



Revisiting ‘The Arab Spring’

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Abstract

The article presents a critical analysis of the imposed construct of ‘The Arab Spring’. It presents an analytic description of a more realistic picture of what happened in the Arab World. There was discontent fomenting among the Arab peoples following what they saw had happened to them, not initiated by the

m, starting with the US’ invasion of Iraq, resulting in its breakup as a unified nation, the dismantling of its army and its institutions, the killing of its President, and the growing wave of the ‘Islamic Caliphate’ sweeping the Arab world. Egypt is now, six years after the second phase of the Revolution (2011-2013), growing into a democracy that has been born out of her historical identity, the national character of Egyptians, and the unique societal fabric of integrated diversity that rejects extremism and western-imposed models.

In this article I will revisit the notion of the ‘Arab Spring’ which I am frequently asked about. Most recently, this question was posed to me directly during the Future of Democracy Roundtable & Planning Workshop held at the Inter-University Centre in Dubrovnik, Croatia (organized by The World Academy of Art and Science and co-organized by The World University Consortium and The Global Round Table) on April 3-5, 2018. Perhaps this article would provide partial answers to that question.

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At first, I would like to state that the ‘Arab Spring’ is a construct imposed on sovereign nation-states of the Arab world. The phrase ‘Arab Spring’ has been referred to internally in English as ‘the-so-called Arab Spring’ or in its Arabic translation as “*Al-Rabi’ Al-Arabi’*”, usually followed by a corrective indicating that this phrase is imposed on the Arab World. As such, it never really existed as a unified observable condition.

Instead, let me attempt here to give an analytic description of a more realistic picture of what happened in the Arab World. There was discontent fomenting among the Arab peoples following what they saw had happened to them, not initiated by them, starting with the US’ invasion of Iraq, resulting in its breakup as a unified nation, the dismantling of its army and

its institutions, the killing of its President, and the growing wave of the 'Islamic Caliphate' sweeping the Arab world. There was too much destruction and senseless killing. Iraq has never recovered. There was a general feeling of shock among Arabs about what was happening to their region, a region marked by its historical role as a cradle of civilization (El Guindi, 1992).

But there was also visibly growing discontent at the level of particular nation-states. Tunisia and Egypt stood out. In Tunisia people were increasingly unhappy about their deteriorating social and economic conditions and the undemocratic rule of their leaders. In Egypt, the people were fed-up of the 30-year rule by President Mubarak who installed himself as President for Life with his corrupt son as unelected 'heir', a reign of unprecedented corruption, poverty, and abuse of Egyptian resources. A close circle of Mubarak was getting very rich, the people became poorer and poorer, institutions were gradually dismantled, rule of law was falling apart, there was open brutality by the police force (endorsed at the top), and so on.* The phrase 'deep state' first emerged in the context of Egyptian discontent. Through Facebook, Egyptian youth were fomenting a "revolution".

In the meantime, self-immolation in Tunisia triggered a mass revolt there, which in turn hastened the revolt by Egyptians who made their move at that time. The phrase 'Arab Spring' was born in the West to describe this 'wave' of protests. In hindsight, the phrase may have been part of an agenda, rather than being descriptive of actual occurring events. There was no apparent 'wave' to speak of. In fact, the protests came as different reactions to different conditions in each country, although rooted in an overall discontent already building among the people of the Arab World. A large portion of the discontent was aimed at the US, not at their own governments. A critical look inward was also emerging.

Events in Libya orchestrated by the West, ending with the killing of former President Qaddafi and the destabilization of Libya, and the confusing events destabilizing Syria amid talk of a planned 'regime change', as in Iraq, made most Arabs suspicious of the "external" hand that was working to dismantle and destabilize sovereign Arab States.

Egypt reacted swiftly. The Egyptian people were extremely suspicious of the former Muslim Brother President Morsi, of whom ordinary Egyptians had not previously heard, nor was he among the official recognized candidates running for President following the abdication of President Hosni Mubarak. After President Morsi assumed office, most Egyptians were concerned about the divisive nature of his presidency, the regular brutal terrorist attacks on the police force, the bombing inside Cairo and other cities terrorizing innocent people, the frequent burnings of Coptic Churches and the strong characterization of Christian Egyptians as non-believers, amid 'reliable' rumors that President Morsi had sold 'Sinai' to extremist forces who would turn it into "The Egyptian Province of the Islamic Caliphate". The whole picture was alien to the majority of the Egyptian people.

