

The Arab Spring

Normalization of history

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A spark for a revolutionary process was lit by a Tunisian fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, on 18 December 2010 in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, when he set himself on fire. This led to a wave of home-grown demonstrations and protests across MENA in aspiration of freedom, justice and democracy, a process that has generally been known as the 'Arab Spring'.¹ To date, the Arab Spring has ousted four rulers² in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen while civil uprisings have erupted in Bahrain and Syria and protests and civil rights campaigns have broken out in a number of countries in the region. The events paving the way towards democratic transformation in the region — not necessarily identical in each country due to different sectarian, ethnic, tribal, regional, ideological, generational and class interests that are at play in each country³ — marked a decisive shift in the modern history of the Arab world, albeit they are not entirely new phenomena.⁴ It is widely acknowledged that the upheavals that have claimed revolutionary political changes in the region came as a surprise to the vast majority of academic specialists on the Arab world although it was crystal clear for almost all scholars and policy experts that the regimes in the region were deeply unpopular and faced serious demographic, economic and political problems.⁵ Regimes once regarded as stable and long-lasting proved to be fragile.⁶ The Arab Spring has manifested that there is no direct correlation between political stability and the legitimacy of government.⁷ It also proved that regimes with depleted legitimacy do not last and that regimes not accountable to constituents and declining to meet the legitimate demands of the people will surely be replaced with those promising to do so.

It has been suggested that the recent events could be an indication of the beginning of a Fourth Wave of democratization,⁸

1 Some authors use alternative terms such as 'Arab Awakening' or 'Arab Uprisings' when referring to the same events. The most commonly used terms in Arabic are 'thawra' (revolution), 'intifada' (uprising), 'sahwa' (awakening) and 'nahda' (renaissance). The term 'Arab Spring' will be employed in this article for the sake of consistency with its widespread usage in the literature as well as the positive prospect it offers by promising a 'summer' for the whole region. The terminological shortcoming remains, however, as it fails to grasp the impacts of the events on non-Arab populations. For critics against using this hopeful label, see Frida Ghitis, 'Don't Call it the 'Arab Spring' Just Yet', *World Politics Review*, September 22, 2011.

2 Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, President of Tunisia (January 14, 2011); Hosni Mubarak, President of Egypt (February 11, 2011); Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, Leader of Libya (August 23, 2011); Ali Abdullah Saleh, President of Yemen (February 27, 2012), in chronological order of the governments overthrown.

3 Lisa Anderson, President of the American University in Cairo, drew attention to how the patterns and demographics of the protests varied widely, and warned that the Arab uprisings should not be treated as a single movement, tempting as it is to do so. See, Lisa Anderson, 'Demystifying the Arab Spring', *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2011, p.2-7.

4 Protests in Tunisia, most notably in the mining area of Gafsa in 2008; the Egyptian labour movement since 2004, in particular an attempted workers' strike on 6 April 2008 at the state-run textile factories of al-Mahalla al-Kabra; social discontent that has led to riots and unrests for years throughout Algeria focusing on issues such as education and health care, to cite just a few. See, Hisham Abd El-Hameed, *The Arab Spring Lessons* (Kindle ed.), p.11.

5 F. Gregory Gause III, 'Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring-The Myth of Authoritarian Stability', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2011, p.81. The Middle East specialist confessed in his article that the events proved that he was spectacularly wrong in arguing that the United States should not encourage democracy in the Arab world because Washington's authoritarian Arab allies represented stable bets for the future. Given the events, he concluded that policymakers should approach the Arab world with humility about their ability to shape its future. See, F. Gregory Gause III, 'Can Democracy Stop Terrorism?', *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2015.

6 Prof. Hourani held that the stability of regimes in the region throughout the 1970s could be attributed to the combination of three factors: cohesive ruling groups, dominant social classes and powerful (political) ideas. Having examined the factors he concluded that they might also appear to be sources of weakness. See, Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, London, 1991, p.453.

7 Prof. Davutoğlu held that political stability in the Arab world should be attributed to the practice of constraint placed on political participation rather than legitimacy based thereon, and that the political transformation where popular participation is denied denotes a false stability in the Arab world. See, Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik* (Strategic Depth), 42nd ed., 2010, p.370-1.

