

SHIFTING SANDS: POWER REALIGNMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AFTER THE ARAB SPRING

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ABSTRACT

Beginning in late 2010, the Arab Spring was a revolution concerning MENA politics. Seemingly simple demands for political reform, social justice, and job opportunities soon snowballed into regime changes and wars. This is what concerned civil instability. The subsequent chaos redrew political maps and shifted power dynamics across the region. The purpose behind this research is to understand this unprecedented disruption that was the Arab Spring, with emphasis on sub-state and non-state actors, new alliances, and the scope of direct intervention. The Spring had set a chain reaction that caused new dynamic actors to enter the scene. Previously, Middle Eastern politics operated through the motor nations of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran, each, to differing degrees, steering the region through religion, military, and politics. The monarchy traditionally is the leading force in the Arab world, but has the ostracized Gulf nations. Regional economic crisis, following power shifts made Egypt lose its influence in the region. On the other hand, the blockade of Qatar and Yemen conflicts raised Arabian and Emirati Saudi foreign policy integration to unprecedented levels. The enhance of Iran's influence in Iraq, Syria and Yemen reflects a network of ideological proxies that fill regions where state power has collapsed. As their economic interests and military investments grow, so does their intention to fill leadership voids. Turkey is now emerging as an active competitor in the region after directly intervening in Libya and Syria, aiding the jihadist factions in Syria and getting aligned with Qatar to oppose the Saudi capitalist bloc. Iran is now using power projection as a means of expanding its borders with backing of sectarian militias to further increase tensions with Sunni rivals. While this is happening, the Chinese and Russian forces are increasing their foothold in the area due to the lack of US presence which previously held a monopoly over the region. China is rapidly expanding their investments there, while Russia intervened militarily in favor of the Assad regime during the Syrian civil war, drawing borders in these violence seized countries. With the rise of the Arab Spring comes the birth of ISIS, who claimed to have violent control of territories across Iraq and Syria, heightening security risks in the area even further.

Keywords: Arab spring, Political, Regional, ISIS, Military, Intervention, Religious Leadership, Economic, Revolution

INTRODUCTION

The Arab Spring wasn't simply a period of revolutionary change; rather, it was an epochal historical rupture which transformed the socioeconomic order of the Middle East

and North Africa (MENA) region. In December 2010, the protests that followed the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia sparked cross-border protests that

dismantled tyrannical regimes, challenged entrenched political conventions, and instigated civil strife and wars. What started as a respectful request for dignity and justice surged into one of the most critical regional changes of modern history. The balance of power—previously monopolized by a handful of states—began to dramatically shift as regimes fell and institutions dissolved. Before the Arab Spring, the political order of the Middle East was dominated by several key players. Egypt, with its significant population and rich cultural heritage, historically acted as a pillar of Arab nationalism and regional diplomacy. Saudi Arabia, due to its position as guardian of Islam's holiest sites and the world's key oil supplier, enjoyed substantial religious and economic power. Iran undermined that order through revolutionary ideology and proxy networks while Turkey, a member of NATO whose economy was on the rise, began to adopt a more assertive posture, portraying itself as a beacon of moderate political Islam and democracy. The Arab Spring was the most significant event, showing people how their political systems are dominated and where there lie greater societal divisions between different ethnic or religious groups. The poles regionally didn't even contain proper governance previously, so with the advent of Libya, Syria, and Yemen there regionally became a huge leadershipless people, with the aid of terrible state violence, unregulated global intervention, and famine striking devastation it was easy for various groups and political factions to rise to power without much regulation. Foreign relations had turned to war within these nations after wars broke out, and instead of political discussions barbarism became an ideal option. The Gulf region, Egypt, and UAE seized this opportunity to provide and reseller the providing countries with energy resources when the turmoil began which bobmared the humanitarian aid. Self governance of the region wasn't an option anymore, and less and less nations cooperated politically and socially in the ripped expression of democracy. Boundaries between desparate Gulf cooperated even less and knew only how

to expand the area of no need regions violently dominating politically. Saudi Arabia or UAE had seasons of conquering to physically gain domination of the Qatar they destroyed, And the invasion in Yemen where now authority was never quit adoped.

All these actions pushed many people further south and numerous wars divided the region and within unwilling, now turned willing to leave Europe, and unbalanced aid collaborations from the US where new businesses kept emerging and no more politics were welcome. And unchecked illegal modern slaving was opened which surrounded this state of government with the war lingering. The more people leaving regions were severed to multiple hostile countries after democracy turned into close regions stripped. This has formed a horizontal region of nonstop social, political, and legal chaos. The Soun coalition endlessly need was never awarded with wanted peace where UK entered in masses causing geopolitical black markets to rear their heads under dark anarchy, which without politics resulted in people facing systems intolerable for rational order under. Iran has emerged as a powerful country by supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Assad regime in Syria, Shia militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen. This Iranian dominance counters Sunni led nations and alters the landscape of sectarian geopolitics. Turkey also began exercising its military might in new territories, such as Syria and Libya, using its connections with political Islamist factions and siding with Qatar to challenge Saudi and Emirati dominance. At the same time, the relaxation of United States focus on the region, demonstrated by their reluctance towards engaging in long-term battles, as well as the shift to one's internal Asian affairs, created strategic voids. Other global countries, especially Russia, which stepped in as a military and diplomatic power with their bold move in Syria, filled those gaps. China, on the other hand, advanced its economy through infrastructure and energy deals, using them as a way to mark their long-term interest in the region and maintaining non-military stability. These actions caused the regional order to become disjointed, and

fiercely competitive while also being extremely fragile. The pre-2011 order dominated by clear single hegemony and superpower alliances has transformed into multi-polar.

