The Arab Uprisings in Historical Perspective

Abstract
At the turn of 2011, turbulent events occurred in the Middle East. Initially, these protests were a form of civil disobedience, but the situation later developed in several directions. In Tunisia and Egypt, the authorities finally gave in to the growing protests. In Jordan, Algeria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Mauritania, Sudan and Oman, the authorities managed to convince the public that they would meet their needs. The authorities in Syria, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain took the harshest positions. In Tunisia and Egypt free elections were conducted, and these countries have started to build a democratic system. This experiment, however, was interrupted in Egypt on July 3, 2013 by the intervention of the army. Can one assume that the Arab Spring is now a closed chapter in the history of the Middle East? This article refers to the sources of the ‘Arab Spring’ and demonstrates its importance for the future of the region.

Driving forces

The literature points to several factors that triggered these acute social protests. The first was the new communication technologies – mobile phones, the Internet, social networking sites – which aroused public awareness, freed people from the dictates of government propaganda and allowed the protesters to organize properly. Indeed, the Internet had already played an important role in mobilizing people in 2009, in the case of the so-called Green Movement in Iran. Those events were even called the ‘Twitter Revolution’. When anti-government protests broke out in 2011 in Egypt, the world called it the ‘Facebook Revolution’, and a girl born on President Mubarak’s resignation day was named Facebook.¹

New technologies have helped to share experiences by creating a network of relationships that cross borders. Such effects were usually achieved by the activities of non-governmental organizations, trade unions and student organizations.

proceedings of Egyptian anti-globalist groups and their cooperation with the Global Justice Movement in 2002–2005 can serve as a good example of this. However, the opinions of cyber-enthusiasts met with criticism from cyber-sceptics, who pointed out that the role of the Internet in the events of the Arab Spring was not decisive, and the new communication technologies were also used by the authorities to strengthen authoritarianism, which as a result limited the potential of these technologies for democracy. Indeed, sociological studies have shown that most of the protesting Tunisians and Egyptians did not have access to the Internet, and some of those who did have such access were worried that their blogs and mailboxes could have been monitored by the authorities, and therefore did not use the Internet. Nevertheless, new technologies have had a huge impact on making those events public worldwide, and thus forced the authorities to be more moderate in their use of violence against demonstrators, but the different results of the protests in Iran and Egypt prove that the success or failure of the democratic movement does not depend so much on the scale of the Internet access, as on many other factors.

The second aspect was the demonstrational effect of what happened in Tunisia. It was the place where protests started and as a result, the omnipotent President Zine el Abidine ben Ali stepped down from office and had to escape abroad. This course of events spoke to the imagination of communities in other countries in the region. However, the strength of the demonstrational effect proved to be limited. Access to information about what happened in Tunisia was widespread, thanks to the Internet and other media, but coverage of the protests in each country was different, not to mention the various effects of these protests in each of the countries of the region.

Moreover, another important factor, common to the entire Middle East, was an inability to meet the vital needs of society. No work, no means of support, increases in food prices, bad governance, corruption, nepotism – these were the driving forces behind the Arab revolutions of 2011. On December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a

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street vendor selling vegetables in Sidi Bouzid, doused himself with gasoline and set himself on fire to protest against his stall being taken away and being thrown out of the police station where he had been trying to defend his rights. Two days later in the same city, there was another tragedy; 22-year-old Houcine Falhi committed suicide by touching the high voltage cables. As he died, he shouted: “The end of poverty, the end of unemployment”.  

However, the most important determinant was breaking the barrier of fear against the all-powerful apparatus of violence at the authoritarian regimes’ disposal. In this sense, the situation in Tunisia has had a major impact on societies in other countries. Tunisia has set an example that demonstrators breaking the barrier of fear and protests, without the use of force, can be effective in achieving the desired result. The fact that the Arab Spring began in Tunisia can be explained by the coincidence of several favorable factors. The country is inhabited by a homogenous population that is almost entirely Muslim, and belongs to one school (the Maliki) of Islamic law. The middle class in Tunisia is well-educated, largely Westernized, and constitutes almost half the population. The army in Tunisia had never been a major political force, and maintained its neutrality during the protests of 2011.

**Macroeconomic indicators and social expectations**

With regard to indicators of economic development, there seemed to be no reason for such radical social protests. Many international experts specializing in development expected that after several years of structural reforms, Egypt would enter a period of high growth and would experience benefits in many areas of civilization. In April 2010, the International Monetary Fund published a report containing the following passage:

> Five years of reforms as well as consistent macroeconomic policy created the necessary basis to tackle the global financial crisis, and Egyptian monetary and fiscal policy was in line with the recommendations of the Fund. The Egyptian authorities have successfully worked to consolidate public finances. After years of reform, Egypt is starting to be successful: it has been classified as one of the leaders of reforms, for excellence for facilitating the start of businesses, access to credit as well as financial and fiscal regulation bills. The World Economic Forum has placed Egypt 11th in the ranking of the most competitive economies in the world for the years 2009–2010, reflecting its enormous progress in the liberalization of economic activity.