8 Carl Gershman, 'The Fourth Wave - Where the Middle East revolts fit in the history of democratization, and how we can support them?', *The New Republic*, March 14, 2011 . (<http://www.tnr.com/article/world/85143/middle-east-revolt-democratization>), last accessed on May 3, 2012).

which could extend democracy's reach into the regions of the world that have been most resistant to democratic change, reference being made to the Third Wave of Democracy of Samuel Huntington.⁹ The rights being demanded in the MENA region do not differ from those demanded in Eastern and Central Europe two decades ago. Actually the winds of the Arab Spring could have blown simultaneously with those of its Prague cousin. In that sense, it can be said that the Arab Spring is a late one. One could question why the Arab Spring suddenly happened after two decades of cold war. One answer, given to that question, is that 'there was a general transition taking place in the Middle East, where most of the countries had not been able to 'normalize' their history: this option was simply not open to them, due to the cold war mentality, which affected perceptions among external and domestic actors alike.'¹⁰ Given the advances in communication technology, the 'Forth Wave' of democratization could potentially spread well beyond the Arab world.¹¹ Some reasons have already been underlined to support the argument that the events in the Middle East could have much broader ramifications for democratic progress:

- (i) events have proven that democracy is a universal value;
- (ii) events have testified to popular attitudes towards democracy;
- (iii) autocratic regimes in the world today are, to one degree or another, vulnerable and unstable; and
- (iv) the rapid growth of new technologies and social networks stands as a principal new factor responsible for the vulnerability of autocratic regimes today.¹²

Apparently, change will take some time. The time frame will be determined by the circumstances of different countries that vary greatly, but it is beyond question that the events have reached an irreversible stage. The process of the normalization of history has started, returning MENA countries to their roots, albeit with some delay.

However, pessimist winds have already blown to challenge subscribers of the Forth Wave theory suggesting that a late spring freeze has hit some areas of the region and that it could be a protracted one.¹³ Ironically, the Economist had run a two-page story discussing the lack of democracies in the Middle East two weeks before the Jasmine Revolution broke out in Tunisia.¹⁴ The article questioned why Arabs seemed to remain 'unusually immune to democracy's spread' and pointed to Arab autocrats' skill at keeping their seats as well as people being inured to authoritarian rule as a fact of life. Yet the developments have suggested otherwise. Among the lessons to be drawn so far is that the Arab Spring marks the invalidity of the phrase 'Arab Exceptionalism', an alleged incompatibility of Arab people with democratic culture. Arab people deserve fruits of democracy no less than other peoples. Neither are they less skillful in raising their democratic claims peacefully.

The Arab Spring was spontaneous. It is a popular movement. It is led and owned by the peoples themselves, not by ideologies or leaders. Ownership by the youth constituting major parts of the populations makes it distinctive. The protests have been pure and naturally ignited by long-standing aspirations for the rule of law, good governance, human rights, freedom and democracy. It is a fact to be recognized that the formation of a functioning opposition with a broad political base would be essential for the success of the transformation process. The Arab Spring is still an evolving process. It requires patience since transformation from autocratic regimes to democracy cannot be achieved overnight. A gradual process of institution building and the development of a culture of a democratic lifestyle are key to the sustainability of this transformation.

While it is almost impossible to make a precise prediction of the future of the events, it is safer to determine some common challenges which lie ahead. What drew peoples to take to the streets were mainly their discontent due to

9 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1999.

10 Zaur Shiriyev, *Caucasus International*, Vol.2, No.1, Spring 2012, p.10.

11 Stephen R. Grand, 'Starting in Egypt: The Forth Wave of Democratization?', *Brookings*, February 10, 2011. (http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2011/0210_egypt_democracy_grand.aspx, last accessed on May 5, 2012).

