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Is the “Arab Spring ” the new 1967 ?

Of all the geostrategic consequences of the 1967 Arab defeat, the domestic political and ideological impact was the most significant. In the aftermath of the war, conservative monarchies displaced revolutionary republics from the center of Arab politics. And political Islam displaced Arab nationalism as the vanguard ideology of liberation from the West. No such dramatic transformations seem to be happening after the monumental abortion of the “Arab Spring.” Yet in many respects, the failure of the 2011 popular uprisings (or revolutions) exposes deeper societal problems in the Arab world than the 1967 war could ever do. After all, the 1967 war was a failure of political and military leadership. **The post-2011 setback engages much broader and diverse segments of Arab society and should be an opportunity for serious self-examination.** Like in any context, opportunities come with an expiration date.

Take a look at the post-Arab Spring regimes. They are the same if not worse than the pre-Arab Spring brand. In Algeria, Bahrain, and Morocco the political police and the courts are borrowing Ben Ali’s most whimsical plots to entrap critics. In Egypt, Marshall El Sissi -- who came to power after a military coup in 2013 – is set to be the nation’s new strongman through at least 2030, thanks to familiar constitutional tricks. In Jordan, King Abdullah – who promised political reforms under popular pressure in 2011 – closed the parliament last year and reimposed emergency laws to muzzle public freedoms in the midst of rising protests. In Libya, Syria and Yemen, civil strife has wrecked national institutions and caused humanitarian crises of unprecedented proportions. As an indication of the world’s skepticism about change in the Arab world, the 2016-2021 protests in numerous Arab countries – also known as the “Arab Spring 2.0” -- rarely made the front pages of the international press.

Clearly then, a decade after the “Arab Spring” the fundamentals have not changed. Autocrats and their pawns remain in charge. The states are either destroyed by armed groups or transformed into instruments of tight control by the regimes. Democracy advocates are still small, divided and ineffective. And societies at large, especially the older generations, are lingering in their social conservatism, preoccupied mainly by religious issues and day to day survival. In the meantime, key aspects of social and political life have actually been worsening [See tables in annex].

According to Freedom House reports, the Arab regimes remain one of the most repressive in the world. Aside from the countries with civil wars, the worse deterioration in fundamental rights occurred in Bahrein which lost 19 points between 2011 (30/100) and 2020 (17/100). Across the Arab world, freedom scores deteriorated significantly as can be seen from the table (table number X). In Morocco, for example, the freedom score declined from 42/100 in 2011 to 37/100 in 2020. Tunisia stands alone as a bright spot with a remarkable score of 71/100 in 2020 (by comparison to 31/100 in 2011).

Next to deteriorating human and political rights, the Arab region (with the qualified exception of the Gulf states) continues to stand out as one of the most corrupt in the globe according to Transparency International. Again, not including zones of conflict, Lebanon, Egypt, Algeria and Morocco display the highest levels of corruption in the region between 2012 and 2020. For comparison purposes, Jordan -- where corruption has recently fueled tribal rumblings and tensions within the royal family -- can proclaim a much better score than Morocco (49/100 and 40/100 respectively) despite the latter’s assertion that huge progress has been made.

Equally unsettling, gender inequality, which is a key variable in measuring a country’s overall level of human development, points to another layer of social degradation. The Arab region in general has the greatest negative gaps in the world due to structural economic problems and deeply rooted social discrimination against women. As the 2020 Global Gap Gender Index (a report of the World Economic Forum) indicates, among the 33 lowest ranked countries in the world, 18 are from the Middle East and North Africa region (16 are predominantly Arab states).

In key sectors according to the report, Morocco ranks lower than Mauritania in

women’s “health and survival” (138 and 111 respectively), lower than Algeria in women’s “political empowerment” (123 and 99 respectively), and lower than Tunisia in “economic participation and opportunity” (146 and 142 respectively).