In June 2010, the Arab Monetary Fund announced that the economic situation of the Arab countries in 2010 was more stable than in the previous two years. Economic

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growth in the region was supposed to reach at least 4%, and the primary driver of
growth was the demand for oil in the world, which remained consistently high. Only
tourism and the export of manufactured goods were threatened by a slight decrease,
but the Fund’s governing body acknowledged that the financial problems of the euro
zone countries had not affected the overall economic situation in the Arab world.10 In
September 2010, in a report on Tunisia, experts of the International Monetary Fund
claimed: “Over the last two decades, Tunisia has implemented a broad program of
reforms aimed at improving the competitiveness of the economy, to create a better
business climate and abolish barriers hampering trade”.11 Also, in the International
Monetary Fund Report from October 1, 2010, we read about the positive perspective
for the Middle East getting out of the crisis.12

It was not until February 15, 2011, when the Middle East was in turmoil, that
the authorities of the Middle Eastern section of the Fund admitted that there was a
need to pay more attention to the internal problems of development, and not only
to the rates of economic growth.13 Not until then was it observed that positive
macroeconomic indicators did not necessarily prove that the situation in the region
was not difficult. Considerable social tensions due to unemployment, overcrowding,
and the deterioration of the financial situation of some professional groups were
expected, but many thought that it would all end with local protests. In June 2009,
the Egyptian newspaper al-Bayan presented an analysis, prepared jointly with the
Union of Egyptian Workers Abroad, which showed that the labor market situation in
Egypt would deteriorate in 2010, and that this would result in a major crisis in the
following year.14 The crisis erupted with a force which nobody had expected. In the
case of Egypt, Tunisia and the whole Middle East, the thesis of Alexis de Tocqueville,
that the most dangerous moment for a bad government is the time when it starts to
go through reforms, has proven true. This phenomenon is referred to as the
‘revolution of rising expectations’. Authoritarian governments, due to their structure,
cannot meet the new demands of society, which as a result leads to a crisis.

The ‘public sector’ – a new proletariat

Deregulation and economic liberalization became the sources of the new social
tensions. In Egypt, in 2000–2005, the percentage of the population below the poverty
line rose from 16.7 to 19.6%. The gap in income and living standards between the
rich and the poor increased considerably. Part of the public felt neglected by this
accelerating development and began to protest. In 2007, a wave of major strikes

10 ‘Arab 2010 GDP Growth Seen Rising to at Least 4%’, ArabianBusiness.com 18.06.2010,
swept across the country. It was a way of protesting for the employees of the judiciary, tax collectors, and 27,000 workers of Egypt’s largest textile conglomerate in Mahalla al-Kubra. The strike took place in December 2007, when Prime Minister Nazif announced the abolition of subsidies for basic food products worth $1 billion. However, President Mubarak annulled the Prime Minister’s decision, fearing an outbreak of discontent across the whole country.\footnote{Cf. Haaretz, December 12, 2007, p. 7. Authors writing on the topic of the theory and practice of neo-liberalism in Egypt include M. Al. Attar, ‘Counter-revolution by Ideology? Law and Development’s Vision(s) for Post-revolutionary Egypt’, \textit{Third World Quarterly}, Vol. 33, No. 9, 2012, pp. 1611–1629.}

In 2011, those who either did not benefit or had lost their privileges due to the economic liberalization went out into the streets. The poorest did not gain anything, but nor did they lose, because they had little to lose. Those who suffered the greatest losses were teachers, doctors occupying public posts, engineers, workers, civil servants and even soldiers – the so-called ‘public sector’. It was widely known that a general in the Egyptian army earned five times less than a graduate of the elite American University in Cairo who started work in the City Bank. The same general was not able to send his children to study at the same university because the fees were too high, unless he had some extra source of income. The salaries did not keep pace with inflation. From this point of view, the events in Tahrir Square were in fact protests by the ‘public sector’ against the impoverishment of that social class. The impoverishment of the middle class was caused by the inflation and depreciation of the Egyptian pound. A manifestation of resignation and loss of confidence in the government was visible in the falling election turnout. In a referendum in March 2007 only 22% of those eligible went to the polls; in the elections to the upper house of parliament that June, only 7% of the electorate voted. People no longer believed that they had any influence on the destiny of their country.\footnote{Tarek Osman, ‘Egypt: A Diagnosis’, \textit{Open Democracy}, 28 June 2007, http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy_power/protest/modern_egypt (accessed 18.04.2011.).}

The same unfortunate Bouazizi mentioned earlier was a symbol of the degradation of the middle class in Tunisia. He was not an ordinary street salesman selling vegetables, but a university graduate who had to accept physical work, because he could not find a job that would match his qualifications and interests. However, during the rule in Tunisia before 1987 of Habib Bourguiba, the country had a model education system and took pride in its high percentage of people with higher education. Bouazizi belonged to a culture in which committing suicide meant breaking the religious norms, so his act was a symbol of the highest desperation.

