

# A Decade Later: Taking Stock of the Arab Uprisings and Turkey's Role

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**ABSTRACT** *This article attempts to understand the outcomes of the crackdown on the Arab revolts and the lessons learned thereof. There is no doubt that the Arab revolts were corrupted shortly after their start and used to serve the interests of counterrevolutionaries. The economic, social, and political problems, which triggered the riots in 2011, have not been mitigated a decade later. In this respect, Turkey's respect for popular demands, the attractiveness of its democratic model, and its proactive foreign policy have concerned the Gulf states leading them to view Turkey as a country that they had to contain. However, Turkey's post-2016 efforts to restore the balance of power through the use of hard power prevented Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates from developing a new regional blueprint under the Trump administration. Right now, there are indications that all regional powers are engaging in a fresh strategic assessment.*

**Keywords:** Arab Uprisings, Turkey, Middle East, North Africa

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## Introduction

A decade has passed since Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor set himself on fire in December 2010. The wave, which started with the so-called Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, turned into a political storm with the Tahrir Revolution in Egypt. In addition to these two countries, it brought about the demise of authoritarian leaders in Libya and Yemen. Whereas governments changed in Kuwait and Jordan, the administrations of Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco appeased the protestors by implementing certain reforms. The riots in Bahrain were crushed thanks to Saudi Arabia's direct military intervention, as Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria survived with the help of Iran and Russia. Within several months, the regional order, which consisted of post-colonial regimes that emerged in the 1940s, experienced a major rupture. Tunisia's Zine al-Abidin Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak had to step down just one month after the protests. In Yemen, President Ali Abdullah Saleh resisted for one year before handing over power to his Vice President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. Finally, Libya's Muammar Qaddafi lost his power as a result of international military intervention –and his life, upon falling into the hands of his opponents.

The Arab people, who took to the streets and demanded 'dignity, human rights, freedom, and democracy,' not only failed to receive support from the United States and the European Union but also ended up being silenced by a counter-revolution orchestrated by the Gulf's status quo regimes.<sup>1</sup> The riots, which many expected to be a prelude to 'spring,' soured into the so-called Arab winter some two and a half years later. Mohamed Morsi, who became Egypt's first democratically elected president in 2012, was removed from power by a July 2013 military coup led by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Hence Egypt, the Arab world's strongest nation, joined the group of authoritarian regimes. Whereas Tunisia barely kept its revolution alive, thanks to the acumen and skill of al-Ghannouchi and his government, it seems still difficult for countries like Libya, Syria, and Yemen to find a way out of civil war. The emergence of stable and democratic administrations remains a remote possibility in these nations.

Libya, which is arguably in the best position, has entered a period of political transition thanks to Turkey's 2019 critical decision to support Fayeze al-Sarraj's UN-recognized government. Khalifa Haftar, a coup plotter, was stopped from taking Tripoli and forming an authoritarian government. It remains unclear, however, what the transition process and the December 2021 elections will entail. It is clear that the crackdown on the Arab peoples' democratic demands by the Gulf's status quo regimes has created a new regional balance of power in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The immediate outcomes of that new balance of power were the Muslim Brotherhood's undermining and the emergence of an anti-Iran bloc. The Gulf States have been concerned about Turkey's

respect for popular demands, the attractiveness of its democratic model, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's strong leadership, and the country's proactive foreign policy.<sup>2</sup>

These concerns have led the Gulf elites to view Turkey as a country that they had to contain. It is clear that the turbulence that Turkey experienced between 2013 and the July 15, 2016 coup attempt was influenced by such containment attempts. Furthermore, the Gulf Bloc was further emboldened during Donald Trump's presidency in the U.S. (2016-2020), which fueled its ambitions to contain Iran and Turkey simultaneously. During that period, some members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), imposed a blockade on Qatar. The most noteworthy aspect of that new equilibrium was that the Gulf States aligned themselves with Israel against Iran. The crackdown on the Arab peoples' genuine democratic demands, which were rooted in socio-economic dynamics, and the Western governments' hypocritical and silent reaction to that development went down in history as an exemplary situation, and fueled the regional competition for power.

On the tenth anniversary of the Arab Uprisings and getting the lessons learned, there are indications that all regional powers are engaging in a fresh strategic assessment. In this new regional and global equation, where the U.S. lacks the commitment to impose a new blueprint on the region, it is possible to argue that Russia, along with regional powers, i.e. Turkey, Israel, and Iran, is gearing up for a fresh round of a pendulum cooperation and competition.<sup>3</sup>

This article primarily focuses on the outcomes of the crackdown on the Arab revolts and the lessons learned. It will touch upon the emergence of fragile blocs, powered by status quo powers, as well as the rise of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), proxy wars, the policy choices of regional powers, the Trump presidency's impact on the region, and the repositioning encouraged by the Biden Administration. Finally, it will analyze Turkey's policy, ten years after the revolts.

