

Arab Spring, Democratic Summer, or Islamist Fall?

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Brief Analysis

On May 4, 2011, Gilles Kepel and Martin Kramer addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Dr. Kepel is the chair of Middle East and Mediterranean studies at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris (Sciences Po) and author of *Beyond Terror and Martyrdom: The Future of the Middle East* (2008). Dr. Kramer is The Washington Institute's Wexler-Fromer fellow and president-designate of the Shalem College in Jerusalem. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Gilles Kepel

As the Arab Spring continues to unfold, two questions arise: First, what are the underlying causes of the momentous changes taking place in the region? Second, how do we navigate the aftermath of revolutions in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt?

In terms of causes, the political and economic environment preceding the Arab Spring was particularly ripe for popular uprisings. In Egypt, the price of rice and wheat had multiplied nearly threefold, while in Tunisia, the cost of living rose steeply in parallel with vast youth unemployment. In general, the effects of globalization and a depressed world economy were undeniable.

At the same time, the license that Arab publics had given to autocrats for curbing Islamist forces had largely expired. As Usama bin Laden's influence began to dissipate and al-Qaeda waned as a threat, Arab democratic movements gained in appeal. In addition, the aging of regional leaders meant greater visibility for their families and cronies, exposing both inefficiency and deep corruption.

The Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions have differed in both environment and outcomes, however. Beginning with Muhammad Bouazizi's self-immolation, the Tunisian uprising was primarily a social protest movement. It became a full-fledged revolution when people of all social classes formed a unified front determined to oust the Ben Ali regime.

The turning point was when the president's own chief of staff firmly objected to the use of military force against the peaceful protesters.

Currently, the country's revolutionary forces -- which consist of an entrepreneurial middle class -- are struggling to rehabilitate the economy. As unemployment and institutional weakness persist, many Tunisians are migrating to Europe, and the economy is at risk of collapse. Politically, Tunisia has a deep tradition of secularism, and Islamism is therefore less of a concern there than in Egypt. The mainstream Islamists in Tunisia claim to be nationalists who are interested in entering the democratic process, with Turkey as their model.

As for Egypt, its revolutionaries initially drew from the youth movement. As the revolution unfolded in Tahrir Square, broadcast live from the balcony of an apartment, the scene became a global stage from which the country's revolutionary discourse was disseminated. Yet discrepancies persisted between the unity seen on that stage and the fragmentation beneath the surface. For this reason, the revolution's ideals have not carried over into Egyptian political life, and a political vacuum has emerged, exacerbated by factionalism.

Although the role of Islamists in the evolving Egyptian political spectrum is worrisome to many in the West, the Islamists themselves are fragmented. The Muslim Brotherhood alone is divided into eight different factions, each with a different agenda. The group's most notable fracture is a generational one. For instance, young Brotherhood members are more secular than their elders and helped lead demonstrations along with other youths. They have a better grasp of democratic principles and are pushing for the Brotherhood to become more democratic as an organization.

In contrast, some in the older generation adhere to the Brotherhood's traditionally autocratic structure and are wary of adapting to the demands of the less conservative youths. Many now wonder whether these disparate factions can be unified within a single party line. Salafis also pose a major threat from their stronghold in Upper Egypt and are unlikely to vote for a more moderate Islamist candidate.

Elsewhere, great uncertainty surrounds the potential outcome in Syria, a country segmented by different sectarian and ethnic identities. Unlike the Egyptian and Tunisian militaries, the Syrian army is closely tied to the regime. The Sunni middle class has not joined demonstrations in full force out of fear that regime change could lead to civil war. Given Syria's role as a key player in the Arab-Israeli peace process, the outcome of ongoing unrest there could have significant regional repercussions.

Martin Kramer

Although historical analogies have become common prisms through which to view recent events in the region, they are deceptive. Highlighting patterns that have emerged in the past few months is more useful, particularly in terms of addressing two key questions. First, does the so-called Arab Spring signal the arrival of a new Arabism and a revived sense of unity? Second, does it finalize the decline of Islamism?

According to one narrative, the Arab Spring has the potential to not only bring democracy to the Arab world, but also unite it. The cascade of revolutions supposedly proves that there is an Arab sensibility, a view held by an old guard of Arab nationalists who regret past fragmentation and believe that the core problem in the region is not the lack of democracy, but the lack of unity. The similar fates of the Egyptian and Tunisian rulers put the wind in the sails of the very concept of an "Arab Spring," that is, one organic phenomenon manifesting itself in different settings.

Currently, however, the "Arab Summer" is upon us, and it already looks quite different. The stalled revolutions in Bahrain, Libya, and Syria are evidence that the vast category we call "Arab" is defined as much by particularities as commonalities. Although "the status quo is unsustainable" has become a mantra of U.S. policy, it is not always true. It may have been true in Egypt, but in Libya, it is the rebellion that has proved unsustainable without outside intervention.

"Arab Spring" thus turns out to be a misnomer, concealing more than it reveals. As the revolutions spread from homogeneous countries to more segmented ones, they have rekindled not a spirit of Arabism, but one of sectarianism, regionalism, and separatism. Libya, Sudan, and the Palestinians are already broken in two as a result of rebellion, referenda, and elections.

The Arabist critique of the Middle Eastern map is that it is a relic of treaties forged by European empires that are now just as defunct as the Ottoman Empire. Many of the post-Ottoman states are themselves miniature empires, ruled by dynastic sultans and hereditary notables. When the prospect of Iraq's breakup emerged around five years ago, scholars drew new maps attempting to illustrate the underlying Middle East. Perhaps such speculation should begin anew, as division is no less likely an outcome of the recent turmoil as democracy -- the former may in fact be necessary for the latter. A thesis worth considering is that the current map has fostered coercive governments.

As for Islamism, notable scholars have argued that the Arab world is now in a post-Islamist phase. They point out that recent events were led by secular youths, with Islamists far to the rear. They also claim that the Islamists are so transformed as to be post-Islamists. And they conclude by narrowly redefining Islamism as its most extreme variety, which they claim is in eclipse.

Yet many forces remain in the revolutionary mix, and no one can say which will prevail. The Islamist strategy is to "lead from behind" -- ample evidence for this can be found in reports of the cunning and strength of the Salafists and Muslim Brotherhood, the leading contenders in the Egyptian political arena. Accordingly, it would be a mistake to believe that we live in a post-Islamist world. Islamists do sometimes change their orbit, but they do not defy the gravity of their idea. If there is any unifying cross-border thread in the Arab Spring, it is more likely to be the Brotherhood's traditional pan-Islam than Arab unity.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Lauren Emerson. ❖

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