In Algeria, teachers’ unions organized mass protests on February 12, 2011. They insisted on the resignation of the government as well as changes economic policy from liberalism to pro-social values. They demanded an end to the privatization of education, among other things. Algerian teachers had made similar demands in the spring of 2010. Back then, they called for higher wages, limiting the increase in the prices of basic food items, and taking action to reduce unemployment. Among the
youth, the unemployment rate was more than 60%. In the same month, the public sector workers started protesting in Jordan; the demonstrators were teachers, who had been demanding the right to form a union for years. The previous teachers’ union in Jordan had been dissolved in 1963, and in 1993 the court upheld its earlier decision, saying that it “contradicts the essence of the teaching profession”. In February 2011, one of the demands of the Jordanian ‘public sector’ was for the government to stop privatization, as it was widening the income gap between the rich and the poor, as well as causing an increase in unemployment. During this time in Jordan, over 30% of professionally active people were unemployed. 17

In Algeria, economic liberalization, and privatization in particular, aroused strong opposition from the trade unions, which feared collective layoffs. 18 Some of the state’s rulers were also against selling national assets to foreign capital; in September 2006 an ex-Prime Minister, Ahmed Benbitour, criticized the sale of national assets and stressed that attracting foreign capital at any cost could not be the sole objective of economic policy. The former head of the Algerian government underlined that the main problem of the country’s economic policy was the lack of competent managers. Most of them found work abroad, and as a result the economy was drifting in an unknown direction. Non-renewable natural resources, which should be used by future generations, were being sold off in the name of creating currency reserves. Benbitour said that foreign capital should only complement the local capital, not supplant it from the Algerian market. Benbitour’s resignation from the post of chief of staff occurred in symptomatic circumstances. The then Prime Minister asked 22 Algerian universities to prepare a report on what Algeria would be like in 2020, and since it was expected that the report would criticize the liberalization and privatization of national assets, the Prime Minister’s opponents urged the President to dismiss the government. 19

In Algeria, the factors of social unrest outbreak were the same as in Egypt and Tunisia, meaning authoritarianism and corruption, conflict between tradition and modernity, as well as unemployment, especially among young people. However, events in Algeria turned out differently. Here the scenario of a dozen people leading crowds of strangers out on the streets using Facebook and Twitter, did not apply. In Algeria, from December 2010 to February 2011, 30 people spilled gasoline on themselves and tried to burn themselves alive (5 succeeded in doing so). This recalled the fate of the Tunisian Mohammed Bouazizi, who self-immolated in protest against the arrogance of the authorities. Nevertheless, the protests in Algeria were not as forceful as in neighboring Tunisia. 20 In January 2011, young people indeed attempted

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to mobilize people to protest through the Internet, but in Algeria only 14% of people have access to the Internet, while in Tunisia the figure is 34%. In February, political organizations and associations launched Saturday protest marches. When Mubarak’s resignation was announced in Egypt, a famous Algerian cartoonist Ali Dimen (whom the Islamists had earlier condemned to death in absentia for preaching secular views) put a caricature on his blog which portrayed an Algerian football fan looking at the scoreboard of a football game; the ‘result’ was Egypt 1, Algeria 0. The fan’s commentary was brief: “We need to get a draw.” This cartoon alluded to the ‘age-old’ football war between Algeria and Egypt. On February 12, two thousand people gathered on 1st of May Square bearing banners reading: ‘Buteflika must go’.21

Is this the twilight of liberalism in the Middle East?

The situation in the Middle East in 2011 has been compared to that in Central Europe in 1989. Here, too, it was all about a shock therapy and the neo-liberal model of economic development. However, the situation in the Middle East in 2011 was very different from that in Central Europe in 1989. In Europe, the protests were caused by the fact that people did not want nationalized socialism, and in fact were demanding a move away from a centrally-planned economy; objectively speaking, they wanted a free market economy with a more or less liberal touch. The Middle East was different; the region had already begun to move to a free market economy in the 1980s, and in 2011 the people were protesting precisely against economic liberalism.22

In connection with such acute social protest, some began to speak and write about the fact that neo-liberalism as a model of development is compromised since it generates poverty, deepens inequality and pushes new social groups to the margins of society.23 But with regard to Egypt, the most populous country and the largest economy in the region, such a statement is only partially true. In the decade of 1991–2000, during the first stage of liberal reforms, economic growth in Egypt rose from 1.2% in 1991 to 6.35% in 2000. As a result, Egypt moved from the group of low-income countries, with a per capita income of US$780 in 1991 to the group of medium-developed countries, with a per capita income of US$1500 in 2000. Therefore, economic growth was evident. Critics of neo-liberalism emphasize that market reforms deepen poverty. However, in Egypt, this thesis has not been confirmed. Whereas before 1991 the poverty rate had been rising by 0.81% per year, and the real wages of manual workers were decreasing by 18%, after 1991 this trend was halted. According to the World Bank, in 1990–1991, 25% of households had incomes below the poverty line. In 1995, the rate was 19%, and in 2000 it was 17%. Therefore, a considerable number of poor people had managed to improve