Regional players now participate in a blend of collaboration and competition, often tempered through proxy conflicts, media campaigns, and economic mechanisms instead of open hostilities. Non-sovereign entities like ISIS and various Kurdish militias also emerged as significant stakeholders, shifting the traditional notions of sovereignty and statehood in the region. This research focuses on analyzing the new balance of power, the emerging and waning influencers, and the shifting dominant and dominated influencers in the Middle East after the Arab Spring. What new hegemonies and Antagonistic Alliances are being formed, and how have External States reacted to and altered the prevailing dynamics? Through this comprehensive approach combining political, military, ideological, and economic facets, this research demonstrates how the Arab Spring redrew the region's geopolitics. These insights are crucial, not only for enduring frameworks in Middle East geopolitics, but for grasping how bordering nations may redefine their relations with the region amid an increasingly volatile global environment.

BACKGROUND

The political and strategic landscape of the Middle East and North Africa was relatively stable but authoritarian prior to the Arab Spring. Underlying this order was the economic coercion of an authoritarian bargain. Regimes with established histories in coercion, patronage politics, and limited participation ruled most of the countries. The basic structure was that fundamental support was provided in the form of the economy and basic public services like healthcare and education, and in response, people remain politically quiescent. While there were other forms of uprisings at an individual state level, most of them were contained and did not erupt on a regional level for decades. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran and Turkey served as

Egypt's key regional powers and contributed to the emerging geo-political order. Turkey, while not central to the problem set, continues to emerge as a rather inconspicuous strategic player in the region. However, Egypt has consistently been undermined with economic bottlenecks under Saudi dominating authority. Saudi's foundation stems from being an ally of the US as well as economic supremacy powered by oil replenished by Islam's holiest sites as the custodian of Islam (Kitchen, Nicholas. (2012)). Iran positioned itself as a counterweight to the Sunni-dominated Arab order post the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Its strategic approach focused on ideological expansion, including the development of proxy groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran's newly formed proxy groups and its growing influence increasingly challenged the conservative Arab monarchies and created a sectarian divide, which further deepened afterward during the post Arab Spring conflicts. Under the rule of Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey emerged as a moderate political Islam, using soft power through economic partnerships and cultural diplomacy to emerge as a model in contrast to the authoritarianism promoting Arab countries. While there is underlying stress and rivalries between those actors, the region was fundamentally dominated by the U.S. strategic dominance. The United States was able to maintain regional balance through their military presence, arms deals, and diplomatic moves, which enabled them to support allies, deter adversaries, and counter extremist threats. The relative predictable order was further reinforced by The Arab League, GCC, and other multilateral institutions, even if many of these performed symbolically rather than resolving crises. Yet, underlying this cosmetic order, there were yawning structural grievances like youth unemployment, corruption, human rights violations, socio-economic disparities, and authoritarian politics that would explode in a colossal mass protest wave beginning late 2010. The Arab Spring originated in Tunisia but rapidly went to Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain and then to other countries, which initiated democratic trials or descended into violent civil wars and regime changes. The

ramifications were instant and extensively transformative. In Egypt, the ouster of Hosni Mubarak created a power vacuum that witnessed a short-lived democratic shift followed by military takeover under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. While Libya, Syria, and Yemen witnessed collapsed central governance descending into drawn-out conflicts featuring foreign intervention and proxy war struggles over control. These conflicts turned previously stable countries into failed or fragile states, creating unclaimed territory that facilitated the emergence of terrorist groups like ISIS and worsened an already acute refugee crisis in the region. During this time, Egypt lost control over its region and Saudi Arabia gained it. This group of countries, consisting of Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and the UAE, attempted to take control of the power dynamic. Military conflicts, proxy wars, and ideological propaganda replaced traditional diplomatic power competition. These wars also fueled the already existing sectarian fighting, but now supported by regional powers in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen (Adams, P. (2024, Jan 12).

The emergence of non-state actors, consisting of Kurdish militias, political Islam followers, and various tribal coalitions, also served to increase instability in the region. With the gradual decline of US intervention, specifically during Obama and Trump's presidency, the region became increasingly more volatile, allowing Russia and China to exert their influence freely. Now in the post-Arab Spring environment, the Middle East is subject to increasing volatility from multiple regions competing for control. Understanding these new vulnerabilities is vital for analyzing the contemporary regional order and planning shifts in the existing power framework.

IMMEDIATE EFFECTS

The Arab Spring events that occurred in 2010 marked another significant turning point in the social and political constructs of the Middle East North Africa region. These sets of global anti-government protests and civil defiance movements did not come into being without precedence. Instead, the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street seller battling due to police-verging

economic oppression, was in large part why he underwent such a painful act. It was indeed painful, but it proved to be a hopeful spark, as his action brought about massive protests that culminated in the overthrow of Tunisia's long-standing president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, in January 2011. Islam's pivotal role in revolving these mass incidents, economic disparity, boundless unemployment of youth, regional and international policies marked by hegemony, human rights oppression, rule of autocrats and absolute dictators were the underlying factors for the uproar that immediately spread into Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, and a chains of other states. Economically, on top of all else, social media allowed these demonstrators to bypass state-controlled news touting media outlets to channel unity among activists across borders and get into action. In Tunisia, it led to the peaceful overthrow of Ben Ali's regime, allowing for democratic transition and the adoption of a new constitution. Tunisia still grapples with economic difficulties but remains the Arab Spring's most successful case of democracy. In Egypt, widespread protests resulted in Hosni Mubarak resigning after three decades in power. This democratic onset was short-lived, however. The 2012 election of Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood was followed by a 2013 military coup which installed Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as president, marking a return to authoritarian rule. In Libya, Gaddafi faced NATO intervention alongside peaceful protests that escalated into armed conflict, and afterward, his regime collapsed. Gaddafi's death in 2011 left a power vacuum that led to civil war, militia rule, and foreign intervention. Syria faced brutal repression of dissenting protests towards Bashar al-Assad and entered into a civil war that transformed into a proxy war with regional and global players such as Iran, Russia, the U.S., and Turkey. The war utterly devastated Syria, killing over 500,000 and displacing millions (Cordesman, A. H. (2018). Yemen's uprising brought about the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012, but the fragile transitional government led by Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi gave way to the collapse that allowed the