Egyptians see their nation, *watan*, as a seamless fabric (*nasig*), made of Muslims and Christians, Nubians and Bedouins, Berbers of the Oases, all making up that unique characteristic fabric that is Egypt. There are no fault lines. It is a stable picture since the King of ancient Egypt had unified the lands of the North and the South. Egyptians' love of their land and country is unsurpassed. It is a picture of tolerance and co-existence that was challenged by the rule of President Morsi. Discontent reached its peak. It is the Egyptian society that

* See my Op-Ed published in the Los Angeles Times (El Guindi, 1993) which foresaw events of January 25, 2011

was aroused. They felt betrayed. Millions of men, women, and children, Muslims and Copts, veiled and unveiled, went out into the streets, starting with Tahrir Square in Cairo and extending to all of Egypt, demanding the removal of President Morsi. They would not return to home or work until their demands were met. Bakeries were sending free bread to the protesters

and the security and police forces were handing out water bottles to the protesters. Physicians volunteered at open tent clinics in the street to serve protesters who would not leave the streets. Solidarity among the citizens reflected the Egyptian fabric. They trusted their Armed Forces and demanded reform of the security and police forces—a retraining as it were from how they were during former President Mubarak's reign. They were out for Egypt, and in the name of Egypt, and to protect Egypt from terror whether from the inside or from the outside. But their foremost demand, expressed vocally and by signs saying "*irhal*" (leave), was aimed at President Morsi. They would not leave the streets to go back to home or work until President Morsi was removed.

"The Arab Spring cannot describe the Egyptian scene."

"The answer to the question of what happened as a result of the Arab Spring is "there never was an Arab Spring"."

The Revolution on June 30, 2013 was a turning point for Egypt, leading to the removal of President Morsi, the rewriting of the Constitution written previously by extremist forces and to the installation of a democratic mechanism for presidential election. The people requested Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to run for President. He was President Morsi's choice of Head of the Armed Forces, which was then unknown to the Egyptian people. They saw him as their savior from wrong leadership and from the terror they lived in daily. It was in no way an army coup. He accepted. It was a response to the people's demand. The new Constitution protected Egypt, the Egyptians in all their shades, and established a foundation for a democratic transition of power. Three institutions were to provide checks and balances: elected Parliament, the executive presidency and government, and the justice institution.

Only when President Morsi was removed did Egyptians leave the streets. They elected President Sisi to replace him. The agenda was full as revenge terrorism pervaded the Egyptian streets and there was overwhelming lawlessness and chaos. But Egyptians felt liberated and empowered. They removed two Presidents within a period of two years and elected one they chose. The Constitution limited the term of Presidency to 4 years and the number of terms to two. At that time, the Egyptians were most concerned about their threatened internal and external security. They wanted safe streets.

It is hard to believe where Egypt is today, only six years from those turbulent days. It is moving forward in the right direction and, being newly empowered, Egyptians are back to complaining about "ordinary" matters like food prices and low salaries. Egypt has become a country ruled by law with rapid development and investment. Concerns are raised about 'sustainability'. Are these rapid developments mindful of the 'human' component? On this concern, as applied to the Gulf country of Qatar, see my critique of Sustainability (El Guindi,

2014). Egypt's roots in ancient Egypt were restored, the Coptic population was re-integrated, the Bedouin groups assimilated without melting into the pot. Egyptians are visibly happier and very proud of being Egyptian, a feeling that had become shaky during President Mubarak's long undemocratic reign and marred with anger during the brief period of President Morsi, during which period the Egyptian fabric was being torn into unrecognizable shreds. The present regime understands what Egypt means to the Egyptians.

Egypt is neither considered a state, nor simply a country. Of the various Arabic terms for country (*dawla*, *balad*, *umma*), *watan* which means nation, rather than state, is the closest. It is to many *Um al-Dunya*, the mother of the world. Governments come and go. What remains is Egyptians' love of Egypt, which is now being restored as the primary element in the rapidly moving process of development in every sector of life. The present generation of Egyptians is finding it a bit hard to catch up, but many are aware that what is happening today is for Egypt's future.

The Arab Spring cannot describe the Egyptian scene. Nor can it accurately capture the overall feeling of loss among the Arabs in general. It is a false construct, imposed in a way that would deny any positive developments not included in a 'measurement scale' imposed by the West for reform in the Arab world. But there is a change, variable in pace and degree, for each country. Time will show. In sum, the answer to the question of what happened as a result of the Arab Spring is "there never was an Arab Spring". There are, instead, real popular revolts trying to keep exploitative and extremist forces out and popularly elected people in. The Democracy Index* divided democracy into 'types': Full Democracy, Flawed Democracy, Hybrid Regime, Authoritarian Regime and thus ranked world nations. The United States is not among the top five. But this taxonomy does not justly reflect nations rebuilding themselves such as the case of Egypt, in which the biggest threat was insecurity and which is now undergoing rapid reform and development. Instead of 'Arab Spring', perhaps Processual Democracy should be added to the typology and the notion of Democracy in general should be broken into its conceptual constituents and gradual processes.

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*See <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>