

Cyclone

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Marking a decade to the Arab Spring:
The turmoil that changed the Middle East

A Portrait of the Turmoil that Changed the Middle East

Michael Milshtein

We are now marking a decade to the eruption of the Arab Spring. A ten year perspective allows for an interim summary of the process that changed the Middle East, and continues to send shockwaves through it to date. It is difficult to discern the exact stage this process is currently in; however, it is advisable to avoid definitive conclusions that could imply that this historical drama is nearing its end or effectively over.

Ten years down the line, several stages of evolvement can be identified in this Middle Eastern turbulence:

1. **2010-2011:** The first days of upheaval were laced with euphoria. Many felt that the Middle East was changing for the better, and heading for a brighter future. And indeed, after decades of powerful authoritarian order, and publics whose participation in the political game and national decision-making processes was limited, the Arab world saw some genuine revolutions. The public came together, protested on the streets, and successfully toppled local regimes. The most prominent development in this context were the dramatic events in Egypt that ended Mubarak's rule, and inspired the entire Arab world.
2. **2011-2014:** The initial wave of optimism was quickly replaced by a cascade of expectations and concerns over the new threats that developed against the backdrop of the shattered old order. Two main phenomena were at the center of this period. As part of the first, some countries in the region were caught up in severe domestic conflicts between religious, ethnic and sectarian forces. This was

particularly true in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. The second was the growing power of the Muslim Brotherhood in key hubs of turmoil. However, this movement's success was short-lived, and ended after their Egyptian regime was toppled in the summer of 2013.

3. **2014-2018:** Half a decade after the Arab Spring began, the "dormant demons" that the authoritarian regimes managed to restrain for many a decade erupted in full force. The most blatant manifestation of this trend was ISIS – a terror organization that successfully established an "Islamic State" in the areas where the sovereignty of nation states collapsed. The ISIS extensions set up more concentrated territorial strongholds in the Sinai Peninsula and Libya, were active in western Europe, and recruited numerous volunteers across the Muslim world, who were drawn to the struggle in the name of the "Islamic State's" compelling vision. These were the most lethal years of regional turmoil, and they ended once ISIS was militarily defeated in Iraq and Syria, its state destroyed during the second half of 2017 (although some of its proxies still exist in various places, and its ideology continues to lure many youngsters).
4. **2018-2021:** Just when many in the Arab world were certain that the regional turmoil had passed, a model that seemed to duplicate the events of 2010-2011 broke out in the summer of 2019. Despite obvious similarity in form – primarily mass protests led by the younger generation, and calls to topple governments – two striking differences emerged between the first and second waves of the Arab Spring. The first is the geographic center of the protest. The second wave swept over the areas left untouched by the first wave: Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria, and Sudan. A decade ago, these same countries were still wounded and scarred by bitter civil wars, and their citizens were therefore wary of undermining existing order. The second difference was embodied by the slogans used in the protests. The demands for democratization and political reforms that characterized the first wave were replaced by calls for everyday improvements: economic recovery, addressing issues relevant to the younger generation, and ending government corruption. The second wave was "artificially" disrupted by the breakout of the COVID-19 crisis; however, the roots of this protest continue to seethe, illustrating that the potential explosiveness in the region remains intact.

After a decade, **the current Middle East differs greatly from that of 2010.** It has been over a century since the Sykes–Picot Agreement of 1916 was signed, and yet this turbulence has demonstrated **just how fragile the state entities in the Middle East are.** The shockwaves endured by most have been detrimental to their functioning, illustrating most residents' loose affinity with the identity various regimes had attempted to nurture and instill for dozens of years. However, despite the harsh blows they sustained, **no Arab state has vanished from the world map.** Moreover, most of the internal forces that caused these countries to crumble – with the prominent exception of ISIS in Syria and Iraq – were active within their territories, and strove to rise to power in them, as was seen in Libya and Yemen.

In contrast, **the primordial forces have strengthened** considerably during the Arab Spring. The undermining of political frameworks has led to the eruption of ancient hostility between religious, tribal, sectarian, and ethnic powers formerly restrained by Arab rulers, some of whom had represented minorities that ruled by force (particularly in Syria and Iraq). As part of these struggles, the deep rift between Sunnis and Shiites was underscored, as exemplified by Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. The rise of primordial forces – together with the growing strength of extreme religious factors – was accompanied by appalling persecution of minorities in the Arab world, who were heavily threatened before the Arab Spring had even begun.