Houthi insurgency to seize Sanaa in 2014 – triggering a Saudi-led military intervention. Yemen shortly transformed into a battleground for the Saudi Iranian rivalry which resulted in one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. In Bahrain, a largely peaceful demonstration organized by the Shia majority was brutally crushed by the Sunni monarchy with assistance from Saudi and Emirati military forces. In other regions, like Morocco and Jordan, passe monarchies were met with limited, yet impactful protests, leading directly to their retention of power following the implementation of some reforms and increasing subsidies. Algeria and Oman also encountered unrest which resulted in varying degrees of a political response. Relatively, the Arab Spring undermined the illusion of authoritarian control as the paradigm of power shifted. It caused military incursions, the ascendancy of Islamist political movements, and the reassertion of authoritarian rule. Some regional actors, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and the UAE, began supporting conflicting sides of the disputes and joined the fray turning Syria, Yemen, and Libya into battlegrounds of proxy warfare. The conflicts also sharpened the divide between political Islam and secular authoritarianism and the Sunni-Shia sectarian divide. The optimism concerning the possibility of the Arab Spring leading to an unprecedented period of liberty and democracy was shattered almost instantly by reality of state disintegration, civil wars, and the renewed authoritarianism most countries heartland enduring.

Long Term Effect :As hoped, the effects of the Arab Spring did not bring about the socio-political reform and change welcomed by many. Instead, the long term consequences have proven to be more transformative and damaging. The uprisings revealed deep structural gaps and weaknesses in Arab states which led to the global exacerbation of unrest, state failure, and violence. Nations like Syria, Libya, and Yemen experienced the collapse of protracted civil wars and foreign intervention as well as the geopolitical humanitarian crisis in the Middle East. The stable regions of these fragile or failing states

allowed for the Islamic jihadist terrorist organizations such as ISIS and al- Qaeda to exploit and extend their influence into security voids. Surviving nations either entered violent eclipses of drought or emerged more authoritarian than ever. Egypt and Bahrain had their governments become increasingly repressive while heavily monitored suppression of civil freedom, surveillance, and liberated oppression on opposition movements took place. On a regional scale, the Arab Spring caused a shifting of fundamental power and influence to realign within the core actors of the Middle East. Saudi Arabia and the UAE aggressively pursued foreign policies aimed at containing Islamist movements and seeking to alter political changes often through direct military intervention or economic pressure with the rise of political Islam as threat and the fall of their authoritarian allies as even more troubling. In stark opposition, Qatar and Turkey sided with Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, creating deep ideological gaps and geopolitical rifts that contributed to the 2017 Gulf crisis. At the same time, Iran destabilized nonstate actors and allied governments in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen to utilize the unrest to further expand its regional influence, provoking deeper divides in the Sunni-Shia fracture and accelerating sectarian polarization. The fragmentation and power vacuum have transformed the Middle East into a complex multipolar arena of proxy warfare amid weakened state sovereignty and growing militias, tribal entities, and foreign powers(BBC News, 2011–2021).

The aftermath of the Arab Spring is considered to be devastating from both an economic and social perspective. Multiple countries faced severe wars, capital flight, negative investor sentiment, and the decimation of public services which resulted in a harsh economic downturn. Public unemployment rates, especially amongst the youth, remain high alongside social inequality, corruption, and the worsening gap between the rich and poor. Disillusionment fueled apathy, mass migration, and a profound legitimacy crisis throughout the region. Although there was a glimmer of hope for a Tunisian democratic paradigm, renewed

attempts at autocratic governance emphasized the fragile reforms that Tunisians volte-faced on within a few years, shackled by inadequate institutions and stagnant economic progress. Ultimately, the Arab Spring failed to realize its revolutionary dreams, resulting in a new epoch of authoritarian backlash, regional rivalry, and sociopolitical turmoil, the ramifications of which are still felt in the Middle East today.

Case Study: Tunisia – The Birthplace and Fragile Hope of the Arab Spring

Tunisia is notable, in the context of the Arab Spring, both for being the birthplace of the movement and standing out as the prime example of a successful, albeit fragile, shift toward democracy. The uprising began when a 26-year old vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, self-immolated in protest of police targeting him and the economic difficulties he was enduring. His self-immolation act served as a catalyst for Tunisians to rise against issues like political corruption, unemployment, and authoritarian governance. All these protests resulted in President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali being ousted in the January of 2011, which marked the end of his 23 year rule. Tunisia, after the removal of Ben Ali, underwent a significant political transformation. A transitional government was put in place and a democratic constitution was ratified in 2014 following wide public consultation and negotiation. A series of free and fair elections were held wherein power changed hands peacefully, which is virtually unheard of in the region. This process was supported by strong civil society, and notably, the National Dialogue Quartet, which is a coalition of labor, legal and human right organizations, and business leaders. This coalition won the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts in facilitating pro-peace dialogue in times of political discord. Much like other countries, Tunisia also had its fair share of obstacles during their process of transitioning into a Democracy. Tunisia continues to battle economic stagnation, rising inflations, debt, and most commonly, youth unemployment. These factors have, and continue to cause public dissent in the form of protests, further eroding trust in democratic structures. On top of that, Tunisia has also

