

10 Years Since the Arab Spring

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A decade ago, we were in the throes of what observers in the West termed the “Arab Spring.” An assessment is now in order.

Because Western analysts assumed that these uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen were organically linked, mirroring the revolutions that brought down the Communist regimes operating under the protective cover of the Soviet Union, they termed them the “Arab Spring”. These Arab uprisings, however, were not threads of one unraveling region. While sharing some common characteristics, in each instance local factors shaped them.

One shared feature was their almost exclusive occurrence in the so-called “Arab Republics”, countries that for decades had been ruled by military regimes that lacked broad legitimacy and had become increasingly ossified and corrupt. Also, each of these uprisings started as largely non-violent youth-led protests focused on poverty, employment, and the desire for greater freedom and political rights.

Despite being branded “revolutions”, only in Tunisia, though it is still in a fragile state, has there been a true revolution, bringing about a change in governance.

In Egypt, nothing close to a revolution occurred, with the military retaining control after deposing Mubarak and later the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite Egyptians’ deep concern with the Brotherhood’s attempt to impose its agenda, the military may have created a problem for themselves. Our polling shows that, as a result of increased repression, Egyptians’ approval of the military has plummeted by more than 35 points, and Egyptians now say they are worse off than they were before and have less hope for the future.

The experiences of Syria, Libya and Yemen have been different. As societies fragmented by sect, tribe and region, with the deposing of old regimes, groups either sought or were sought out by external powers, resulting in prolonged bloody civil conflicts; outcomes remain uncertain.

Even with this checkered record, new uprisings are still occurring, including sustained mass protests in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon and Iraq in recent years. While distinct and not fundamentally linked, each uprising has exploded for similar reasons: lack of jobs and

needed services, bad governance, and hopelessness.

The revolts in Algeria and Sudan are somewhat similar to those in the other “Arab Republics” with only Sudan a potential success story. With Sudan’s military dictator deposed, and after continuing protests, the military agreed to form a new government sharing power with civilian leadership. With a projected three-year run for this “experiment”, only time will tell whether the transition leads to full civilian control.

The outcomes in Lebanon and Iraq, where the demands are similar, and include an end to sectarianism, are even more difficult to predict. The repressive violence of Iranian-supported militias in both countries, and the stubbornness of corrupt sectarian elites in Lebanon, pose real roadblocks to change.

Ten years after the first uprisings, the fragile “stability” that once characterised the old order of the “Arab Republics” has given way mostly to chaos. Despite their uneven success and uncertain futures, there are lessons to be learned.

Regimes should know that repression cannot replace unresponsive governance. Leaders should respond to the protestors’ legitimate concerns and offer them real hope for change.

The protestors, especially in Lebanon and Iraq, must develop a coordinated leadership, a coherent program of demands, and a plan for implementation. Where possible (e.g., Lebanon, Egypt, Sudan, Libya, and Iraq), protestors must organise politically for the next election, to prevent the uprisings from being co-opted by the Muslim Brotherhood or other politicised sectarian movements.

The US must understand that any new Iran deal must include pressure to stop exploiting sectarian divisions and end its meddlesome and violent behaviours in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. And the US should focus future assistance to these governments on job creation, private sector growth, and improvements in education, healthcare, and delivery of social services.

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