12 Gershman, *op. cit.*

13 Larry Diamond, 'A Forth Wave or False Start', *Foreign Affairs*, May 22, 2011.

14 'A commodity still in short supply', *The Economist*, December 2, 2010.

poverty and unemployment, the search for a better life in dignity, a denial of fundamental freedoms and human rights including the effective participation of individuals as well as different segments of societies in decision-making, and an accumulation of wealth in the hands of the privileged through corrupt practices and/or the mismanagement of natural resources. As Prof. Davutoğlu, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Turkey, said in an interview with the Cairo Review of Global Affairs on 12 March 2012, ‘The biggest challenge is to materialize the reforms in the fields of politics, economy, and security simultaneously. On the one hand, you need to set up democratic institutions and make them function; on the other, you need to produce lasting solutions to the requirements of the peoples on employment, education, food, and health...the people will set the pace and the scope of the change in the Middle East.’¹⁵

Whether the uprisings will usher in democracy will largely depend on the ability of the newcomers to address the widespread economic grievances. These efforts will need to be accompanied by introducing a normative framework — in particular new constitutions in Egypt and Tunisia — on a par with contemporary trends as well as strengthening democratic institutions, the judiciary and civil society. The question here is whether the OSCE could provide a basis for a functioning political dialogue and effective cooperation among equals in this process and, if so, how it could offer its ‘tool-box’ to the Partners in historic transformation with a prospect that could inspire thoughts and mechanisms for a comprehensive security concept in the region.

The OSCE framework for dialogue and co-operation with its Mediterranean Partners

The relationship between the OSCE and the Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation¹⁶ (MPC) dates back to the Helsinki process. The Helsinki Final Act contained a chapter on ‘Questions relating to Security and Co-operation in the Mediterranean’. Based on a broader context of world security, the participating States (ps) acknowledged that security in Europe is closely linked with security in the Mediterranean area as a whole.¹⁷ Since Helsinki, many OSCE documents have included provisions on the Mediterranean dimension. In 1990, ps expressed that they would continue efforts to strengthen security and co-operation in the Mediterranean as an important factor for stability in Europe, and that enhanced co-operation would be pursued with the aim of promoting economic and social development and thereby enhancing stability in the region.¹⁸ In the years which followed, ps invited Mediterranean Partners to review conferences to make contributions concerning security and co-operation in the Mediterranean;¹⁹ agreed on intensifying the dialogue with Mediterranean Partners by establishing an informal, open-ended contact group²⁰ in order to facilitate the interchange of information of mutual interest;²¹ decided to encourage the MPC to draw on the OSCE’s expertise in setting up structures and mechanisms in the Mediterranean for early warning preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention;²² and recognized that the security of the OSCE area is inextricably linked to that of adjacent areas, notably in the Mediterranean and in Asia.²³

In 2003, ps addressed the threats to security and stability in their region including those originating and evolving in adjacent regions. In the ‘OSCE Strategy to Address Threats to Security and Stability in the Twenty-First Century’, partic-

15 <http://www.aucegypt.edu/news/Pages/NewsRelease.aspx?rid=270>, last accessed on May 8, 2012); (http://www.mfa.gov.tr/interview-by-mr_-ahmet-davuto%C4%9Flu-published-in-auc-cairo-review-_egypt_-on-12-march-2012.en.mfa, last accessed on May 8, 2012).

16 Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia. With the adoption of PC decision No.94 (PC.DEC/94, December 5, 1995) ‘non-participating Mediterranean States’ have been designated as ‘Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation’.

17 Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, Helsinki, August 1, 1975.

18 Charter of Paris for a New Europe, Paris, November 19-21, 1990.

19 The Challenges of Change, Helsinki, July 9-10, 1992.

20 According to the Rules of Procedure of the OSCE, adopted by a Ministerial Council decision in 2006 (MC.DOC/1/06, November 1, 2006), the Contact Group with the Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation holds the status of an informal subsidiary body of the Permanent Council (Rule II (C)1).

21 CSCE Budapest Document 1994, Towards a Genuine Partnership in a New Era, Budapest, December 5-6, 1994.

22 Charter for European Security, Istanbul, November 19, 1999.

23 Astana Commemorative Declaration: Towards a Security Community, Astana, December 1-3, 2010.

icipating States decided that the OSCE would ‘...intensify its co-operation with its Mediterranean and Asian Partners for Co-operation, by early identification of areas of common interest and concern and possibilities for future co-ordinated action...’²⁴ PS also decided to invite all Partners to participate on a more frequent basis as observers in Permanent Council and Forum for Security Co-operation meetings.²⁵ The OSCE would also consider ways in which OSCE norms, principles, commitments and values could be shared with other regions, in particular neighbouring countries.²⁶