23 Ibidem.
their position under the conditions of the liberalizing economy. The World Bank report confirmed, however, that the situation of those who had failed to get out of the cycle of poverty had worsened. The conclusion was particularly evident when one takes into consideration the first half of 1990, when GDP growth was not yet so high. All things considered, liberalization has had a positive impact on poverty reduction, although it has not eliminated poverty completely. Statistics showed that the problem was the fact that the economic growth was uneven – some years it was high, and others low. On one hand, low growth does not create demand for an unskilled workforce, and the economy does not absorb this surplus power. On the other, during years of high growth, wages increase substantially and the poor are positive about it. This was the situation in Egypt.24

Deregulation and economic liberalization in the region was conducted within the framework of authoritarian political systems. In such an environment, the political and economic sphere first interweaves and then unites. In the Arab countries, under the conditions of the lack of political and economic transparency, the privatization processes were deformed. Economic success depended on the right political and social connections. In the literature, such arrangement is called ‘active pension search’, and the whole system is one of crony capitalism, meaning ‘the capitalism of connections’.

In Egypt, those who approached the entourage of the President and his son Gamal were the first to learn about favorable contracts, and could count on lucrative public tenders. They also learned about the government’s investment plans, and were therefore able to judge the value of land and building lots. These people quickly built up immense fortunes. Of course, they had to return the favor. They paid off officials, and generously supported the President’s wife’s charity. The presidential party and its leadership needed financial support from the business, and they duly received such support. Indeed, many leading businessmen joined the National Democratic Party and became members of parliament on the party’s behalf. Sponsoring the president’s party in this situation was something natural for them. After winning the elections in December 2010, the National Democratic Party and the leading ‘new Egyptians’ not only found themselves again in parliament, but occupied managerial positions in parliamentary committees.25

Numerous scientific and journalistic studies show that there was a narrow coalition between bureaucrats and business, which grew rich through the ‘active pension search’. This mainly concerned the privatization of state enterprises. Officials of state institutions cooperated with businessmen who acquired state-owned enterprises at a reduced price. In this way, a few large companies, profitable at the time of sale, were sold; these included Pepsi Cola, al-Nasr Boilers, al-Ahram Beverages, Asyut

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Cement and Meridian Hotel, to name just a few. The tenders were not transparent. The sale of the Qaha Company for Preserved Food is one example of what the process looked like. The investor, whose payment abilities had not been confirmed, did not pay a single instalment required by the act of sale. Nevertheless, that individual remained the owner of the profitable company, deriving profits from the sale of the foodstuffs produced.\textsuperscript{26}

In Tunisia, the phenomenon of active pension searching was similar to that in Egypt. Here too, all the threads of the links between politicians and business converged in the Presidential palace. President Ben Ali’s wife played an important role in these relationships. The privatization of state-owned enterprises was carried out by the central bank, and as of November 1997 also by commercial banks, which were able to provide loans for the purchase of privatized enterprises. A ‘coalition’ of pension searchers was formed by great landowners and urban bourgeoisie. Of course, not everyone could get a loan; to obtain one, people needed to have the connections, a line which ended in the Presidential palace. Those who had direct access to the center of political power did not have to pay the middlemen, and their profits from buying a state-owned company were bigger; the others had to pay all the link-men leading to the presidential palace. Nevertheless, even for them it was profitable to acquire privatized properties. In many cases, state-owned companies were bought just to lay the employees off and sell the machines and the land. In most cases, the loans taken for the privatization in state-owned banks have not been repaid – which was allowed by the law. The banks received only about 20\% of the borrowed money back. The privatization also included arable land; about 600,000 hectares of the best arable land, previously taken over from private owners under the agrarian reform program, ended up in private hands and sold below the market price. At the same time about 2.7 million hectares of community land was sold, which worsened the situation of the smallholders.\textsuperscript{27}

Economic liberalization also offered a great opportunity to get rich in Algeria. Initially, that opportunity was grabbed by the class of technocrats gathered around President Chadli Ben Jadid. The civil war that broke out in 1992 pushed the economic affairs into the background, but after 1995 the new President Liamine Zéroual and Prime Minister Ahmad Ujahja started a new program of economic liberalization. The specificity of privatization in Algeria was that the oil and gas sectors, the production of textiles and food were excluded from the sale; these sectors remained in the possession of the state. The buyers of privatized enterprises were those who were able to enter into agreements with government officials and politicians. The privatization of Orascom TV channel brought to light the fact that the company’s shares had also been sold to the family of the President. The land and arable land

\textsuperscript{27} King, ‘Sustaining Authoritarianism…’.
belonging to the state was sold off, although this process was slower in Algeria than in Tunisia. Privatized land was taken away from the French colonists and Algerian landowners in order to distribute it among the landless peasants.\(^{28}\)

Development in the Middle Eastern countries in the last decade and severe social protests against government policies do not compromise economic liberalism as a development model as such, but rather one of its specific forms, namely privatization and the free market economy, as well as the pursuit of economic growth at any cost, within the framework of political authoritarianism without any public supervision. This form of the liberal model worked only for the regimes’ ‘cronies’, and led to the deepening of income inequality and disparities in regional development. That is what the Arab streets in 2011 were protesting against.

