

Received: 15 June 2024, Accepted: 27 July 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33282/rr.vx9i2.44>

## Geopolitics of Arab Spring and Its Impacts

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### Abstract

Arab Spring happened in the Middle East and North Africa in the 2010s. Arab Spring was a series of revolutions in various countries that throw the non-democratic governments in neighboring states like dominos. The revolution started in Tunisia and ended in Syria which is still suffering from transition of power. All of these states had a non-democratic government for decades, so the people of these nation-states dreamed of democracy to practice their political rights and good future. The series of revolutions in different states was a trance of democracy for a better future which affected the geopolitics of the region and introduced new fantasies for the stability of the region.

### What Is the Arab Spring?

The Arab Spring was a loosely related group of protests that ultimately resulted in regime changes in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Not all of the movements, however, could be deemed successful—at least if the end goal was increased democracy and cultural freedom.

In fact, for many countries enveloped by the revolts of the Arab Spring, the period since has been hallmarked by increased instability and oppression.

Given the significant impact of the Arab Spring throughout northern Africa and the Middle East, it's easy to forget the series of large-scale political and social movements arguably began with a single act of defiance.

Historically, the name "Arab Spring" is a reference to the Revolutions of 1848—also known as the "People's Spring"—when political upheavals swept Europe. Ever since, "spring" has been used to describe movements toward democracy like Czechoslovakia's 1968 "Prague Spring." Western media began popularizing the term "Arab Spring" in 2011.

## Jasmine Revolution

The Arab Spring began in December 2010 when Tunisian street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest the arbitrary seizing of his vegetable stand by police over failure to obtain a permit. Bouazizi's sacrificial act served as a catalyst for the so-called Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia.

The street protests that ensued in Tunis, the country's capital, eventually prompted authoritarian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to abdicate his position and flee to Saudi Arabia. He had ruled the country with an iron fist for more than 20 years.

Activists in other countries in the region were inspired by the regime change in Tunisia—the country's first democratic parliamentary elections were held in October 2011—and began to protest similar authoritarian governments in their own nations.

The participants in these grassroots movements sought increased social freedoms and greater participation in the political process. Notably, this includes the Tahrir Square uprisings in Cairo, Egypt and similar protests in Bahrain. However, in some cases, these protests morphed into full-scale civil wars, as evidenced in countries such as Libya, Syria and Yemen.

## Muammar Gaddafi

In Libya, meanwhile, authoritarian dictator Colonel Muammar Qaddafi was overthrown in October 2011, during a violent civil war, and he was tortured (literally dragged through the streets) and executed by opposition fighters. Video footage of his death was seen by millions online.

However, since Qaddafi's downfall, Libya has remained in a state of civil war, and two opposing governments effectively rule separate regions of the country. Libya's civilian population has suffered significantly during the years of political upheaval, with violence in the streets and access to food, resources and healthcare services severely limited.

This has contributed, in part, to the ongoing worldwide refugee crisis, which has seen thousands flee Libya, most often by boat across the Mediterranean Sea, with hopes of new opportunities in Europe.

## Bashar al Assad

Similarly, the civil war in Syria that began in the aftermath of the Arab Spring lasted for several years, forcing many to leave the country to seek refuge in Turkey, Greece and throughout Western Europe. For a time, the militant group ISIS had declared a caliphate—a nation governed by Islamic law—in north-eastern Syria.

The group executed thousands of people, and many others fled the region in fear of their lives. Yet, although ISIS has largely been defeated in Syria, the oppressive regime of long-time dictator Bashar al Assad remains in power in the country.

In addition, the ongoing civil war in Yemen can also be traced to the Arab Spring. The country's infrastructure has suffered significant damage, and the conflict has devolved into tribal warfare.

And in Bahrain, peaceful pro-democracy protests in the capital Manama in 2011 and 2012 were violently suppressed by the government of King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. Officially, the country has a constitutional monarchy form of government, but personal freedoms remain limited. The plight of the Bahraini people was dramatically portrayed in the documentary *Shouting in the Dark*, which was released in 2012.

