

Cyclone

Journal for Policy and Strategic Affairs | Vol.1, 2021

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

Marking a Decade to the Arab Spring: The Middle East at a Crossroads

Maj. Gen. (res.) Amos Gilead

A decade ago, the Arab world was in the midst of a historical shockwave between two dramatic events: The incident during which Tunisian street vendor Mohamad Boua`zizi set himself on fire (December 17, 2010), marking the beginning of the Arab Spring; and the start of the Tahrir Square events in Cairo (January 25, 2011), leading to the collapse of Mubarak's regime, and marking the culmination of that spring while also indicating the beginning of its decline.

The Middle East has changed immensely over the past ten years: long-lasting regimes that seemed to have tremendous power collapsed under the unprecedented pressure exerted by the public in the Arab world; political entities were shaken to the core, some of which continue to wallow in blood-soaked civil wars to this day; the "dormant demons" of hostility between ethnicities, religions, and political groups emerged in all their glory; the Arab world weakened, with non-Arab forces in the region becoming more influential at its expense; and extremists made their presence known across the region, posing a challenge to the political order that had existed there for the past century.

What began as an "Arab Spring" and accompanied by optimism with the prospects of democratization and social reform in the Middle East soon transformed into continued turbulence filled with suffering and violence for most countries in the region.

What began as an "Arab Spring" and accompanied by optimism with the prospects of democratization and social reform in the Middle East soon transformed into continued turbulence filled with suffering and violence for most countries in the region, and it remains unclear whether it is nearing

its end, peak or has perhaps only just begun. After a decade of upheaval, the Middle East in general and Arab world in particular is wounded, weak and weary from bloody struggles, most of which are still ongoing.

Moreover, the lion's share of fundamental issues that led to the eruption of the Arab Spring not only have not been resolved, but have even exacerbated. In some of the Arab Spring centers, such as Egypt, that served as a hub for all regional turmoil, the economic state is graver now than it was in 2010, as are political oppression and human rights. Because these severe points of distress remain, future outbreaks are possible, both in areas where turmoil has already left its deep and painful mark, and in those it has skipped to date, such as the Arab monarchies and Palestinian system.

future outbreaks are possible, both in areas where turmoil has already left its deep and painful mark, and in those it has skipped to date, such as the Arab monarchies and Palestinian system.

The Middle East is currently more polarized than ever before. Four key compelling ideas emerge from it, each of which is hostile toward and opposes the others in terms of their objectives and visions. The two main camps battling one another are: the opposition camp headed by Iran, primarily affiliated with Shia, which grew over the past decade and has set roots in many geographical locations (especially Syria, Iraq and Yemen); and the moderate Sunni camp that strives to keep the status quo that existed in the region a decade ago, which is strongly affiliated with the United States, and, nowadays, Israel too. Among the prominent leaders of the Sunni Arab camp are the Gulf states, the increasing weight of which reflects the power shift in the Arab world away from the long-standing centers such as Cairo, Baghdad and Damascus. New powers are on the rise that replace reliance on military might and revolutionary ideas with financial force and clout in areas such as diplomacy and media.

The two regional powers that have more limited weight, yet have enjoyed "temporary clout" over the last decade (which has since waned) is the Muslim Brotherhood camp, which Erdoğan is attempting to head by entrenching himself as its leader, and the Islamic State's (ISIS) radical Islam, eliminated as a governmental entity but still existing as an idea, attempting to bolster its stronghold in the hearts and minds of many members of the younger generation across the Middle East.

From a strategic Israeli point of view, the last decade has provided opportunities alongside threats. The turbulence lessened the conventional military threat as the Arab states focused on addressing their domestic issues and, in some cases, because their powerful armies had been eroded. Another opportunity that evolved due to the turmoil was the promotion of normalization with the Arab world. However, Israel must continue to beware of the chronic instability characteristic of this region, and remain alert to possible additional shockwaves, that may also be accompanied by changes in the status of Israel's strategically important allies.

The strategic debate on Middle Eastern turmoil requires profound methodological discourse. These dramatic developments have proven that the current state of affairs cannot be properly analyzed without prior familiarity with the culture, language, and history of research subjects.

The strategic debate on Middle Eastern turmoil requires profound methodological discourse. These dramatic developments have proven that the current state of affairs cannot be properly analyzed without prior familiarity with the culture, language, and history of research subjects, and that these are also required when diagnosing its undercurrents, which seethe below the surface and, at times, erupt. While such tools do not guarantee the ability to predict the future, they are essential to the precise and sharp analysis of events and processes as they take place, as well as to understanding their implications and possible developments.

Moreover, the changes that swept over the region have demonstrated to research institutions that they would find it difficult to continue with their traditional focus on governing elites, military forces and political actions, perceiving them as key shapers of reality. For while they all still carry considerable weight in the Middle East, they are no longer exclusive, and research capabilities must also be developed in the public sphere that, after many years of being a relatively marginal factor in the Arab world, has now become equally influential.