



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Easter in Winter: The “Arab Spring” Seven Years Later

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The time has come to stop peddling misleading and empty political metaphors and to refrain from predicating alternative futures on facile inferences that serve only to add confusion to ambiguity.

Triggered by a dispossessed and humiliated street vendor’s self-immolation in Tunisia on December 17, 2010, the “Arab Spring” destroyed everything in its path, from Libya to Yemen to Syria. Each of the countries and peoples affected experienced its own self-liberationist pseudo-version of a season that never arrived.

In Tunisia, the flight of president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali led to a divisive and palpable soul-searching that ultimately yielded a semblance of inclusive, if religiously biased, political consensus. Tunisia has been the only non-loser of the international havoc that began there.

In Algeria, popular violence erupted to protest government corruption, state repression of citizens’ freedoms, and substandard living conditions, eliciting prompt palliatives. The country managed to remain intact thanks to rapid government action to boost employment and combat political corruption coupled with tighter policing to maintain order and stability.

In Morocco, King Mohammed VI quickly offered concessions, including a referendum to bring about constitutional changes, which caused protests to die down by the end of 2012.

The NATO-supported, hasty, messy, and ugly overthrow of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi in Libya in August 2011 was supposed to install Western-style governance in a jiffy. A parliament would be elected and order restored in no time, according to a French pundit. That is not how events transpired. The

General National Congress, which took power in August 2012, was forced to take refuge in Tobruk while a rival government took power in Tripoli. The country remains in a shambles, with unified control dependent on the elimination of ISIS and other Islamist militias. Qaddafi's madness had a method that Western wisdom failed to grasp.

The 18 days of protest in Egypt's Tahrir Square that began on January 25, 2011 led the government of Hosni Mubarak to censor Internet access in an effort to thwart citizen organization. By February 10, the level of violence had led to Mubarak's resignation. Parliament was dissolved by the military; Essam Sharaf was appointed and then dismissed as civilian leader; and on November 22, 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood's Muhammad Morsi was sworn in as president. This was followed by Morsi's incompetent and prejudiced rule; his overthrow by the military; and the reversal of Mubarak's sentence. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's efforts to minimize the huge damage caused Egypt by the prolonged upheaval; to try and halt the unrest, towards stabilizing the country's internal and external environments; to take a fresh approach towards Hamas (the Palestinian off-shoot of the Muslim Brotherhood); and to suppress, possibly even eradicate, Islamist terrorism in the Sinai Peninsula, opened a new (if still far from top-down democratic) era for Egypt.

Trouble in Yemen started on January 27, 2011 in Sana'a, when 16,000 angry citizens took to the streets to protest high unemployment, poor economic conditions, and state corruption. On February 3, activist politician Tawakel Karman called for a "Day of Rage." Though 20,000 protesters demanded President Ali Abdullah Saleh's swift resignation, it took an assassination attempt to get him to flee to Saudi Arabia on June 3 (he eventually returned to Sana'a and was assassinated there on December 4, 2017). Saleh's vice president, Abd al-Rab Mansur al-Hadi, who succeeded him in February 2012, had to run for his own life in 2015 owing to the Shiite rebel uprising initiated by Abdul-Malik al-Houthi in 2014.

The Iran-affiliated Houthis took control of the capital despite attacks from a Saudi-led Sunni coalition. Ever since then, the Houthis and the Saudi coalition have been engaged in an internationalized armed conflict – a struggle for regional supremacy that has become a tug of war from which it is increasingly difficult for any party to be the first to withdraw. With 17 million starving and many dead, Yemen's "Arab Spring" has turned into a self-prolonging, cruel winter.

In Bahrain, citizens gathered on February 14, 2011 peacefully to call for human rights and political freedoms. They were violently dispersed by the police. On February 20, some 150,000 people demonstrated at the Pearl Roundabout. Many were killed or injured. In March, the government arrested 3,000 people, many of whom were allegedly tortured. Human rights groups and the media were

denied access to the detainees. The same month, the Saudi military entered Bahrain on behalf of the governing Sunni minority. When calm was restored, the Bahraini government tore down the Pearl Roundabout, stripping the place from its historicity. An indelible shadow fell on the future of Bahrain's grip on its Shiite majority at a time when Iran's regional clout keeps hardening.

Qatar's internal and external politics immunized it against local protests, despite its activism in Libya and elsewhere. Its rapprochement with Iran and active support for the Muslim Brotherhood (and Hamas) led to its formal estrangement from most of the other GCC countries, and Turkey's initiatives in Qatar promise to complicate the region's power equations even further.