## Egypt's January 25 Revolution

Inspired by Ben Ali's ouster in Tunisia, similar protests were quickly organized among young Egyptians through social media (see Wael Ghonim), bringing out massive crowds across Egypt on January 25. The Egyptian government also tried and failed to control protests by offering

concessions while cracking down violently against protesters. After several days of massive demonstrations and clashes between protesters and security forces in Cairo and around the country, a turning point came at the end of the month when the Egyptian army announced that it would refuse to use force against protesters calling for the removal of Pres. Hosni Mubarak. Having lost the support of the military, Mubarak left office on February 11 after nearly 30 years, ceding power to a council of senior military officers. The military enjoyed high public approval in the interim before a new government, but its apparent prioritization of stability over democratic transition at times dampened optimism.

## Legacy

Although the protest movements in 2011 were unique in their interconnected struggle for democracy across the region, the push to end corruption and improve citizens' quality of life did not end with the Arab Spring. Protests continued for years to come, and an additional wave of protests took place in the Arab world in the late 2010s and early 2020s. In February 2019, protests in Algeria toppled the government of Pres. Abdelaziz Bouteflika; in April, Sudan's military ended the 30-year rule of Pres. Omar al-Bashir after months of protests. Iraq and Lebanon, democracies whose polarized factions rendered the governments incapable of addressing major crises, also faced massive demonstrations of their own in 2019–20. Although these individual protest movements were not inspired by one another, the scale and similarity of their grievances led many observers to refer to this wave of protests as a second Arab Spring.

## Geopolitics

**DEFINITION:** The struggle over the control of geographical entities with an international and global dimension, and the use of such geographical entities for political advantage. Geopolitics is a framework that we can use to understand the complex world around us. Global politics, or “getting what you want in the world” involves thinking and acting geographically. But what does that mean? Geopolitics explains how countries, businesses, terrorist groups, etc. try to reach their political goals by controlling geographic features of the world. We call these features geographical entities. Geographical entities are the places, regions, territories, scales, and networks that make up the world.

Geopolitics looks at a particular use of power: how countries and other groups compete to control these entities within the international community. Controlling these entities is seen to help countries and groups reach their goals. Geopolitics is always looked at with an international and global dimension, meaning that the issues being looked at are connected to the global scale. Thus, geopolitics can be defined as the struggle over the control of geographical entities with an international and global dimension, and the use of such geographical entities for political advantage

## Geo-Political Power

Geopolitics is the analysis of geographic influences on power relations in international relations (Deudney 2006). The strength of a nation and its chances of survival are dependent to a great extent on geographic factors: location, size, shape, depth, climate, population and manpower, natural resources, industrial capacity, and social and political organisation (Boland III 1992). The strategic position and military potential of a nation depends on its location with respect to the major land and sea trade routes, and the development and extent of its external transportation system (Boland III 1992). Iran and Russia are two land powers, while Turkey and China enjoy more geopolitically advantageous territories because they are land and maritime powers. The limited access of land powers to maritime passages put constraints on their abilities to project influence. In the Middle East, the strategic significance of Turkey is in part a function of its location as a land bridge between Europe and Asia, and as a land barrier across the only outlet of the Black Sea. Egypt's geostrategic power emanates from its central location in the heart of the Middle East serving as a bridge between Africa, Asia, and Mediterranean Europe. Morocco enjoys significant maritime assets but is limited by its location on the outer part of the region. Iran's mountainous terrain had protected it from invasion for most of its history, but also limited its capacity to project power and influence. Historically, it has been more influential when its neighbouring countries face deep political crises. Its influence has been pending its ability to accrue significant wealth and military might or to exploit the weakness of its neighbours (Friedman 2016). This may explain the increasing role of Iran after the US invasion of Iraq and the collapse of Syria following the post-uprising civil war.

## Hypothesis

The Arab Spring may have a transformative effect on the political landscape of the region by fostering a desire for democratic governance. Successful transitions to democratic systems in countries like Tunisia could inspire and influence neighboring states, leading to a broader democratic wave in the region. This could reshape geopolitical dynamics by promoting shared values and facilitating cooperation among democratic countries.