been the victim of multiple terrorist attacks which have raised doubts about the state of security in the country, and in turn, hurt tourism, which is vital for the economy. The biggest concern which pains the country politically came in July 2021 when President Kais Saied decided to suspend the parliament. He then proceeded to fire the prime minister, accumulating unprecedented power during Implementation of an emergency state which was justified as a means to fix the economic and health crises in the nation. Even though a lot of citizens appreciated this coming as a way to save the nation from political stagnation, this undeniably resulted in rising fear of Tunisian's returning to Autocratic rule. Tunisia demonstrates the opportunities and weaknesses of democratic reform within the Middle East. Despite being viewed initially as a model of peaceful transition and inclusive governance, the country's enduring political and economic challenges is revealing the profound unsolved problems from decades of authoritarian rule. Tunisia continues to be an important experiment in understanding whether the democratic achievements made after the popular revolution can be maintained within the region's and world's challenging environment (Raftsjø, Henrik. (2019).

Case study: egypt – revolution, regression, and the return of authoritarianism

The experience of Egypt during and after the Arab Spring demonstrates the region's unrest alongside the persistently strong grip of political dominance. Egypt has always represented the greater Arab world being the largest country geographically and historically considered a regional power. Egypt's history is important for the Middle East. What began as a protest campaign on January 25, 2011, was propelled forward by the Jan 14 events in Tunisia. Anger towards police violence, rampant government corruption, and unreasonable economic disparity made unrest an uncontrollable issue for the Egyptian government. Leading up to and during the protest, Egyptians started crowning streets all over the new and old Cairo attempting to take control of the most securized Tahrir Square. Mubarak came under enormous duress on

February 11, 2011 and chose to resign from his 30 year long rule. Following the events, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) took over and vowed to shift to civilian governance. In 2012, Egypt held its inaugural fully free presidential election, which was won by the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party candidate, Mohamed Morsi. His win came as a shock as Morsi was the first Islamist and civilian to assume leadership of Egypt. Nonetheless, Morsi's presidency was tumultuous and incredibly divisive. His attempts to further Islamism, wreak havoc, and implement an Islamist-leaning constitution eroded many people's support including the judiciary, the military, secular citizens, and even some of his prior backers. With the combination of an overwhelming popular outcry and a complete standstill in politics, the military stepped in again to remove Morsi from power in a coup that was orchestrated by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in July 2013. Although the public was clearly supporting the decision, suspending democracy was a drastic step backwards for Egypt. Sisi was then elected president in 2014, reelected in 2018, with both elections labeled as highly controversial due to lack of true opposition. Since then, Egypt has experienced a period of "authoritarian consolidation" in which the regime militarily focuses on an internal crackdown with increased efficiency. The regime's decimation of dissent has included the jailing of thousands, which includes political opponents, journalists, activists, and even academics. Civil liberties have been kept to a minimum, with independent media outlets further being suppressed, as the ability for the public to discourse is tightly monitored and regulated. Furthermore, the governing body has used laws counteractive to the protection of human rights in the name of terrorism to justify repression, especially for Islamist groups of the likes of the Muslim Brotherhood which was, in 2013, declared a terrorist organization (Saikal, Amin. (2011).

Economically, the Sisi administration has initiated the construction of new infrastructural projects such as the Extension of the Suez Canal and the establishment of a new administrative capital. Although these projects have increased the rate of foreign investment alongside boosting the national

pride, they have been condemned for the lack of attention directed towards fundamental rooted issues like poverty, inflation, as well as the unemployment rate amongst the youth. Additionally, Egypt continues to be perennial desiccants of financial aid from Gulf countries alongside loans obtained from international institutes like the IMF. Egypt's history after the Arab Spring shows the stubbornness and strength of the military and authoritarian systems of governance in Egypt during times of upheaval. The short-lived democracy between 2011 and 2013 was replaced by deeper, harsher, and more advanced authoritarian rule. This example illustrates the obstacles to democracy in the region and the impact of local and regional influences on the political results.

CASE STUDY: LIBYA – STATE COLLAPSE AND THE RISE OF FACTIONALISM

Libya's historical chronicle regarding the Civil War reflects the vindicating consequence of enduring a power structure failure without a substantial corrective blueprint. The uprising of 2011 against Gaddafi, who had ruled the country for more than forty years, originated in the form of protests from the city of Benghazi and very quickly progressed to a full-blown civil war. Differently from Tunisia or Egypt, Libya underwent an early militarized and heightened Gaddafi's intervention due to the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) framework. Gaddafi was ultimately captured and killed in October 2011 because of the combined efforts of airstrikes and advances from rebels. The downfall Gaddafi did not result in peace or stabilization for Libya. The country was devoid of strong institutions and state control, which led to a wide array of Islamist factions, tribal groups, and militias subduing to fill in the void left by the regime. The lack of central governance and security construct caused the constant deterioration of violence and stability. Eventually in 2014, Libya was propelled into a second civil war with differing governments forming in opposing sides of the country. One side was controlled and backed by the UN in Tripoli while the other side was governed by General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army in the

east. This torn Libya into a stage for foreign and domestic conflict. Egypt, the UAE, Russia, and France backed Haftar. Turkey and Qatar funded the Government based in Tripoli. The abuse of arms, fighters, and foreign meddling transformed Libya into a center for smuggling, illegal immigration, and terrorism. Even though a truce was made in 2020 and a government supported by the UN was put in place in 2021, movement towards elections and political unity is still very weak. Libya showcases the difficulties involved in post-war reconstruction along with the realities of overseas involvement without a well-defined long-term framework. It still is a fractured and volatile country lacking a concrete political agenda (Elhudairi, Abdelsalam. (2023).

