

Fall of the Arab Spring: From Revolution to Destruction

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In-depth Report: [ARAB PROTEST MOVEMENT](#)

From Libya and Egypt to Syria and Yemen, the MENA (Middle East North Africa) region is undergoing unprecedented tumult and chaos. We are now approaching the five year anniversary of the so-called “Arab Spring.” This pivotal event laid the groundwork for MENA’s unfolding collapse of nation-states. That the mainstream narrative of this wave of revolts has never been substantially challenged makes new trenchant exploration of this event indispensable. In a newly released book, [Fall of the Arab Spring: From Revolution to Destruction](#),

I propound a maverick thesis on this far-reaching Arab unrest. The book views this widespread Arab upheaval, not as authentic grass roots movements for democracy, but as an ambitious iteration of yet another US-engineered destabilization. Facing an incipient tendency toward multipolarity (multiple centers of world power) against US hegemony—while continuing the status quo of buttressing Israel—Washington manufactured the “Arab Spring.” Eschewing George W. Bush’s crude and bellicose approach, the Obama administration leaned on a synergy of soft and hard power: so-called smart power—all under the veil of lofty romantic platitudes of “democracy” and “human rights.”

Since its outbreak, the “Arab Spring” has long been discredited. “Five years later it is clear that the result of the uprisings has been calamitous, leading to wars or increased repression,” journalist [Patrick Cockburn recently observed](#). A recent *Wall Street Journal* Op-Ed laments the [“End of the Arab Spring Dream.”](#) “[Today] the Middle East is less stable, and less hopeful, than it was before the Arab Spring. Five years ago, the denim-clad, smartphone-wielding Arab liberal became the region’s avatar. Now the knife-wielding jihadist and the refugee have risen to prominence instead,” it notes. The disillusioned author edited an anthology of essays by young Middle East dissidents featuring quixotic liberal notions of what these uprisings would bring; the book’s title, “Arab Spring Dreams,” he now aptly regards as “cringe-inducing.” Indeed, a tremendous gulf has emerged between the brisk romantic idealism expressed at the onset of the Arab Spring and the reality of what unfolded on the ground. Dreams have turned into nightmares. Using figures from the World Bank, United Nations, and World Trade Organization, a recent report commissioned by the UAE’s Arab Strategy Forum estimates the Arab Spring and the events it precipitated have cost affected countries in the region [a staggering \\$830 billion](#).

Libya: From Arab Spring to Failed State

Of all MENA states that faced the outbreak of the Arab Spring, Libya was the first to palpably

shatter its romantic veneer. With a tenuous “humanitarian” pretext under the “Responsibility to Protect” or “R-to-P” doctrine—and with the acquiescence of Russia and China at the UN Security Council—NATO and Qatar proceeded with a ruthless bombing campaign (including special forces directing rebels) to topple Qaddafi’s regime completely. Here, contrasting with romantic platitudes was the naked brutality of predator drones, tomahawk cruise missiles, massacres of civilians; ethnic cleansing against black Libyans; the vindictive destruction of pro-Qaddafi cities by rebel forces; and, ultimately, the destruction of a [once prosperous](#) country as a functioning nation-state. Contrasting with the West’s blithe pronouncements of “freedom,” today Libya is a no man’s land where no one is safe—[not elected heads of state](#), [Arab](#), or even [Western diplomats](#). The country’s youthful [liberal](#) democrats—extolled as exemplars of MENA’s transition toward democracy—are [being hunted down](#) and tortured by powerful militias. Any notion of “freedom” was emphatically quenched when [militias in Tripoli opened fire](#) on [peaceful protesters](#)—the same pretext used as justification for smashing Libya in the first place. [Drugs are rampant](#). The country is under the iron grip of tribal militias, and bifurcated by rival governments based in Tripoli in the west and Tobruk in the east, both vying for power and control of the country’s oil. Meanwhile, the benighted Islamic State has turned the country into one of its main bastions outside of the Levant.

Egypt: NED “Civilian Based Power” Destabilization

Examining Egypt is trickier. The lack of an overt military offensive gave America’s use of “civilian-based power” for regime change the appearance of an indigenous grass roots movement for change. In truth, as expounded in [Fall of the Arab Spring](#), Egypt’s 2011 upheaval is a manifestation of the same imperialist policy that destroyed Libya.