In Kuwait, a summary dismissal of the government helped redress the effects of the protests fostered by "the Arab Spring" between 2011 and 2012. The al-Sabah family acts as official mediator in the bitter conflict that ranges Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE against circumstantially Iran-friendly Qatar.

Introverted Oman outmaneuvered its own internal unrest in 2011 by creating a Public Authority for Consumer Protection. It has also managed to avoid being drawn into either the GCC's dispute with Qatar or the armed conflict between its immediate neighbors, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

In the United Arab Emirates, *pro forma* calls for democratic freedoms were easily stifled by the government's competitive pursuit of prosperity and international connectivity.

Saudi Arabia used a carrot and stick approach – by enacting generous measures and swift retribution – to fend off complications from the "Arab Spring" during a menacing period of great tension. The kingdom engaged in a military incursion against the uprisings in Bahrain, and sent its military into the fray of Yemen's fratricidal war, at a time when brusque, belated reforms and weaker oil revenues coincided with a power transfer at home. Riyadh has had to contend with Iran's nuclear ambitions, ballistic missile pursuits, and hegemonic striving in the region; rival Sunni fundamentalisms abroad; Qatar's alleged betrayals; and worries over the perception among Muslims and Arabs of the Saudis' legitimate leadership role. As Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman swiftly acted to consolidate power, shaking Saudi religious and financial circles in the process, the House of Saud found itself hamstrung between nominal alliances with the West and practical pursuits with Russia.

In Jordan, relatively moderate protests led to the standard palliative reforms. The few changes in government that King Abdullah II undertook sufficed to restore order. Yet the sudden arrival of more than 600,000 Syrian refugees and non-

refugees as a consequence of Syria's own "Arab Spring," and threats to the Kingdom from domestic Islamist militancy, have created problems. If Tehran succeeds in its efforts to gain access to the Mediterranean Sea (via Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon) and to secure its presence in Bab-el-Mandeb via Yemen, then Jordan could become "an area of interest" for Iran from which it could profitably open yet another military front – this time against archenemy Israel.

In Iran, reverberations of the "Arab Spring" in the form of local, bottom-up agitation had no chance at all. Acting swiftly and ferociously, the regime decisively eliminated all real and suspected sources of such threats.

In Iraq, protests against state corruption in 2011 were relatively light. The major demonstrations in 2012-13 against the blatant Shiite discrimination that led to the electoral defeat of PM Nouri al-Maliki in 2014 would create latitude for the swift rise and deadly spread of ISIS. It has taken three long years for the Iraqi army to claim "almost" total victory over Sunni Islamists, after receiving important help from Iran. Of course, Iran itself poses serious problems to the future of Iraq as a viably sovereign, indivisible political entity.

Syria's case in the context of the "Arab Spring" has been *sui generis*. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians have been murdered, millions displaced, the country itself demolished, and the regime disqualified of its legitimacy to govern by its willingness to butcher its own people in its determination to stay in power. Yet for geopolitical reasons, the leadership still enjoys the support of Iran and Russia, which view Syria as a means rather than an end. The shift in US foreign policy from abdication to resigned facilitation has not only diminished its leadership image and role in the region, but has created distrust among major and minor stakeholders who still have good reasons for wanting to continue counting on it.

The long-in-coming victory over ISIS is bound to have a complex aftermath. Complicating factors include the role of Iran (*per se*, and via Hezbollah and, ironically, Hamas); Russia's stance; Turkey's regional security interests, with Iraqi and Syrian Kurds in mind; the longer-term regional strategies of the EU and the US; China's perception of this part of the Levant's geography in the patiently ambitious context of its globalizing geopolitical designs; and the unavoidable implications and consequences for Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel.

The meticulously tailored if short-lived "surprise" resignation on November 4, 2017, of Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri, "in charge" for less than a year, does not augur well for the tenor of regional geopolitical developments. The threat to his life, which he claims to have received from "outsiders intervening in Arab affairs," raises urgent questions about the prospects for peace, security, and prosperity in the Levant. It would seem imperative at this stage for Lebanon

to distinguish friend from foe before it becomes the next victim in what, for it, would be a familiar Sisyphean process of never-ending reconfiguration.

After seven years of destruction, the fertility attributed to the “Arab Spring” seems to have been but a case of boastful frigidity. The local and international effects of the “Arab Spring” underscore the difficulty of establishing peace in a region where theocracies and autocracies are not only unlikely to disappear overnight, but – short of real revolutions – promise to persist for decades to come.

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