### Reconfiguration of Alliances:

The emergence of democratic governments can lead to shifts in alliances and partnerships. Countries that embrace democracy may seek closer ties with other democratic nations, forming new regional alliances based on shared values and principles. This can realign geopolitical relationships and create new dynamics within the region.

### Promotion of Stability and Conflict Resolution:

Democratic governments often prioritize peaceful resolution of conflicts and engage in diplomatic efforts. Increased democratization in MENA can lead to a greater emphasis on diplomatic negotiations and mediation to resolve regional disputes. This can contribute to stability and reduce the likelihood of conflicts escalating into larger geopolitical crises.

### Regional Cooperation and Integration:

Democratic governments tend to foster regional cooperation and integration. As more countries in MENA adopt democratic systems, there can be a greater focus on shared economic, security, and development interests. This can lead to the formation of regional organizations or initiatives aimed at addressing common challenges, promoting economic integration, and fostering collective security.

### Influence on Neighboring Countries:

The spread of democracy in MENA can have a contagion effect, inspiring and influencing neighboring countries to pursue political reforms. The success of democratic transitions in one country can serve as an example and encouragement for others to embark on similar paths. This

can lead to a broader wave of democratization beyond the initial countries affected by the Arab Spring.

### Enhanced Soft Power and International Influence:

Democratically governed countries often attract greater international attention and support. They may enjoy enhanced soft power, which can influence regional dynamics and global perceptions of the region. Democracies are more likely to engage in international institutions, participate in diplomatic initiatives, and attract foreign investment and aid, which can shape regional geopolitics.

### Economic Development and Trade Partnerships:

Democratic governance can create an environment conducive to economic growth and development. As more countries in MENA transition to democracy, there may be increased emphasis on economic reforms, attracting foreign investment, and promoting trade partnerships. Economic interdependence among democratic countries can foster greater regional integration and influence geopolitical relationships.

It is important to note that the actual impact of the wave of democracy in MENA on regional geopolitics will depend on numerous factors, including the extent and success of democratic transitions, internal dynamics within each country, geopolitical rivalries, and the response of external actors. The process of democratization is complex, and outcomes may vary across different countries in the region.

## Parties Involved in the Arab Spring Conflict

### Civil Society and Activists:

Civil society organizations, including human rights groups, labor unions, and professional associations, played a crucial role in mobilizing and organizing protests during the Arab Spring. These groups aimed to advocate for democratic reforms, human rights, and social justice. Activists utilized social media platforms and other communication tools to connect and coordinate protests, spreading awareness and mobilizing the masses. They sought to challenge the status quo and demand greater political participation and accountability from their governments.

### Authoritarian Regimes:

Authoritarian regimes, led by presidents or monarchs, were the primary targets of the Arab Spring uprisings. These regimes had maintained power through centralized control, repression, and limited political freedoms. Leaders such as Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, Gaddafi in Libya, Saleh in Yemen, and Assad in Syria faced widespread popular discontent and demands for their ousting. These regimes sought to retain power by suppressing protests, using force, and engaging in political manipulation to co-opt or divide opposition movements.

### **Islamist Movements:**

Islamist movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafists, and other religiously inspired groups, also played a significant role in the Arab Spring.

### **Youth and Students:**

Youth and students formed a significant demographic in the Arab Spring uprisings. They were motivated by a range of factors, including unemployment, limited economic opportunities, political marginalization, and a desire for social change. This demographic, often highly educated and connected through social media, played a pivotal role in mobilizing protests and advocating for their demands. Their interests revolved around securing a better future, democratic reforms, and increased political participation. They sought to challenge the prevailing authoritarian systems and create a more inclusive and responsive political environment.

### **International Actors:**

International actors, including governments, intergovernmental organizations, and non-state actors, also had a stake in the Arab Spring conflict. Their interests varied based on geopolitical considerations, economic interests, and ideological factors. Major powers such as the United States, European Union, and Russia had strategic concerns regarding regional stability, energy security, and influence over the affected countries. Additionally, regional actors like Iran and Saudi Arabia were engaged in a struggle for influence and dominance, with differing interests in supporting or suppressing certain parties. International actors also sought to promote their values, such as democracy, human rights, or religious ideologies, depending on their respective agendas.