Last year, at the Vilnius Ministerial Council, participating States recognized and commended the democratic transition processes in the Mediterranean region, and decided to enhance further the Partnership for Co-operation by broadening the dialogue, intensifying political consultations, strengthening practical co-operation, and sharing best practices and experience gained in the development of comprehensive, co-operative and indivisible security, in the three OSCE dimensions, according to the needs and priorities identified by the Partners.²⁷

The OSCE framework for dialogue and co-operation with MPC, including its Partnership Fund established to foster deeper relations with the Partners,²⁸ offers fertile ground to provide assistance to MPC in their transition process. The experience and expertise which the OSCE gained, in particular when it played a key role in managing the challenges of transition in Eastern Europe two decades ago, would benefit its Mediterranean Partners. The unique OSCE concept of comprehensive, collective and indivisible security built on interdependence across its three dimensions stands as an added value in terms of foreign assistance to be offered. Over the previous two decades the OSCE has developed a rich tool-box including the Secretariat, with its Conflict Prevention Centre and thematic units devoted to combating transnational threats; field operations tailored to the needs of the countries where they have operated; and the three institutions, namely the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) and the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFOM). The accumulated OSCE experience and expertise could be relevant for MPC in particular in areas regarding electoral assistance, democratic governance and the rule of law, legislative reforms, freedom of the media, police reform and confidence and security building measures. While searching for ways to maximize the efficiency of the OSCE’s engagement with its Mediterranean Partners, the following thoughts can be taken into account:

- As Mediterranean Partners have embarked on a challenging process of democratic transition they are faced with a number of priorities to be dealt with. That the Mediterranean Partners are deeply focused on their own urgent priorities should not be taken as an illustration of their indifference to the expectations of PS in their engagement with the OSCE. The process justifies patience.
- What could be normally expected from the OSCE is to raise awareness across the Mediterranean region and to maintain its engagement with its Mediterranean Partners.
- Awareness-raising activities would entail engagement with each Mediterranean Partner individually while cooperation is maintained at the same time with regional players such as the Arab League as well as the African Union.
- The OSCE norms, principles, commitments and values have been developed over a four-decade period and in a way which accommodates the different points of view of all PS. The tools therefore need to be adjusted to the specific

24 OSCE Strategy to Address Threats to Security and Stability in the Twenty-First Century, Maastricht, December 2, 2003 (MC(11).JOUR/2, Annex 3).

25 See, OSCE Rules of Procedure, Rule IV.1 (D) 4; Rule V (A) 7 (b)-8.

26 See, also, the Permanent Council decision adopted on December 2, 2003 (PC.DEC/571) in which participating States decided to identify additional fields of co-operation and interaction with MPC, to encourage Partners to voluntarily implement the OSCE norms, principles and commitments and to prepare a report on the outcome of this work. That report is annexed to the Sofia Ministerial Council Document (MC.DOC/1/04), December 7, 2004.


27 MC.DEC/5/11, December 7, 2011.

28 Permanent Council decision No. 812 (PC.DEC/812) of November 30, 2007. The Fund is financed exclusively through extra-budgetary contributions, and aims mainly at financing participation by representatives from Partners for Co-operation in relevant OSCE activities held in the territory of a participating State. OSCE activities outside of the OSCE region can be financed through the Partnership Fund only if an appropriate decision is adopted by an OSCE decision-making body.

ic needs of the MPC. In other words, a ‘one size fits all’ approach should not be adopted. The OSCE’s tool-box is an instrument to be placed at the disposal of the Mediterranean Partners. Any OSCE engagement should be a demand-driven one. The partnership is a two-way process, and the OSCE should offer its cooperation once it receives a request from MPC based on their needs identified by them. Neither OSCE nor the OSCE would know better than the Mediterranean Partners what their actual needs are.

The river has found its correct course and will not flow backwards. The Arab Spring promises a genuine democracy whose benefits will spread beyond its borders. It will definitely fit with the OSCE’s unique concept of comprehensive, collective and indivisible security. Thus, OSCE assistance will benefit MPC as the transition process will also benefit the OSCE. They have much to learn from the OSCE, just as the OSCE has much to learn from them.





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