**Islamists in power**

On a wave of anti-authoritarian sentiments and the removal of corrupt authoritarian regimes from power in Tunisia and Egypt, the opportunity to create democratic systems of power arose. The first step in that direction was free and democratic elections. Many people voted in the belief that their party would best meet their needs, whereas others voted for the available parties only because they were not associated with the old authorities. The Islamists filled both roles. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood had already tried to enter the parliament, and in 2005 won as many as 88 seats. However, the next elections in 2010 were strictly controlled by the government and the ruling National Democratic Party took all the seats in parliament. Egyptian voters well remembered that political manipulation, and during the free elections in 2011, many of them voted for the candidates representing the Brotherhood. A similar turn of events was seen in Tunisia. As a result, governments were taken over by the Islamists in both countries. This meant a completely new situation for Islamism as a political ideology. So far, the groups that drew on this ideology were in the political opposition and often worked underground. The activists were persecuted and many of them scarified their lives for their ideals. Now, Islamist parties were supposed to rule the country led by an apparatus of state, and shape its relations with the opposition. This meant a re-evaluation of many of the essential ideas of Islamism on political relations in the country and the development of society.\(^{29}\)

At first, on March 23, 2011, an interim constitutional declaration was adopted in Egypt. At the turn of 2012 parliamentary elections were held, which were generally considered free and fair. The elections were won by the Party of Freedom and

\(^{28}\) Ibidem.

Justice, which was founded by activists deriving from the Muslim Brotherhood. During the first democratic Presidential elections held on June 30, 2012, the winner was the Islamist groups’ candidate, Muhammad Mursi. He defeated Ahmad Shafiq, who had been backed by the army and supporters of the old regime.30

In Tunisia’s first free parliamentary elections, held on October 23, 2011, the most votes were won by the Islamist party an-Nahda. This party had already operated for several decades and even participated in the 1989 elections, winning 17% of the votes, but later was pushed underground by the authorities.31

However, neither the Freedom and Justice Party nor an-Nahda won absolute majorities and had to rule in coalition with other parties. As a result, the process of creating a democratic system in both countries was full of tensions and political conflicts. It was also based on provisional legal acts which were full of contradictions, which further intensified the political chaos. The nations’ new leaders made many mistakes, which could be explained by the lack of experience in governing. Some party activists did not want to share power with the opposition and aimed at imposing an Islamic vision of development upon the whole society. This tendency meant a worsening of the situation for religious and ethnic minorities.32 The economic situation deteriorated as the dynamic political events effectively deterred tourists and shook tourism as a pillar of the economies of both countries. In Tunisia, within two years of the Arab Spring’s outbreak, the number of tourists had fallen from 7 to 3 million. Also, foreign investors held their investment back in both countries, and began to direct capital to more stable countries.

July 3, 2013, saw a military coup in Egypt, as the army removed the government and the President from power. The experiment of creating a democratic system in that country was interrupted. Moreover, discussions on the mistakes made by the authorities during the transitional period and on the future of democracy in the Middle East were initiated. It is worth noting that in Western countries, the creation of a political system of the representative democracy took several centuries. Meanwhile, less than two and a half years had passed since the resignation of ben Ali in Tunisia (January 2011) and Mubarak in Egypt (February 2011). That period is certainly too short to build a democracy, considering that the Middle East had been dominated by authoritarian systems for more than 50 years.33

“We are all Arabs!”

The phenomenon of Islamism in the Middle East should be considered in the context of the political processes of the region, and the dynamics of those processes should be seen in the context of the local culture. The problem of the political process’s cultural context, present for many decades, was barely noticed by Western political scientists. The situation in this respect changed drastically after the Khomeini revolution in Iran in 1979. In the Middle East, the cultural context is the role of Islam in shaping the lives of local communities and raising political awareness. In this regard, the twentieth century was a time of profound changes in the Middle East. Religious law was forced out and replaced by civil and criminal laws modeled on Western standards. The new state educational systems were also based on the Western models. The Arab world is a Muslim world, although one should remember that in all Arab countries (except Saudi Arabia) the development model is not based on religious norms. One may say that the Arab world is Muslim at the same level as Europe is Christian. The secularization of society is way more advanced than is commonly thought. Mosques in the Arab countries are state-owned or are under state supervision, and people connected with the practice of worship (imams in mosques, religious teachers, academics in religious universities, Cairo’s Al-Azhar included) are civil servants who may be removed from office at any time. In Tunisia until 2011, religious lessons could not be conducted at school. Moroccan sociologists’ studies of 2001, 2003 and 2005 on the practice of worship in the country have shown that 65% of those surveyed prayed regularly, 8% prayed irregularly, approximately 12% prayed during their childhood but stopped praying and going to the mosque during their adulthood, and nearly 15% of respondents had never prayed at all. At the same time, all of them identified themselves as Muslims.34