CASE STUDY: SYRIA - CIVIL WAR, PROXY BATTLES, AND HUMANITARIAN CATASTROPHE

Arguably the most tragic and geopolitically significant event within Syria's Arab Spring account is its tragedy. What started as peaceful protests demanding political reform, justice, and an end to rampant corruption under President Bashar al-Assad's rule in March 2011, quickly morphed into one of the 21st century's deadliest and longest conflicts. In response to the protests, the Assad regime implemented extreme crackdowns which, in turn, led to greater upsurge. As resistance groups began to take up arms, the disorder transformed into a multifaceted civil war with countless internal factions and foreign participants. Unlike Libya, Assad was able to retain the loyalty of critical military units and, through leveraging sectarian narratives, gained support from several minority factions, most notably the Alawite population. Over time, the conflict drew in regional and global powers, each backing different actors. Iran and Hezbollah supported Assad, viewing Syria as a critical part of their "axis of resistance" against Israel and the West. Russia's military intervention in 2015 was pivotal in turning the tide in Assad's favor. On the other hand, the U.S., Turkey, Gulf states, and Western allies provided varying levels of support to opposition forces and the Kurds. This multifaceted involvement turned Syria into a theater of proxy wars with shifting coalitions and a fast-changing landscape (Amante, Jase. (2022).

The emergence of ISIS in 2014 worsened the already complicated conflict, leading to international military intervention spearheaded by the U.S. Coalition. While ISIS has been territorially defeated, its remnants and ideology persist. Over 500,000 people have died as a result of Syria's war and it has also led to over 12 million people being displaced, which is half of the country's pre-war population. The humanitarian crisis has affected neighboring countries and Europe, igniting debates over refugees and political tension across the world. As of now, Assad, with the aid of Russia and Iran, has regained control of most of Syria and still remains in power. However, large portions of the north and northeast regions are still not under his governance, as they are controlled by Kurdish forces or Turkish sponsored rebels. Lack of international recognition, instability, and sanctions all contribute to the lacking ability to reconstruct the area. The case of Syria epitomizes the consequences of the violent state repression which caused fragmentation internationally, alongside a lack of cohesive diplomatic solutions. Additionally, it illustrates the way the Arab Spring, instead of fostering a democratic transition, creates prolonged disorder when authoritarian governments resist change and external forces have differing agendas.

CASE STUDY: YEMEN - FROM UPRISING TO HUMANITARIAN CATASTROPHE

Following Yemen's Arab Spring events, the country's situation went from a potential political change to one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. Yemen's 2011 uprisings were part of the greater Arab Spring and were the result of widespread discontent with President Ali Abdullah Saleh's rule, which lasted for 30 years and was marked by rampant corruption, nepotism, and economic decline. During college years, they and many other groups began welcoming democratic change as well as better social conditions Yemen's economy. Saleh stubbornly tried to stay in power, but after he was bombed and severely injured, he agreed to step down in November 2011 during a GCC deal. He passed his mandate to vice president

Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, who became the new interim president in 2012. Even though this change was celebrated globally, it did not address the underlying issues, such as unresolved political strife, and the declining economy. The most challenging threat to Yemen's stability rests in the hands of the Houthi movement, a Zaidi Shia rebel faction from the north that has always opposed the central government. They allied with former president Saleh and conquered the capital, Sanaa, in 2014. The Houthis captured the government institutions and used them to undermine the legitimacy of the transitional government, which was already weak. In 2015, the Houthis escalated the conflict and forced President Hadi to seek refuge in Saudi Arabia. As a consequence of taking over the country, the Saudis intended to restore Hadi's government, which resulted in a Saudi led military intervention. The crisis transformed Yemen into a proxy battleground for regional forces, alongside Saudi Arabia, who were accused of defending the Houthis and Iran, turned into the opposition. A neutral ultimatum and core constitutional boundaries have still yet to be identified after years of blockades and ground fighting. The internal conflict within Yemen has utterly devastated the economy and country. Approximately 80% of the civilian population is in need of humanitarian support. Millions more civilians have been displaced on top of already tens of thousands dying from conflict and famine. The aftermath of the war has open doors for terrorist organizations, including the Rest of the World Fighting Against Al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (RQAP) and ISIS, expanding their vicinity in untouched regions. While there have been attempts for peace talks and ceasefire resolutions, they are more episodic in nature. Yemen showcases the failure of post-Arab Spring developments for fragile state transitions that feature dysfunctional institutions, regional disputes and deeply rooted internal strife. This case also shows the catastrophic impact of extended violence on civilians and stability in the region (Edwards, Aaron. (2019).

SHIFTING REGIONAL POWERS AFTER THE ARAB SPRING

The Arab Spring definitely initiated a revolutionary change in the Middle East as it not only brought down several governments but also changed the geopolitics of the region. The Arab Spring resulted in erosion of authority in several states which wondered if the governments started to struggle in different aspects. This power vacuum was soon filled by regional authorities however these newly emergent allied states which wreaked havoc in the region for centuries. The result is a highly polarized regional order, where proxy wars, mercenary conflicts, and violent clashes enable countries to fulfill their goals of hegemonic influence without taking economy advantage stripped centralized major critical states losing power.