Although he now [distances himself](#) from the discredited Arab Spring, President Obama was vocal in giving its narrative credence and supporting it from the onset. This is alluded to in the *New Yorker’s* recent [post-Arab Spring survey](#) of MENA’s chaos: “What seems to have been lost in the past five years is American strategic support for the Arab Spring’s aspirations.” “With the outlook increasingly bleak, President Obama’s tone has shifted from praising the noble ambitions of the Arab Spring to reassuring the American public about its murderous by-products,” it notes. Indeed, it was Obama—head of state of the world’s preeminent power—that abandoned America’s longstanding support for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Briskly pronouncing that “history [is] taking place,” he called for the embattled leader to step down. When Mubarak hesitated in capitulation, “Mr. Obama was furious,” the *New York Times* reported. Today his tone is different. “We did not depose Hosni Mubarak,” he argues, adding, “Millions of Egyptians did because of their dissatisfaction with the corruption and authoritarianism of the regime.”

This notion, still widely believed, is specious. Egypt’s mass protests, though sizable, were ultimately impotent. Contemporary observers of Egypt’s unfolding events illustrated this.

Joshua Stacher writing for the CFR’s *Foreign Affairs* on February 7th, 2011, just before Mubarak stepped down, observed: “Contrary to the to the dominant media narrative, over the last ten days the Egyptian state has not experienced a regime breakdown. The protests have certainly rocked the system and have put Mubarak on his heels, but at no time has the uprising seriously threatened Mubarak’s regime.” [1] This was because, as Eric Trager explained at the time in *Foreign Affairs*, “The [Egyptian] Army is the backbone of the regime.” Through the ranks “the message from the ruling military elite was clear, united, [and] fully supportive of Mubarak,” he added. [2] Thus, with protesters impotent, but

nonetheless absorbing mainstream media attention, the US relied on two top military figures within the Egyptian military command, Chief of Staff Mohammad Hussein Tantawi and Defense Minister Sami Hafez Anan, to stage a coup and subsequently seize the reins of power. (They subsequently began sending [weapons into Libya for the overthrow of Qaddafi](#).) These calls from the Obama administration came directly from Samantha Power and Michael McFaul in the US National Security Council. Both McFaul and Power are known for aggressively promoting subversion against enemy states.

While the mass protests were impotent—lacking the organizational heft to topple the Egyptian regime—it did destabilize the country and gave the Arab Spring credence. But these massive protests were not the result of merely indigenous political dissension; the American role in mobilizing malcontents was paramount. The advent of the Obama administration saw a new foreign policy cadre that eschewed Bush’s direct and bellicose approach. Accordingly, it exploited the Middle East’s decades of political repression, its demographic youth bulge, and [Wall Street’s food price inflation](#) by leaning on “civilian based power.” It mobilized the same institutional apparatus for regime change used in places [such as Venezuela](#), Serbia, and the former Soviet Union during its sponsored “Color Revolutions.”

The youth-led movements that swept the Arab world were facilitated by a collection of NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) funded by the US and intimately tied to its intelligence community with support from the State Department. Central to these NGOs was the NED (National Endowment for Democracy). Once called the CIA’s “sidekick,” it has been the primary instrument for subversion, destabilization, and interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states via political action groups since a series of exposés on sordid CIA activities during the 1980s forced it to regroup. “A lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA,” its [intellectual architect candidly remarked to the Washington Post](#). As the *New York Times* revealed, just as the [NED and its associated subdivisions guided “Color Revolutions”](#) to reorder the former Soviet Union into the orbit of US hegemony, it was [central to unleashing Arab Spring protests](#). Indeed, Egypt’s April 6th movement, which spearheaded protests in Cairo’s Tahrir Square, met with top Washington officials, [leaked cables revealed](#), and traveled to a State Department sponsored conference. They were even [trained by “Otpor!” of Serbia](#), the youth-led movement sponsored by Washington to topple strongman Slobodan Milosevic. Revealingly, April 6th used the same clenched-fist symbol of their “Otpor!” mentors. In Egypt all the earmarks of US destabilization were manifest.

