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The Arab Spring, its implications on the geopolitics of MENA region

The Arab Spring is a set of anti-government protests, street events and riots that began in Tunisia in 2010 when a street vendor set himself on fire, denouncing the lack of livelihood and socio-economic inequality in the country. Subsequently, it spread to countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Sparked by an individual case, the Arab Spring has evolved into a regional social movement in which MENA citizens have attempted to demand democracy, freedom, and basic human rights through political protests and, in some countries, through armed movements. The dimensions of the social reaction and actions do not have the same intensity in every MENA country. In addition to softer manifestations such as protests, demonstrations and rallies, there also have been examples such as Syria, Yemen, and Libya, where internal conflicts have turned into civil wars. In this sense, although the dimensions of the manifestations in Syria, Libya, Yemen, Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria, and Bahrain were more severe and large-scale, in Mauritania, Oman, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Morocco, the intensity of the social reaction was more limited and milder.

In his presentation, “The Arab Spring and its Consequences”, Professor Najib Mokhtari provides an analysis of the Arab Spring through the documentary ‘My Makhzen and Me’, which focuses on Morocco's experience with the Arab Spring and in particular the February 20, 2011 demonstrations. Summarizing the situation in other MENA countries, the documentary draws attention to power dynamics, identity issues and social injustices in Morocco. The social complexity and contradictions of the people’s demands and expectations were also highlighted. At this point, the Arab Spring demonstrates that societies in the Middle East and North Africa lack the same level of awareness regarding it, despite mobilizing to demand democratic rights on the streets. Indeed, Professor Mokhtari emphasized that it was Marc Lynch, a political scientist from the US political journal Foreign Policy, who first used the term Arab Spring to define this movement.

“The emergent geopolitical picture introduces the poisonous mix of loss of state authority spiraling toward instability, defined by sectarianism, extremism, and global rivalries, and ultimately irredentism within the interdependent subregional formations” (Aras & Yorulmazlar, 2016). In general, the Arab Spring movements across MENA countries impacted the legitimacy of Arab nation-states, serving as a platform for transnationalism, extremism, and sectarianism. In other words, the lack of a regional order, resulting from the civil wars and the influence of non-state actors, compelled both established and emerging regional actors to intervene, jeopardizing the rhetoric of a new normative order (Aras & Yorulmazlar, 2016).

There is no doubt that the “(dis)order” presents isolationism as a solution to avoid the loss of security, the dispute for dominance and the restructuring of power in the area. According to Aras and Yorulmazlar (2016), this region endorsed a geopolitical shift between the domestic and regional dynamic, and subsequently, the projection of the regional context to the international one. This negatively impacted the definition and clear perception of the boundaries of the policy framework.

Specifically in the Maghreb sub-region, there continues to be a power dynamic between “Secular” and “Islamist” competitors, in which Tunisia has been able to maintain its secular regime, Algeria has



maintained a certain stability, and Libya has remained divided. Its stability rests on reconciliation between the secular and Islamist groups.

As mentioned, the Arab Spring was followed by geopolitical rivalries in the MENA region, where “geostrategic structures based on the pro-Western vs. anti-Western dichotomy were shattered” (Aras & Yorulmazlar, 2016). According to the main narrative of the Arab Spring, the demands for political transformation towards democracy were the primary catalyst for the turmoil that spread in the region. However, the local or regional actor’s efforts alone were not enough to assist the political transformation agenda. Indeed, when regional actors failed to devise efficient mechanisms to alleviate conflicts and tensions, the region was infiltrated by third-party actors and interests, resulting in a clash of interests. Therefore, the crisis in the region has been internationalized, triggering geopolitical rivalries between different international actors, which have resulted in the stalling of political reforms. Socio-economic pressures, regional conflicts, and the emergence of non-state actors and third-party involvements undermined the establishment of regional order, boundaries, power balance, and alignments. The main line of division in finding a regional balance has thus been between the divided Arab world and powerful non-Arab actors (Aras & Şaban Kardaş, 2021).

Most authors have underlined some of the major geopolitical shifts in the MENA region such as the growing influence of Gulf countries, the new dynamic of global penetration related to Russia and the volatility of alliances and rivalries. We can identify two main actors who are pursuing different strategies in the region in order to fill the gap left by the absence of a solid leadership in the area: Russia and China (Aras & Şaban Kardaş, 2021).

Though, it is still in its infancy, China’s policy towards the region is aimed at challenging the order that other powers, such as Russia and the United States are trying to impose. Until now, it has been absent from discussion on the Middle East regionalization. Authors claim that China’s interest in MENA is driven by six interrelated dimensions such as the strategy, politics, energy, economy, security and cultural interests and also underline the fact that the country has unleashed mechanisms for international cooperation such as China-Arab States cooperation and Belt and Road Initiative.

Since the years of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia policies in the region have been aimed at a continuous and consistent presence, in line with the pragmatic drive that has replaced the ideological one that characterized the USSR. This translated into a development of Moscow’s trade and economic ties with the North African countries, in contrast to the more aggressive military intervention that we witnessed in Syria civil war (Aras & Şaban Kardaş, 2021). In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the Middle East's geopolitical landscape became a fertile ground for proxy wars, mainly influenced by the strategic maneuvers of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey. These regional powers have exploited local conflicts to expand their influence without direct military confrontation, frequently employing proxy groups as instruments of their foreign policy. Saudi Arabia has actively supported Sunni rebel factions in Syria in an effort to counterbalance the Assad regime, backed by Shiite-majority Iran. This support is an integral component of Saudi Arabia's broader objective to safeguard Sunni dominance and curtail the expansion of Shiite influence in the region. The kingdom's involvement is characterized by significant



financial and military aid to these groups, aimed to weakening Assad and preventing the emergence of a "Shiite Crescent". Iran's strategy centers on sustaining a corridor of influence that extends from Tehran to the Mediterranean (Poulis, 2015).

To achieve this objective, Iran lends its support to the Assad regime and other Shiite factions in Iraq and Lebanon. This support includes the deployment of military advisors and the mobilization of militias such as Hezbollah, which fight alongside Assad's forces to preserve the regime and Iran's regional interests. Turkey's role in the regional proxy wars has been influenced by its opposition to Assad and concerns about Kurdish autonomy. Turkey supports various Syrian opposition groups in order to influence the outcome of the Syrian conflict and prevent Kurdish forces from gaining a stronghold along its borders. This strategy is intertwined with Turkey's wider ambitions to project power in the region and its ideological ties with the Muslim Brotherhood. These proxy engagements between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey have deepened the sectarian divide in the region, turning local disputes into battlefields for broader regional conflicts. Each nation's involvement is driven by a complex mix of strategic goals, sectarian loyalties, and geopolitical ambitions. This complicates the path to peace and stability in the Middle East (Poulis, 2015).

Taking all of the above into account, it can be inferred that the Arab Spring has been a missed opportunity for the Arab world to bring change to its political systems, not only due to the internal challenges that every country has to face due to terrorism, instability, and fragmentation among others.

It was possible to seize that even if these uprisings appeared to have failed, they had planted the seeds for new revolutions in the future. By adopting transparent measures, enhancing a multi-party political system, creating a conflict resolution and intervention framework for the Arab League to respond to future conflicts in the region, resorting to multilateralism, and cooperating with countries that permit them to safeguard their national interests, Arab States have the opportunity to avert this outcome.



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