1. Saudi Arabia and the UAE: Guardians of the Status Quo

The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia set themselves as the defenders of the order of the middle east primarily to gain power over radical Islamist rebels which could exploit this opportunity and trigger unhindered opposition towards monarchy supporting regimes. The regions undergone massive crisis for Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi is to contain the political Islam. They both defined their solution on stasis with overriding proxy strain of the Muslim Brotherhood as proxy means reserved for massive lead states. In Egypt, both states provided emphatic assistance in reversing the democratic strides achieved after the 2011 revolution. After the military coup against President Mohamed Morsi in 2013, they spent billions on Egypt's economy, which in turn helped to solidify General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's rule and return Egypt to authoritarian-tinged governance. The new message was clear: democratization efforts from, especially Islamist groups, will not be accepted. The Gulf powers also furthered their regional expansionism. In Bahrain, they sent Saudi troops in the name of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to violently quell protest activities by the Shiite majority. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia led a military coalition in 2015 with the goal of reinstating President

Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi's administration and limiting Iranian influence via the Houthis. The UAE, who was part of the coalition at the beginning, later refocused on southern Yemen and began to groom local militia groups while exercising control over important ports and other strategic locations (Davidson, Christopher. (2021).

2. Iran: Strategic Entrenchment and Regional Projection

With the advent of the Arab Spring, Iran saw this as a timely opportunity to increase its control in the Arab World. Tehran chose to frame the uprisings in the context of a 'resistance movement' like its 1979 revolution, primarily where Shia populations or supportive elements were willing to be mobilized. Iran's position as a primary actor in the evolving regional order was made possible through a blend of ideological charm, military assistance, and proxy pawns. In Syria, Iran sent the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and recruited allied militias from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon to aid Bashar al-Assad. The Conflict allowed Iran to obtain long term military and economic contracts, securing a place in Syria's infrastructure and defense industries. In the same way, in Iraq, Iran used his networks with Shiite political parties and militias—some who were very active in the campaign against ISIS—to deepen his dominance over the Iraqi state system. Yemen's Houthi movement has received Iranian political and logistical support, functioning as a separate front in the Iranian-Saudi rivalry. Iran, having opposing parties and clients throughout the region, does not directly control them. This patchwork of influence—sometimes called the "Axis of Resistance" is a different phenomenon that has already changed the strategic equilibrium, increasing the risks to regional security (Knight, Darric).

3. Turkey and Qatar: Ideological Expansion and Soft Power Projection

Turkey and Qatar viewed the Arab Spring as an opportunity to advance a new, moderate Islamist-based political model that stems from political Islam and electoral legitimacy. Turkey

under President Erdoğan, practicing religious conservatism in concert with democratic institutions, tried to position itself as a regional role model. Qatar may be small in geographic scope, but its wealth, global connections, and the Al Jazeera opposition network have strengthened the voice of protesters and opposition movements in the Arab world. Both nations funded the Muslim Brotherhood and affiliated groups throughout the region. Qatar financed Egypt's Morsi government while Turkey provided diplomatic support. Both backed the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya that included Islamist factions, opposing the UAE and Egypt's General Khalifa Haftar. Turkey supplied arms, training, and safe havens to numerous opposition groups in Syria, especially those with Sunni Islamist leanings. This commitment to political Islam put Turkey and Qatar on a collision course with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, leading to the 2017 Gulf Crisis. The blockade intended to coerce Qatar into changing its policies, but instead resulted in stronger relations between Qatar, Turkey, and Iran. The construction of a Turkish military base in Qatar marked the development of an alternate regional axis (Maziad, Marwa. (2019).

4. Collapse of Traditional Arab Leaders: Egypt and Iraq

The Arab Spring highlighted the declining influence of Egypt and Iraq, long the dominant regional leaders. Egypt, the cultural and political hub of the Arab world, has become mired in internal instability and an economy reliant on Gulf donors. Its foreign policy has grown increasingly passive, with strong alignment to Saudi-UAE policies. Iraq is still dealing with the consequences from the US invasion, the sectarian wars that followed, and now finds itself wrestling with the rivalry between the US and Iran. Iraq is rich with resources and is strategically located in the region however, weak governance coupled with militia factionalism has made it impossible for Iraq to begin functioning as a regional actor (Baghirova, Aida. (2024).

5. External Powers and the Multipolar Order

Russia used the opportunity presented by the Arab Spring to further strengthen its influence in the middle east, particularly when it intervened in Syria in 2015. By obtaining military bases at Latakia and Tartus, Moscow has secured a position in the Eastern Mediterranean for years to come. While the United States did attempt to support democratization initially, their later shift towards counter terrorism and disengagement proved detrimental. Unrest in Syria during the Obama administration

followed by the indefinite withdraw of the Trump administration from strategic locations gave the United States an unjustifiable “retreat” narrative in the eyes of the international community which dangerously encouraged unilateralism from regional rivals. China’s indirect approach to foreign conflict means they have been making investments and building infrastructure which fall under the Belt and Road Initiative. China’s neutral position on regional disputes has facilitated their ability to foster relations across divided lines.