In sum, two main points : **The universally accepted indicators to gage the potential for progressive political and social change in the Arab world are all in the red. And Morocco is far from being a positive exception to the troubling trends in the region.** Yet the image of Morocco as a moderate, pluralistic-friendly monarchy that will become one day a democracy is a mirage that too many, naively or strategically, believe is attainable.

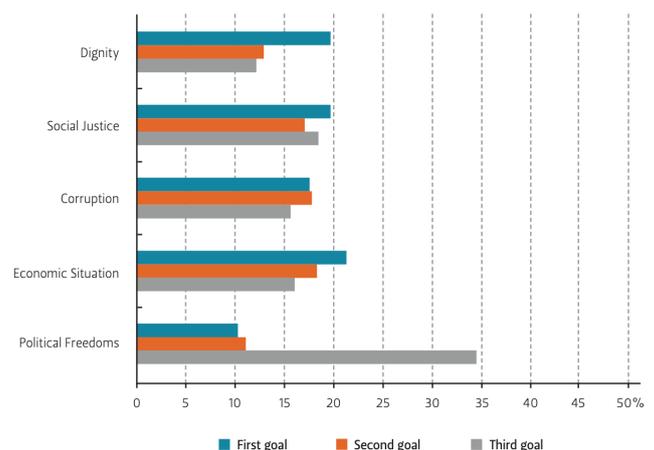
But here is the paradox that brings into plain view the disarray of current thinking about the “Arab Spring.” **Far from the bitterness of defeat that deeply shook the political and intellectual Arab elites in 1967, many today seem unconcerned or see a silver lining in the “Arab Spring” debacle.** Some claim that the regimes are actually making concessions thanks to popular pressure. Others maintain

that people speak more freely now, that civil society is stronger, that social movements are opening up democratic spaces.

Yet others argue that it is too early to pass judgement on the “Arab Spring” because all revolutions go through distinct periods of setbacks and advances (many refer to the French revolution as an example). For the majority of people in the Arab world, however, the “Arab Spring” was primarily about socioeconomic issues. A recent survey by the Baker Institute at Rice University finds that the people’s top priority is not political freedom, a goal they curiously feel has been achieved.

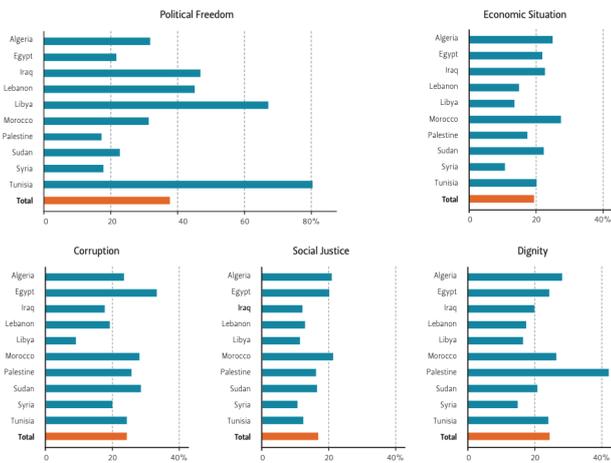
RICE UNIVERSITY’S BAKER INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY // POLICY BRIEF // 03.21.19

FIGURE 1 — GOALS OF THE ARAB SPRING



SURVEY QUESTION What were the three most important goals of the Arab Spring protests, in your opinion?

FIGURE 4 — WERE THE ARAB SPRING GOALS ACHIEVED?



SURVEY QUESTION Which of the following goals did the Arab Spring protests achieve in your country?

Could a liberal, progressive movement emerge after the failure of the “Arab Spring” despite consistently low interest in political freedoms ? Would it be broad enough to displace political Islam just like 1967 displaced Arab nationalism ? Could it challenge the regimes’ religious fundamentalism and chauvinistic nationalism ? Not in the foreseeable future.