Another prominent fundamental trend is **the weakening of the Arab world alongside the rise of non-Arab forces.** Bitter internal struggles and the undermining of regimes across the Arab world have contributed to the strengthening of regional non-Arab actors, led by Iran and Turkey, as well as Israel. The weakening of the Arab collective was evident prior to the Arab Spring, but has clearly been accelerated by it. Most non-Arab forces are increasing their impact in the Arab space, establishing both a military and economic stronghold in many of its centers.

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Regional turmoil was accompanied by a **power center shift in the Arab world**. The long-standing power hubs that formerly led the Arab world had nosedived into severe domestic crises, primarily Cairo, Baghdad, and Damascus, and new powers have risen in their stead. Prominent among them are the Gulf states, which have been relatively less impacted by regional turmoil, led by Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The new dominant pole in the Arab world differs from the power centers that were hegemonic in the past. The Gulf states are displaying a softer political approach, expressed in their willingness to promote relations with Israel – which is essential to their interests, particularly security-related ones – even in the absence of an arrangement on the Palestinian issue.

The effect of the turbulence is apparent beyond the boundaries of the Arab world too. The shaken reality in the heart of the Middle East, and especially the crumbling of some of the state entities, has created far-reaching shockwaves that have broadened the traditional definition of regional boundaries to a great extent. The collapse of the state entities and harsh civil wars (particularly in Syria and Iraq) have led to two phenomena that have deeply projected onto the West: the first – waves of immigration consisting of millions of refugees have swept over Europe; the second – young Muslims in western countries have joined the ranks of the "Islamic State" en masse, in part with the aim of carrying out terror attacks in the very same countries in which they had been born and raised.

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In the social context – the role played by **the younger generation in spearheading the Arab Spring** stands out, particularly in its early stages. The young people's protests emanated from several reasons: the inability to realize their full potential, especially in terms of material gain and having families; growing familiarity with the goings-on around the world by using the internet, increasing the gap between their desires and the reality in which they were living; and the profound sense of alienation in light of the political and social order around them.

The collective despair following this difficult decade led many in the Arab realm **to steer clear of the slogans and ideologies** that previously motivated the Middle East. Desperate and tired of every sort of vision – be it socialist, pan-Arab or Islamic – Arab



crowds are now pursuing a far more modest goal – **Bidna Na'ish** ("We Want to Live"). In the absence of a promising, compelling idea, and with leaders and political forces in the region whose image is often unimpressive or even contemptible, a large part of the Arab public – particularly the younger members of the population – is expressing little interest in the political sphere.

A decade down the line, it seems that **the collection of reasons that led to the eruption of the Arab Spring remains intact, and some have even been reinforced**. The socio-economic reality in most turbulence hubs is still harsh, even exacerbated; political order has only partially changed; the future seems vaguer than ever for the younger generation; governing order and citizens' security in many Arab states has deteriorated since 2010.

Another factor expected to impact life in the Arab world is the foreign policy adopted by the new administration in Washington. Much of the Sunni world, especially the Gulf states and Egypt, is very anxious about the possibility that the Biden Administration will promote a dialogue and reach an arrangement with Iran, as such a development would raise Tehran's self-esteem and make it bolder, prioritizing democratization over economic ties with the Arab states.

The ongoing disquiet may manifest itself in **a third Arab Spring wave** that will once again sweep over areas that have been rocked by it before, such as Egypt, the economic state of which is sensitive and constantly hanging by a thread, or Lebanon, which is currently a "volcano" ready to erupt at any moment. It could also wash over areas that almost have not been touched by it, primarily Jordan, where the socio-economic state and growing public criticism of the monarchy may lead to acute domestic protests, or the Palestinian system, where both the government in Ramallah and that in Gaza struggle to provide solutions for the younger population's basic issues.

Turbulence throughout most of the Arab world poses severe challenges to Israel, and it must advance some key efforts to address them by: trying to contribute to the establishment of good relations between the Sunni Arab world and the new administration in Washington; continuing to limit Iran's force buildup both in the regional space and in nuclear contexts; maintaining close coordination with Russia, especially with regard to the northern arena and Iran; attempting to promote normalization with the Arab world while developing communication channels with its various audiences; and, in the Palestinian context – preserve economic stability and, in the longer term, examine the possibility of renewing the peace process.