ROLE OF NON-STATE ACTORS AND EXTERNAL POWERS IN THE POST- ARAB SPRING

The Arab spring not only affected the domestic politics for the concerned states but also changed the power dynamics of the region. The rise of non-state actors and increase involvement of foreign powers are two of the most notable developments. New political, military, and ideological players emerged to fill the gap caused by the state institutions collapsing or weakening. From Insurgent groups and Militias to foreign powers with their own agendas, these actors have had a significant impact in redefining the landscape of the Middle East after the Arab Spring.

and governance. These groups began as some form of auxiliary resistance to authoritarian rule, which later developed into deeply rooted local power brokers. In Libya, Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) and numerous GNA-aligned militias entrenched in conflict on protracted conflict, each with competing geopolitical sponsors and ideological interests.

1. The Rise of Alternative Power Centers and Non-State Actors

The conflict led to the emergence of numerous non-state actors embodying different forms of legitimacy and capacity. These include political movements, tribal coalitions, armed militias, and jihadist groups that supplanted or resisted formal state structures.

Militia and Tribal Forces: In weak and failing states such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen, an amalgam of militias and tribal forces became the foremost guarantors of security Stephen. (2023).

Political Islamist Movements: The Muslim Brotherhood, Ennahda in Tunisia, and a range of Salafist groups tried to channel the

Jihadist and Extremist Organizations: The destruction caused by the uprisings created an opportunity for jihadist groups to flourish. Particularly dangerous was the rapid advancement of ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates across Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Such groups not only benefited from the lack of order but also amplified existing sectarian rifts and public discontent. Most notably, ISIS carved out a quasi-state in Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2017, administering territory while imposing barbaric laws and perpetrating acts of terrorism on foreign nations. Even after the loss of its territorial dominion dubbed ‘caliphate’, ISIS remains a potent source of violence and terror regionally and internationally (Zinigrad, Roman & Sawyer,

revolutionary zeal into something politically useful. Their wins in the electoral contests in Egypt and Tunisia alarmed entrenched regimes and monarchical states in the region, prompting heavy-handed responses and the

banning of such movements in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Even with repressive frameworks, these movements continue to shape ideologies and maintain transnational support systems.

Civil Society and Protest Movements: Even if always in the background of armed actors, civil society organizations as well as protest movements have emerged as powerful non-state actors. There are even non-sectarian, youth-led protests in Lebanon, Iraq, and Sudan which seek to end elite rule and strive for political reform. Though often met with repression, these movements endure as expressions of the ongoing demand for accountability and change.

2. External Powers: Strategic Opportunism and Proxy Conflicts

The post-Arab Spring weakening of state authority created a geopolitical void which external powers were eager to fill. Such interventions whether direct military engagement or secret support for proxies have turned local conflicts into regional theaters of war.

Iran: Iran sought to expand its influence following the Arab Spring by using Hezbollah in Lebanon and Houthi militants in Yemen as part of a "Resistance Axis" strategy, which included the Assad regime in Syria and militia groups such as Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq in Iraq. Using a mix of military training, financial assistance, and ideological sympathy, Iran has sponsored militarized non-state actors that serve both defensive and strategic functions across the Gulf and the Levant. For example, Iranian support for militias enables them to contest Israeli authority, while support for the Houthis allows Iran to open a new front south of Saudi territory.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE: In response, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have sought an active agenda to contain the Iranian threat and restrict Islamist political movements. The invasion of Yemen by Saudi Arabia in 2015 aimed to re-establish the internationally recognized government and

constrain Houthi territorial advances. This conflict has since morphed into an enduring man-made humanitarian catastrophe with little achieved militarily. The two states have also exerted their economic and diplomatic resources in Egypt, Sudan, and Libya—often siding with authoritarian and secular forces and pitted against Islamist-leaning political coalitions.

Turkey and Qatar: Turkey and Qatar took a different route by backing revolutionary and Islamist movements. Turkey sheltered members of the Muslim Brotherhood, and during the Syrian Civil War's early years, Turkey fought ISIS in Syria to keep Kurdish nationalism in check and strengthen anti-Assad forces. Qatar utilized its considerable wealth and media clout (most notably Al Jazeera) to champion politically convenient Arab causes for propaganda purposes. This direction antagonized Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, worsening tensions that led to the Gulf diplomatic crisis of 2017 (Al Jazeera).

Russia: Russia was undeniably back at the heart of Middle Eastern geopolitics after performing one of the boldest military interventions in recent history by entering Syria in 2015. Keeping Bashar al-Assad in power enabled Moscow to secure a long-standing military presence in the region, unlock Mediterranean port access, obtain central participation in diplomatic haggling, and establish Russian bases in the country. Russian intervention focuses on counterterrorism and maintained state sovereignty, aggressively defending the West's regime-change policy.

United States and the West: The uprisings took the United States by surprise, adopting a stance that was slow and often contradictory. It managed the removal of autocrats such as Mubarak and Gaddafi, but refrained from full-scaled engagement into later changes. Along with them, the Obama administration drew scrutiny for not tackling Syria while simultaneously supporting NATO's intervention in Libya. Focus shifted to

counterterrorism, especially the war against ISIS. Meanwhile, European powers primary France and Italy became resolute in helping lower migration and stabilizing North Africa.

China: China remains less directly engaged in the region's conflicts, but extends its economic and diplomatic presence without attracting much attention. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) umbrella supports infrastructure, energy, and technology projects within the country, frequently siding with non-democratic regimes as long as the alliances bring financial benefits. The focus is welcome by numerous Middle Eastern countries, which require political stability.