Similar studies and observations of customs in other countries have led to the conclusion that Islam as a faith and a group of religious institutions is experiencing a serious crisis, and the widespread belief in the West that the Arab world is engulfed by religious zeal stands in stark opposition to the fervor and madness of consumerism visible in large supermarkets in Riyadh, Kuwait, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Muscat and Cairo. The modernization ongoing since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and the impact of global culture have led to a situation in which the majority of the Middle Eastern societies have been secularized and are in favor of the concept of a state in which religion is separated from politics. However, Islam still plays a huge role in shaping social attitudes and political awareness. It is a cultural context that cannot be ignored, and Islamism is an important element of policy, without which it is difficult to imagine the development of the region.

In the world of the Middle East a sharp ideological dispute is taking place. It revolves around fundamental issues and the question of whether to modernize with or without God. At the policy level, the dispute has been going on at least since the

end of World War I, and is expressed in the form of a confrontation between two political ideologies, Islamism and Arabism. In the twentieth century, this confrontation was very heated and in many cases ended in bloodshed. This was the time of Nasser in Egypt, Bourguiba in Tunisia, Yemen after the unification of the country, as well as Iraq and Syria under the Ba’ath Party. Arabism promoted the model of the secular state and pushed Islamism, with its state model based on religion, underground. In the regional sphere of international relations, Arabism promoted pan-Arabism, and therefore the unity of all the Arab countries on the basis of ethnicity, community, language and history; and Islamism propagated pan-Islamism, an idea which states that Islam is and should be a common ground integrating the region’s inhabitants. The dispute between Arabism and Islamism manifested itself clearly during the Arab Spring. The slogan “We are all Arabs”, regardless of religion and religiosity, was often heard in the streets of Arab cities in 2011. However, unlike the 1960s and 1970s, when that slogan was supposed to unite the Arabs against the colonialism and imperialism of the West, now, during the Arab Spring it became a common ground for those who demanded rights, political freedoms and social security. It meant the revitalization of Arabism, which has been losing its advocates in favor of Islamism since the 1980s, and the revival of pan-Arabism based on the new narrative and the discourse of Arab societies revolting against oppressive and corrupt regimes. The birth of that narrative and that discourse is one of the most important phenomena of the Arab Spring.35

The new subjectivity

The importance of the Arab Spring goes beyond the unresolved problems of material goods and living conditions. Many authors believe that the rebellion of the societies of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen against their countries’ governments was not only the result of frustration due to the inefficiencies of those governments in creating jobs, building homes, roads, schools and hospitals. Disappointment was present and it was deep. However, a new approach to politics and the individual’s place in society, a new relationship to power as such and to religion, and the relationship between the generations was gradually being born. These changes contributed to the awareness of what has been referred to in the literature as the new political subjectivity. The content of this new subjectivity was reflective individualism, meaning thoughts and actions taken by the individuals to free themselves from the influence of social structures dominating them and determining their behavior. However, reflective individualism was different from neo-liberal individualism, as it openly questioned all sorts of restrictions imposed on the individual by the group as well as any kind of authority over the individual – from the patriarchal to communal, tribal and party. Reflective individualism boils down to the fact that the individual is negotiating opportunities for greater freedom of action.

and acceptance of the individual’s new unconventional behavior with an environment
that determines their behavior, however, without destroying the already existing
systems and structures.\textsuperscript{36}

New non-governmental broadcast media, especially television, played a huge role
in shaping the new subjectivity. al-Jazeera, al-Arabiyya and other Arab and Western
stations transmitting programs in Arabic created a new public space in which social
dialogue and debates were conducted on topics banned by the authorities and absent
from governmental stations. Government channels transmitted television programs
that were divorced from fundamental political issues and created a virtual reality, not
having much in common with what was going on outside the studio. On January 26,
2011, Egyptian state television aired cooking programs, and remained silent about
the fact that hundreds of thousands of people protesting against the government had
gathered on the streets of Cairo. The new media have become a platform for many
people who would never have had the opportunity to express their views to the
media because of the dense net of censorship. Although the new television stations
fit the framework of the Western liberal concepts of the media as the third power
(and therefore the conservative wing of the opposition saw them as a tool of U.S.
policy toward the Middle East), it was in fact the exact same media which had
harshly criticized U.S. policy in the region.\textsuperscript{37}

Their reflexivity in evaluating the political situation became apparent even among
Islamist political activists. Some members of the Muslim Brotherhood, and even
radical Salafists, began to protest against the traditional position of Islamism which
claims that ‘the only solution is Islam’ and initiated a discussion about freedom, civil
liberties and democracy. That attempt brought them closer to the secular opposition
groups who were discussing precisely these issues. That openness to the issues
fundamental to the political system was a new phenomenon in the ideology of Islamism,
which came to be called post-Islamism.\textsuperscript{38}