The Muslim Brotherhood and “Lebanonization” of the Arab World

With Washington’s history of meddling in the Arab world, Egypt’s idealistic liberal youth were not the only allies it relied on. Though Egypt’s romantic liberals could mobilize thousands of discontented Egyptians in the streets, only the Muslim Brotherhood—the world’s foremost organization for political Islam—retained the requisite level of political sophistication to seize power and subsequently carry out its regional policy.

The Obama administration was more than inclined to form a continuing partnership with the new Brotherhood government under Mohammad Morsi, a US-educated engineer, as president. This Western cooperation and partnership with the Brotherhood was no aberration. Since the Cold War [political Islam has been used by the West](#) as an instrument of foreign policy. The West leaned on it as a bulwark against communism and an [ideological counterpoise against pan-Arab nationalism](#), as [exemplified by Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser](#).

In fact, the CIA, MI-6, and the Eisenhower administration fostered its international political profile to begin with. Thus, with [a history of fruitful partnership](#), the US found in the post-Mubarak Brotherhood regime a reliable partner for its regional policies. This included [support for the overthrow of Qaddafi](#) in Libya, and [positioning Egypt for involvement in the Syrian civil war](#)—an event that would have proved disastrous for the Arab world. This is why, as [observed by journalist Dan Glazebrook](#),

“[T]he overthrow of Egyptian President Morsi by the Egyptian army actually strengthened the [overall] Arab position, ending the divisive policies which were causing huge religious rifts internally, and ending the prospect of Egypt gratuitously tearing itself apart through direct military involvement in the Syrian civil war.”

It is also why Abdel Fatah al-Sisi’s coup in Egypt was met with US consternation and [punitive measures](#) (prompting [Cairo’s tentative shift toward Moscow](#)). Indeed, in synergy with the Arab Spring, the Brotherhood’s divisive policies in Egypt and abroad have proved useful in accelerating the regional process of what influential Arabist Bernard Lewis referred to as “Lebanonization.” [3] This is the far-reaching balkanization, societal breakdown, and explosion of sectarian conflicts following the attenuation or collapse of the state.

Notably, vis-à-vis the Palestinian struggle for independence, MENA’s “Lebanonization” has been the preferred policy of Israeli policy circles. An Israeli academic, Oded Yinon, in an [notable 1982 journal piece](#) candidly expressed support for this as policy: “Lebanon’s total dissolution into five provinces serves as a precedent for the entire Arab world including Egypt, Syria, Iraq and the Arabian peninsula and is already following that track...This state of affairs will be the guarantee for peace and security in the area [i.e. for Israel] in the long run, and that aim is already within our reach today.”

Any objective look at today’s Arab world confirms that the Arab Spring destabilization has accelerated this process. And if the “Palestinian struggle for independence rises and falls with the overall Arab struggle for independence,” then the Arab position is doubtless more tenuous than ever before. The Arab Spring has produced a marked “deterioration in the region, a dramatic loss in economic and growth opportunities over the past several years and destroyed the infrastructure that the region had invested decades, even centuries to build.”

“It’s no longer about what Egyptians want. Or what the Syrian people want,” a Western human rights advocate recently lamented to the *New Yorker*. In truth, it *never* was. From its onset the “Arab Spring” was always about what Washington and its allies wanted more than anything. Five years later the Arab world must reflect on how its youthful pseudo-revolutionaries were made the malleable plaything of external powers. Meanwhile, the Fall of Arab Spring’s ramifications continue to reverberate.

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Notes

[1] Joshua Stacher, “Egypt’s Democratic Mirage: How Cairo’s Authoritarian Regime is adapting to Preserve Itself,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 7, 2011.

[2] Eric Trager, "Letter From Cairo: People's Military in Egypt?" *Foreign Affairs*, January 30, 2011.

[3] "Another possibility, which could even be precipitated by fundamentalism, is what has of late become fashionable to call "Lebanonization." Most of the states of the Middle East—Egypt is an obvious exception—are of recent and artificial construction and are vulnerable to such a process. If the central power is sufficiently weakened, there is no real civil society to hold the polity together, no real sense of common national identity or overriding allegiance to the [nation-state]. The state then disintegrates—as happened in Lebanon—into a chaos of squabbling, feuding, fighting sects, tribes, regions and parties." Bernard Lewis, "Rethinking the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1992, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/48213/bernard-lewis/rethinking-the-middle-east>

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