CONSEQUENCES AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Arab Spring triggered a series of events that continue to affect the politics and social aspects of the Middle East and North Africa. One of the most prominent effects that can be observed is the dismantlement of state control and the inability to implement democratic shifts. During the initial phases of the uprisings, there was an indiscriminate optimism for a political overhaul, but most nations either reverted to authoritarian domination or spiraled into drawn-out civil strife. In the case of Egypt, military governance saw a comeback alongside the brutal silencing of dissent. Other countries Syria, Yemen, and Libya saw the ousting of dictatorial rulers, but in their place were swift armed militia and tribal faction takeovers which, alongside religious extremists and foreign-backed proxies, tore nations into multi-tiered civil wars. The impact on the social fabric of various Arab communities was equally devastating. The revolutions together with the violent responses they elicited – inflicted a grave sense of collective national trauma. In numerous nations, the public completely lost faith – not just in the state institutions, but also in the so-called opposition movements. Civilians, who were once celebrated as the frontrunners of the democratic change, were progressively ignored due to the rising militarization of struggles and the emergence of extremist political movements. In popular perception,

the prospects for meaningful change are fading or have already dissipated and, in many cases, there is apathy, emigration, or, radicalization. It also caused one of the worst displacement crises in contemporary history; the conflict's omnipresence resulted in millions of displaced people fleeing their homes, living as refugees or internally displaced. The region experienced severe economic decline. The turmoil had a negative impact on investment, trade, and the depletion of national reserves due to the uncertainty and instability that followed the revolts. The oil and tourism industries, agriculture, and others suffered greatly, debt levels rose unchecked, and inflation strangled the economy. Regions such as Syria, Libya, and Yemen that experienced violent conflicts saw heavy destruction to infrastructure, which resulted in the breakdown of crucial services including healthcare, education, electricity, and water supply. Prolonged stagnation has worsened the ever-widening economic divide, motivated the exodus of the middle class, and deepened the polarization of society further (International Crisis Group).

On a broader scale, the Arab Spring catalyzed new and intensified ongoing geopolitical tensions within the region. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and the UAE redirected their focus on the resulting regional turmoil, aiding allied factions while directly intervening in battles under the pretext of order restoration or ideological promotion. Local conflicts morphed into drawn-out proxy conflicts due to their interference, making it harder to resolve the conflict and prolonging pain and suffering. As alliances shifted, new spheres of influence emerged in the region, the balance of power underwent alteration, and the Middle East became increasingly fractured and volatile in comparison to the period before the uprisings. The Arab Spring highlighted gaps within the foreign policy strategies of Western and Global powers. Although some players claimed to support the democratic movements, in practice many short-sightedly focused on combating terrorism, energy security, or migration control rather than genuine democratic reform. This falta de consistencia caused trust among Western

countries to decline with Arab societies, raising the charge of neo-colonialist meddling.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To lessen the lasting impacts of the Arab Spring and create a more stable and equitable balance for the region, there needs to be a unified strategy that encompasses political, economic, and social reform. This change plan needs to focus on addressing underlying issues as well as the reasons for uprisings. From a political angle Arab governments need to ensure that they broaden their policies to encompass all forms of political, ethnic, and religious inclusivity. This means that there needs to be opposition parties, civil liberties granted, and independent organs that exercise checks and balances need to be given power. The public should be able to trust their government and for that transparent and accountable governance is essential. Protections against human rights violations/domestic terrorism should be enacted through transitional justice by addressing such abuses, paying reparations, and restoring families and communities that have suffered. In areas where conflict has arisen, all stakeholders should focus on rebuilding through discussions, disarmament, and rebuilding institutions where the focus should be on political settlements. A long-term developmental strategy enabling economic growth is desperately needed in the region. Youth unemployment must be tackled, private sector activity encouraged, and key industries modernized. There is a need for educational innovations that will encourage young people to think out of the box as well as curiously shape the curricula to relevant market's demands. Addressing the developing environmental problems in the region poses an additional challenge while investing in technology, sustainable energy, and green infrastructure provides promising avenues. Rather than solely providing humanitarian aid, international financial institutions and donor countries need to fundamentally rethink their approach. Strategic investments that foster self-sufficiency and resilience in post-conflict states is what is truly needed.

On the regional scale, there is heightened

need for cooperation and de-escalation. Arab countries need to understand that achieving lasting stability is not possible through rivalry and intervention. Instead, these regions need to rely on dialogue and collective security mechanisms. The establishment of region-wide bodies for economic and political cooperation, similar to the European Union or ASEAN, would slow down the existing friction toward focusing on the shared objectives of developmental progress. The incorporation of arms control treaties, border security pacts, and conflict mediation platforms would help in building trust and reduce the likelihood of future proxy wars. The international community has a crucial role to play in supporting peaceful transitions and sustainable development. Deradicalization strategies that target the petrofuel ideological underpinning fuel of extremism, combined with diarchic policies, and top-bottom and bottom-up frameworks for grassroots political development, counter-radicalization policies, and other supporting programs at the broader scope can address the issues driving the youth towards the extremist ideologies. From an overarching point of view, middle east regional powers must shift their dynamic approach from within the region and instead adopt a more holistic approach to power-migration reversanism. Rather than narrowing the scope of interest to border militarization, mitigating policy terrorism, and conflict skyrocketing, they must pivot and deliver on the humanitarian aspects pre-along or post migration cycle while also ensuring proper assistance for social integration post-settlement. Global powers must commit to an actively engage with supporting democracy advocacy while also pressuring grant-grading tyrants to embrace windows of human rights granted to society. Aim to take initiative in leading peacemaking, mediation of dynamics, violence, and the building disruptive capabilities to create a strategy framework towards acompag fragile failed states to renewed reform. This kind of diverse and long-lasting action is the only way the region can recover from the troubling implications

of the Arab Spring and advance to a future marked by not oppression and conflict, but rather by self-empowerment, cooperation, and comprehensive wealth.

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