The evolution of Islamism in the direction of reflexivity in evaluating the political
situation was also influenced by the activation of secular environments of the political
opposition. Prior to 2011, there was a conviction that the Islamists were the center
of anti-government opposition, and that only they were able to mobilize the masses
to take to the streets in protest against government policy. Meanwhile, in 2011, the
massive anti-government demonstrations were a spontaneous civic protest by the

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p. 206.
vast masses of people which not only had not been planned by the Islamists, but even took them by surprise. 39

The success of the protests in Egypt and Tunisia has been made possible thanks to the cooperation of people of different faiths and different views that were willing to discuss the shape of the state and the place of religion in it. In this way, new forms of social solidarity were born. That phenomenon may have political importance in the creation of alliances between parties and building a nationwide vision of the state and society in the coming years. One must bear in mind the fact that after the military coup in July 2013, Egypt’s ability to create such alliances has declined, since the Islamist circles have been put on the defensive. However, in the future they may be reborn. The events in Egypt in 2012–2013, namely the polarization of political forces due to the monopolization of power by the Islamist government, can be taken as an important experience for the process of democracy building. These experiments confirm the thesis of Samuel Huntington from 1991, which says that during the transitional period, the new ruling elite and the opposition, including the old regime, should not only negotiate between themselves, but at the same time demonstrate restraint and moderation. The logic of exclusion and marginalization of one force by the other does not lead to democracy, but a new authoritarianism. 40

The experiences of Tunisia and Egypt in the transitional period were different. In Tunisia, before the parliamentary elections in 2011, the advisability completely eliminating the forces of the old regime from the political process and the dissolution of former President ben Ali’s party were discussed. However, eventually this approach was abandoned, especially when an-Nahda won only 37% of the seats in elections to the National Assembly, and in order to rule they had to start discussing the possibilities of creating the coalition with the opposition. In Egypt, the new ruling party was unable to communicate with the army, which was more influential than the one in Tunisia, and the conflict which arose against the background of the separation of powers and sanctions against representatives of the old regime was initially settled in favor of the President. However, ultimately the army proved to be the winning side, although the military coup meant that the creation of a democratic system ended in failure. In Algeria, though there has been no change in the government, under pressure from the public it declared that it was willing to take steps towards political liberalization. However, their intentions turned out to be illusive. The elections of 2012 showed that authoritarianism may be subject to modifications, but without pressure from the society it cannot evolve towards a democratic system. In the case of Algeria, an additional factor strengthening the authoritarian rule is the ‘oil salary’, which allows the ruling elite to manipulate the public by bribing those strata of the society which at a given moment are showing their dissatisfaction or protest. 41

Political transformation and the economy

The Arab Spring has confirmed earlier observations of events taking place in other regions, that during the transition from an authoritarian system to democracy, the economic situation is a very important factor. Politics and the economy form an entity like interconnected vessels. The successes of transitional governments in improving the citizens’ living conditions strengthen nascent democratic institutions, whereas the failures facilitate populism, radicalism, terrorism and revenge, and also undermine confidence in the new government.\textsuperscript{42} In the case of the Arab countries, the issues of socio-economic development which the state authorities faced after 2011 were enormous. These included high unemployment, especially among young people, low per capita GDP, large disparities in income between the rich and poor, and an inefficient welfare system, poor infrastructure, and dependence on economic sectors such as oil production and tourism, which are sensitive to economic conditions and international events. Further major challenges for any ruling party are the robust bureaucracy and the decline in industrial production over the past three decades. The opposition in Egypt paid attention to the close relationship between politics and the economy, especially after the strike by 24,000 textile plant workers in al-Mahalla al-Kubra in 2006. In subsequent years, the activists of the pro-democracy organizations \textit{Tadamon} (Solidarity), the April 6 Movement, Youth for Justice and Freedom, and \textit{Hashd} (Mobilization) called for the support of economic strikes in factories, and argued that political activities in favor of democratic change should be connected with the struggle of the workers for better pay conditions and social rights.\textsuperscript{43}

The workers contributed to the history of the Middle East numerous times, and also participated in the recent Arab Spring events. In January and February 2011, a group of workers marched repeatedly from the industrial outskirts of the Egyptian capital to Tahrir Square in Cairo. The workers were holding banners saying ‘We want to live’, ‘We want to eat’, and chanted: ‘Democracy, bread, justice’. The workers had expressed their opposition against the system power before. Since 1998, when the government began a wide-ranging privatization of state assets, about four thousand strikes, demonstrations, workplaces occupation and other forms of collective protest attended by millions of workers took place in Egypt. People protested against collective layoffs and sending employees on early retirement. The authorities limited employment to improve the efficiency of the companies and to sell them to private investors at a higher price. The role of workers’ dissent was often overlooked.


by the protest movements in the emerging middle class, because of the animosity between the two classes. What is more, the two movements operated in other areas: the middle class youth, much wealthier than the workers, demanded democracy and greater access to power, whereas workers demanded improvements in their living conditions above all. The middle class movements, such as the April 6 Youth Movement and *Kifāya* (Enough), used modern technologies to achieve their goals and for that reason were more ‘visible’. It was not until June 2011 that the April 6 Youth Movement paid attention to the workers’ economic demands of, which only added strength to the anti-Mubarak opposition.44

