

# **The Arab Spring**

## Potential and Challenges

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Over more than a year ago, a Tunisian fruit seller Mohamed Bouaziz did not expect that his tragic act in December 2010 would trigger such a widespread change. He was the spark that started the Arab Spring as we know it today. Since his act of revolt, we have seen the people of the region express their desire for a better future, for democracy, for accountability, for respect of fundamental rights, and for a more prosperous, dignified life, both for themselves and for future generations.

The words of the late Tunisian poet Abu al-Qassem al-Chabbi — chanted in the Tunisian national anthem but speaking to all peoples — simultaneously travelled with the televised images of Bouazizi to the heart and soul of the people around the world:

‘If the people one day have the will to live, Destiny must then respond,  
And the night must disappear, And the chain must break.’

The Arab World is changing, and will change further, maybe at a faster pace than one might think.

The collapse of the four toughest and long-standing autocratic regimes froze the world’s mind in disbelief. While demanding democratic change in their countries — Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen — the people there managed to complete their revolutions without the mass bloodshed that was seen in Libya and continues to be shed in Syria.

Two features of what is being called the ‘Arab Spring’ need to be highlighted. First, that the anger expressed against regimes is often a principled, non-violent anger, in spite of much provocation. Indeed, the anger is largely being accompanied by a sense of social renewal and national cohesion. The second feature is the sheer surprise of much of the world concerning these popular movements. It is as though Arabs were not quite expected to share, so deeply, the aspiration for pluralist democracy.

Let us tackle, first, the Arab aspiration for freedom. The current uprisings are against regimes that, in many cases, have been in power for 30 or 40 years and, during this period, two structural changes occurred: the growth of ever-younger populations at a pace that has moved more rapidly than their economies and their concentration in urban areas. As these changes were taking place, the Arab people were dominated by autocratic regimes that fostered an increasing sense of hopelessness, a bitter sense of disability: the inability to change anything in their lives, whether politically, economically or culturally. Indeed, they lived under high levels of oppression, socio-economic inequalities, youth unemployment, dismal healthcare, poor education, cultural anxiety, political humiliation and a loss of dignity and self-respect.

Since the early 1990s, these nation states have in turn been subjected to the perverse effects of globalization: creating more inequalities in the distribution of wealth, widening the gap between the rich and the poor; mercilessly destroying all forms of cohesion within societies, breaking them into individual lonely and depressed entities.

Politically, the leaders of the Arab World today include reformist and conservative monarchs and autocratic presidents; the region’s states includes some that are tribal and others that are failing, some that have yet to discover a unity that transcends ethnic or religious groupings, and others whose politics is distorted by oil wealth or water poverty.

The weight of this combination was such that most Arabs, and foreign observers, became resigned to the idea that any progress was impossible, particularly when the once progressive and revolutionary republican regimes began to try to transform themselves into a ‘family business’, with power being passed on from father to son like an inheritance.

For the first time, the League of Arab States went beyond legalizing sovereignty to assuming the latent role of legalizing the aspirations of the Arab peoples for freedom, by freezing the participation of the former Libyan regime, then the Syrian regime in the League’s organs. While the Arab League rarely takes decisions against member states, it has taken a leap forward in this matter during 2011 and 2012.

For a long time, the Arab League has been criticized for not paying attention to the people of the region. Today, we can proudly say that we have embraced the Arab Spring. The Arab League is playing a catalyst role in this historic transformation, and is eager to realize the people’s aspirations.

The uprisings and revolutions tested the way in which the democratic countries were dealing with the autocratic regimes: they confused stagnation and the status quo with stability, which is why they preferred to cooperate with such rigid regimes in the past.

Cooperation with the Arab regimes concentrated on stability, which was related to numerous interests (countering Iran's ambitions in the region, Israel's security, immigration control and counter-terrorism). In the early stages of the revolutions, our neighbours to the north were more concerned about the role that Islamic movements might play, and about the large waves of refugees and asylum seekers that were to be expected as a result of the conflicts and reduced border controls. To go through a successful transformation period, power must be institutionally redistributed from the political executive to different institutions within the state and civil society. This involves establishing effective political parties, independent judiciaries, election boards, unhindered media and functional parliaments. For the foreseeable future, organized groups — political Islamists and the army — are likely to emerge as the key players. However, while they may provide stability, reform and change are likely to follow slowly. A long road thus lies ahead before Arab countries learn to successfully combine Islam, democracy and modernity.

It is also doubtful that the Arab Spring would have been possible — on the massive scale that we see today — if the Arab peoples were not rediscovering, after years of fragmentation, a sense of a pan-Arab community of destiny: not a community with a single state, but a community that shares a common aspiration for dignity, liberty and solidarity.

In the midst of this historical moment, let us not forget Palestine... Palestine which remains in the hearts of all people around the world who believe in justice and freedom.

The Palestinians' basic rights have been denied for more than 64 years. They have made painful compromises, and they have the right, just like everyone else, to have their own state. Palestinians should be the masters of their own fate. We look forward to the day when Palestine can live in peace, prosperity and security with its neighbours.

Reconfiguring the framework of regional cooperation has become an obvious necessity in the light of the Arab Spring. 'Business as usual' is no longer an option in our part of the world. The wind of change is blowing all around the Arab region, and the youth who have bravely orchestrated the Arab Spring are indeed impatient... And for sure, one of the issues that they are growing impatient about is the confiscation of the rights of their Palestinian brothers and sisters, who also have rights... human, political and economic rights in a state of their own... Let us not forget them when discussing the opportunities that have blossomed with the Arab Spring.... It is time to grant them their rights.


The Arab world, the home of the Arab Spring, is sub-divided and is never dealt with as a whole. The role played by the League of Arab States — a new, evolving role, of more than symbolic importance — is concerned with legitimizing the aspirations of Arab People around the world. The Arab Spring has shown the importance of the pan-Arab dimensions

We believe that the role of the international community in this transitional process is crucial and we can say that a number of OSCE countries have recently passed through their own transitional period and that the OSCE has played an important role in making this transition safe and easy. We need this experience to help the countries going through the Arab Spring to enhance the role of law, the democratization of police forces, as well as the successful experience of ODIHR in the democratic and electoral process, so the high level of cooperation between LAS & OSCE is much needed these days.

Challenges! There are plenty of them; the political instability is painfully reflected in the economic and security sphere and the Arab public have expressed their demands for achieving social justice, fighting unemployment, as well as a better level of education and healthcare. Enforcing security and managing the economy is a crucial need, but the aspiration of the people for freedom, democracy and transparency will always be at the top of the agenda.

It is the role of diplomacy to turn these challenges into opportunities. We need to move from situational reactions to structured relationships, from tactics to real strategy, if the lessons of the recent transformation in the region are to be learned, and the hopes of the Arab Spring are to bloom in fertile soil.

Democracy has a price, and we are willing to pay it.



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