Progressive politics in the Arab world will probably not happen until people understand that neither the regime’s paternalism nor the Islamists’ dangerous moralism are good for them. If people don’t get the importance of political and individual, they will remain trapped between autocracy and political Islam. But such a collective awareness will take roots only when the independent political, cultural, and economic elites in the Arab world are themselves ideologically committed to progressive liberalism.

SOURCE : DEBORAH ADES, ÉTUDIANTE DE PREMIER CYCLE À LA DUKE UNIVERSITY, FREEDOM HOUSE ET TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL

Algeria	36/100	35/100	35/100	34/100	34/100	35/100	35/100	35/100	34/100	34/100
Bahrain	30/100	20/100	18/100	16/100	15/100	14/100	12/100	12/100	12/100	11/100
Egypt	25/100	35/100	41/100	31/100	26/100	27/100	26/100	26/100	22/100	21/100
Iran	17/100	16/100	16/100	17/100	17/100	17/100	17/100	18/100	18/100	17/100
Iraq	25/100	25/100	24/100	25/100	24/100	27/100	27/100	31/100	32/100	31/100
Israel	83/100	81/100	81/100	81/100	80/100	80/100	80/100	79/100	78/100	76/100
Jordan	34/100	35/100	34/100	35/100	36/100	36/100	37/100	37/100	37/100	37/100
Kuwait	44/100	44/100	41/100	39/100	37/100	36/100	36/100	36/100	36/100	36/100
Lebanon	52/100	51/100	49/100	48/100	44/100	43/100	44/100	43/100	45/100	44/100
Libya	8/100	17/100	43/100	41/100	23/100	20/100	13/100	9/100	9/100	9/100
Morocco	42/100	43/100	43/100	42/100	42/100	41/100	41/100	39/100	39/100	37/100
Oman	27/100	27/100	26/100	26/100	26/100	25/100	25/100	23/100	23/100	23/100
Palestine	18/100	19/100	19/100	15/100	15/100	12/100	12/100	12/100	11/100	11/100
Qatar	28/100	28/100	28/100	28/100	28/100	27/100	26/100	24/100	25/100	25/100
Saudi Arabia	12/100	10/100	10/100	10/100	10/100	10/100	10/100	7/100	7/100	7/100
Sudan	11/100	6/100	7/100	7/100	6/100	6/100	6/100	8/100	7/100	17/100
Syria	9/100	6/100	5/100	1/100	-1/100	-1/100	-1/100	-1/100	0/100	1/100
Tunisia	23/100	58/100	59/100	63/100	79/100	79/100	78/100	70/100	69/100	71/100
United Arab Emirates	27/100	24/100	22/100	21/100	21/100	20/100	20/100	17/100	17/100	17/100
Yemen	29/100	23/100	25/100	26/100	25/100	17/100	14/100	13/100	11/100	11/100

	Corruption TI 2020										
Algeria		34	36	36	36	34	33	35	35	36	
Bahrain		51	48	49	51	43	36	36	42	42	
Egypt		32	32	37	36	34	32	35	35	33	
Iran		28	25	27	27	29	30	28	26	25	
Iraq		18	16	16	16	17	18	18	20	21	
Israel		60	61	60	61	64	62	61	60	60	
Jordan		48	45	49	53	48	48	49	48	49	
Kuwait		44	43	44	49	41	39	41	40	42	
Lebanon		30	28	27	28	28	28	28	28	25	
Libya		21	15	18	16	14	17	17	18	17	
Morocco		37	37	39	36	37	40	43	41	40	
Oman		47	47	45	45	45	44	52	52	54	
Palestine	na										
Qatar		68	68	69	71	61	63	62	62	63	
Saudi Arabia		44	46	49	52	46	49	49	53	53	
Sudan		13	11	11	12	14	16	16	16	16	
Syria		26	17	20	18	13	14	13	13	14	
Tunisia		41	41	40	38	41	42	43	43	44	
United Arab Emirates		68	69	70	70	66	71	70	71	71	
Yemen		23	18	19	18	14	16	14	15	15	

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