**The new episode of the Cold War**

The international dimension was another important aspect of the Arab Spring. The states outside the region were involved in the events in the Middle East from the beginning. The course of these events in countries such as Libya, Bahrain and Syria would have been quite different if not for the interference of external forces. The involvement of the West in the affairs of the Middle East was evident and ambiguous. On the one hand, the West has shown great restraint in supporting democratic movements in Egypt and Bahrain, which tried to overthrow the pro-Western authoritarian regimes. On the other hand, Western countries have condemned and even undertaken military action to overthrow dictators in other countries, such as Libya and Syria, which were known for their anti-Western attitudes. So the West has supported democracy and condemned authoritarianism selectively, depending on whether the regime pursued a pro- or anti-Western policy. It turned out that the geo-strategic goals of the West had greater priority than the pursuit of democratization in the Arab world.

The division of the Arab world into pro- and anti-Western countries was a remnant of the Cold War. The regime in Syria had been a client of the Soviet Union since the 1960s, and even after the fall of its patron continued the policy of hostility towards the West. Therefore, it was no surprise that the U.S. condemned the brutally suppressed social protests in Syria, and Russia supported the Syrian authorities. Washington, in turn, supported the Bahraini authorities throughout the ruthless suppression of anti-government protests. Bahrain’s rulers had been loyal American allies for many decades.45

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The case of Libya was more complex. The regime of Muammar Gaddafi became the object of military action by the West, despite the fact that previous Libyan relations with the West had been proper and Western corporations had received long-term concessions to extract Libyan oil. However, normalization in the political and economic relations did not mean the restoration of mutual trust. As a result of the violent polarization of political forces in Libya, the old enmity was revived and the West sided with the rebels. First, on March 2, the League of Arab States, controlled by the conservative countries of the Arabian Peninsula, adopted Resolution No. 7298, calling on the UN to carry out its duties, which meant banning flights over Libya. Then, the UN adopted Resolutions Nos. 1970 and 1973, and on their basis, NATO took military action. This step proved to be the right one from the point of view of political and economic interests of the West, because after the fall of Gaddafi, Western corporations maintained their positions in the Libyan oil sector, and the new political authorities cooperated with the West. At the same time, they were internally broken and weak, so it was obvious that they would not be able to challenge the dominance of the West, and that they would become their clients.

Since the Syrian and Libyan regimes had requested emergency assistance from Moscow, the situation and the division of the Middle East into two camps was similar to that of the Cold War: those looking for support in Washington and those whose patron was Moscow. That situation proved that the transformation of power in the Middle East and the security in the region did not end with the official end of the Cold War. If on the global scale the world had become unipolar after 1989, the Middle East still suffered from the Cold War division, and the internal politics of the authoritarian regimes continued to exploit the rivalry between world powers to strengthen their own positions. From the point of view of the theory of regional


On military actions, see: Abdelali, ‘Wave of Change…’, p. 204.


international relations, the events that took place in the region after 2011 can be called the new episode of the Cold War. International relations, revived by the Arab Spring, had many characteristics of the Cold War period’s politics. The Middle East was again the scene of a confrontation between the superpowers, and the local leaders again become clients of these powers, seeking support from their patrons to gain control over their citizens and strengthen their own international position. Russia once again became an important actor on the stage of the Middle East, and the question of whom to support and what position to take in the face of what happened in Libya, Egypt and especially Syria, again divided the world into two camps.49

A new era

The Arab Spring has opened a new era in the history of international relations in the Middle East, and the international conditions for a return to the ‘Cold War’ in the Middle East differed substantially from those of previous decades. In comparison with the period of 1950–1970, the Middle Eastern regimes that inherited anti-Western attitudes from the Cold War and requested assistance from Moscow have first and foremost overstated their patron’s potential, and have either been seriously weakened like Assad’s Syria, or even disappeared from the political scene like Gaddafi’s Libya. Secondly, the conflict between the U.S. and Russia on the background of the situation in the Middle East after 2011, has not influenced substantially the cooperation between the two countries on a global scale.

As for the new era, the most important events were the victory of Islamist parties in Egypt and Tunisia and the strengthening of parties of a similar character in other Arab countries: Jordan, Morocco and Syria. For the first time in the history of the Arab Middle East, Islamism has become the ruling power of the two countries, including Egypt, the most populous and politically crucial Arab country. The Islamist parties’ policy contested the interference of foreign powers in the affairs of the region and questioned the previous cliental agreements with these powers. This was a proclamation of a fundamental change in the balance of power in the region and a limitation of the influence of foreign powers on the international relations in the Middle East. Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood has also announced that the ruling force will review the agreement concluded with Israel at Camp David by the previous government of Egypt. However, the military coup in Egypt on July 3, 2011 opened the way to the restoration of cliental systems with the West, and also to Egypt respecting international agreements.