## **Interests of the Parties**

### **Civil Society and Activists:**

Civil society organizations and activists involved in the Arab Spring were driven by various interests. They aimed to promote democracy, human rights, social justice, and political reforms. Their primary objective was to challenge the authoritarian regimes and demand greater accountability, transparency, and political participation. They sought to empower marginalized groups, protect individual freedoms, and address socio-economic inequalities. Civil society and activists also aimed to establish a more inclusive and pluralistic political system that respected the rule of law and protected the rights of all citizens.

### **Authoritarian Regimes:**

Authoritarian regimes had vested interests in maintaining their grip on power and preserving the status quo. They aimed to suppress the uprisings, protect their positions, and prevent any potential threat to their rule. Their interests revolved around self-preservation, stability, and the preservation of political, economic, and social privileges enjoyed by the ruling elite. Authoritarian regimes used various tactics, including repression, violence, co-optation, and limited reforms, to counter the demands of the protesters and maintain their authority.

### **Islamist Movements:**

Islamist movements involved in the Arab Spring had their own interests and objectives. They aimed to leverage the popular discontent and demand for change to gain political power and establish Islamic governance systems. Islamist movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist groups, sought to shape the future political landscape in accordance with their ideological perspectives and interpretations of Islam. Their interests varied, with some emphasizing democratic participation, while others sought to establish Islamic states based on strict interpretations of Sharia law.

### **Youth and Students:**

The interests of youth and students were driven by a desire for socio-economic opportunities, political participation, and a better future. They sought greater employment prospects, improved living standards, and a fair distribution of resources. Their interests encompassed demands for political reforms, democratic governance, and an end to corruption and nepotism. Youth and students aimed to challenge the existing power structures and create a more inclusive political environment that prioritized their concerns and aspirations.

### **International Actors:**

The interests of international actors involved in the Arab Spring conflict were diverse and influenced by geopolitical, economic, and ideological factors. Major powers, such as the United States and European Union, aimed to promote stability, democratic values, and human rights in the region. They sought to prevent extremist ideologies from gaining ground, protect their economic interests, and maintain influence over regional dynamics. Other international actors, such as Russia and Iran, had different interests, including preserving strategic alliances, countering Western influence, and advancing.

### **Impacts of Arab Spring Conflict**

The conflicts that arose from these protests have had a number of impacts on the region and the world as a whole. Some of the key impacts of the Arab Spring conflict include:

#### **Political Instability:**

The Arab Spring protests and uprisings led to the overthrow of long-standing authoritarian leaders in several countries, including Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. While this was seen as a positive development by many, the resulting power vacuum created by the removal of these leaders has led to political instability and uncertainty in many of these countries. In Libya, for example, the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 led to a prolonged civil war that has continued to this day, with multiple factions vying for power and control over the country. In Egypt, the ousting of Hosni Mubarak was followed by a period of military rule, which was then followed by the election of Mohamed Morsi and the subsequent military coup that overthrew him. These political upheavals

have made it difficult to establish stable political systems and democratic institutions in these countries.

### **Economic Disruption:**

The Arab Spring conflicts have had a significant impact on the economies of the countries involved. Tourism, a major source of revenue for many of these countries, has declined sharply due to the instability and violence. For example, in Egypt, tourism revenues fell by almost 50% between 2010 and 2016. Foreign investment has also declined, as investors have become hesitant to invest in countries that are experiencing political turmoil and uncertainty. Infrastructure has been damaged by the conflicts, making it more difficult and expensive to conduct business, transport goods and services, and rebuild after the fighting ends. Trade has also been disrupted, with some countries imposing trade embargoes or restrictions on other countries involved in the conflicts.

### **Humanitarian Crises:**

The conflicts that have arisen from the Arab Spring protests have also led to significant humanitarian crises. Millions of people have been displaced from their homes, and many have been forced to flee to neighboring countries as refugees. In Syria, for example, the civil war that began in 2011 has displaced over 6 million people internally and forced another 5.6 million to seek refuge in other countries. The conflict has also led to food and medical shortages, with many people struggling to access basic necessities. Humanitarian organizations have struggled to provide aid and assistance to those affected by the conflicts, due to the instability and violence in many of the affected countries.

### **Rise of Extremism:**

The instability and power vacuum created by the Arab Spring conflicts have also allowed extremist groups to gain a foothold in some countries. Groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda have taken advantage of the instability to recruit members and gain territory. In Syria, for example, ISIS took control of large parts of the country during the civil war, establishing a self-proclaimed caliphate and carrying

out acts of terror and violence against civilians. The group also gained support and funding from foreign fighters and sympathizers, further exacerbating the conflict.

### **International Relations:**

The Arab Spring conflicts have also had significant implications for international relations. Some countries have taken sides and provided support to different factions in the conflicts, exacerbating tensions between countries and contributing to the instability. For example, Russia and Iran have supported the Syrian government in its fight against rebel groups, while the United States and its allies have provided support to opposition groups. This has led to diplomatic tensions and even military action in some cases, such as the bombing campaigns carried out by the United States and its allies against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. In summary, the Arab Spring conflicts have had far-reaching and complex impacts on the region and the world. The conflicts have led to political instability, economic disruption, humanitarian crises, the rise of extremism, and strained international relations. While the long-term implications of these conflicts are still uncertain, it is clear that they will continue to shape the future of the Middle East and North Africa for years to come.

### **Conclusion**

Numerous writings have claimed the failure of states as a result of the uprisings and how they have led to destruction, yet such analyses may be missing an important aspect in the emergence of violent actors: the role of strong capable states in creating these irregular militias. The strength of armed militias could not have endured but for sustained support from patron states. Iran fostered Hezbollah and al-Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq. The emergence of ISIL, Jabhat al-Nusra and other militias that are active in Syria could not have been possible without the opened borders of Turkey, Lebanon, and Iran, logistical support from Turkey and the US and funding from all of the above. Wielding an unmistakable will and power, the Turkish government kept its borders between Europe and Syria accessible to thousands of foreign fighters. With the fall of the Qaddafi regime in Libya, stashes of arms were lifted from the North African embattled state to the conflict in Syria. The flow of human bodies across the Turkish and Iranian borders was paralleled by adequate funding from oil-rich countries, all under the supervision of the US and Russia.

While the region's conflicts have highlighted the irregular armies model and its impact on the destruction of nation-states, the region still experiences the old pattern of irregular armies that fight to establish nation-states. That Kurdish forces fighting in Syria is a case in point. Their fight against ISIL not only aims to curry favour with the US, but is also a campaign to showcase its nationalism and capability of statehood.

The uprisings exposed the extent to which ideational sources, in particular religious rhetoric, wield power over demographic groups especially the youth in the region. The political mobilisation of the uprisings may have given power to radical political groups, but it did not create them. The jihadi ideology has existed since the mid-1970s, and despite some efforts to eradicate it, it persevered for various domestic reasons, with external military intervention in the region providing further stimulation (Pape 2005).

Youth are also the victims of wars and violence. More than 13 million children, equivalent to around 40% of all school-age children in the region, are being deprived of a school education because of conflict. Current estimates indicate that the number of inhabitants living in countries vulnerable to conflict in the Arab region is expected to rise from around 250 million in 2010 to over 350 million in 2020 (Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality).

The Arab uprisings may have exposed the extent to which the current interests of regional and international parties diverged from old contracts/alliances but the uprisings have not created them. Egypt's re-alliance with Russia has been fuelled by its military's desire to diversify sources of armament beyond the US. Turkey's re-orientation towards Iran, Russia, and Islamic states in Central Asia reflects a deep interest to direct its economic and geostrategic power to gain influence in neighbouring Asia and not to confine its movement to European and Western circles. The post-uprising moment may bring geography more power to bear on political configurations in the Middle East than before.

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