## **Disappointment, Bitter Lessons, and the Spiral of Loss**

The Arab Uprisings, which took place in the first days of 2011, were welcomed as the overdue 4<sup>th</sup> wave of democratization in the MENA region.<sup>4</sup> Many observers expected the region's authoritarian regimes – republics and, later, monarchies – to crumble one by one, and a brand new era to begin. By August 2011,

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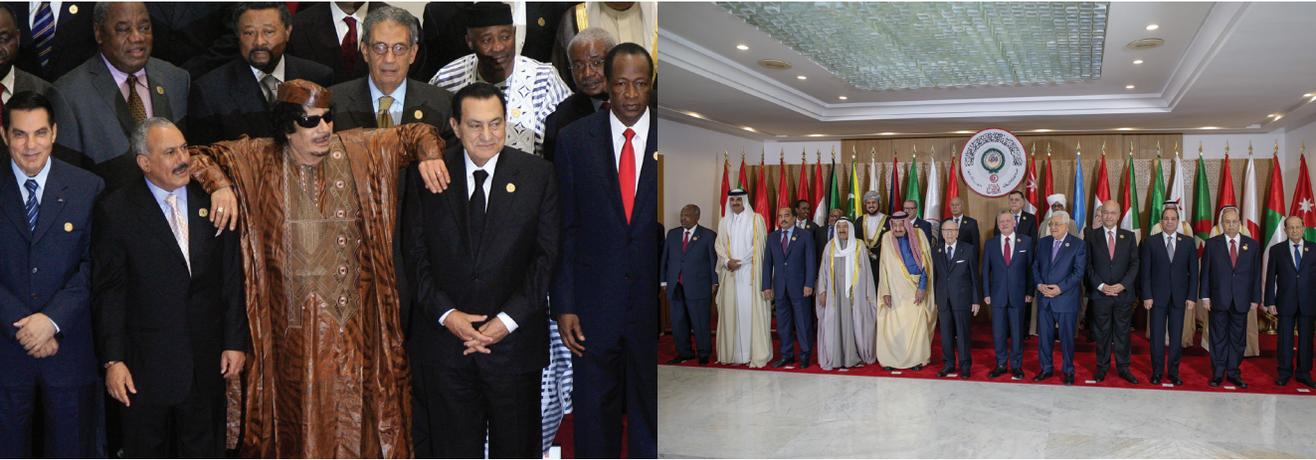
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military ousted Mohamed Morsi's Administration one year after the 2012 elections. By the summer of 2013, in turn, it was already clear that no country that had set the stage for pro-democracy riots, with the notable exception of Tunisia, was going to transition into democracy.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, the success of the Jasmine Revolution established that it was not inevitable for other Arab Uprisings to result in civil war or more authoritarianism.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, authoritarian regimes proved that they were highly skilled at adapting to changing circumstances. As such, the Arab regimes' strategies included harsh crackdowns as well as containing their opponents through partial reforms.<sup>7</sup>

Although authoritarian regimes turned out to be highly fragile, it was widely disappointing that those authoritarian leaders, whom the people had removed from power, ended up being replaced by the military, militants partaking in civil wars, or foreign powers. Even though the reasons behind the Jasmine and Tahrir revolutions remain very much alive in the eyes of Arab people, one of the lessons learned is that gaining access to a democratic government is extremely difficult. Separately, another bitter lesson relates to the fact that the chaos that followed the uprising in Iraq and Syria ultimately served the interests of the ISIS, along with other proxy forces.

The Arab Uprisings have been deformed, shortly after their start, and exploited by counter-revolutionary forces.<sup>8</sup> From this perspective, looking back from today, it is abundantly clear who benefited most from the evolution of riots into civil wars. Those powers, which would have been most unsettled by the rise of democratic governments to power in Arab countries, reaped its benefits – the Gulf, Iran, and, especially, Israel. Authoritarian regimes also demonstrated their resilience in the face of the protestors' challenges as well as their level of adaptability. The outcome of that process, in turn, was the rise of authoritarianism in the region, once again, starting with Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's military coup in 2013. The primary outcome of the crackdown on the Arab revolts was the spread of proxy wars and the growing importance of terrorist organizations and Salafist extremism. Secondly, the relationship between Islamists

however, the protest movement in Bahrain became the target of a harsh crackdown. Meanwhile, the situation in Syria evolved into a civil war. Whereas the governments of Morocco and Jordan responded to protests with partial reforms, the pre-existing political structure managed to defend itself. In Egypt, where the *ancien régime* (also known as *fouloul*, primarily referring to the military and the judiciary) was not dismantled, the



and democracy was deprived of its platform for transformation. The third result was the emergence of fragile blocs, based on competition among regional powers. Another outcome of the new regional balance of power was the growing influence of Israel. Last but not least, it was the suffering of refugees.<sup>9</sup>

## The Spread of Terrorist Organizations and Proxy Wars

The leading negative outcome of the prevention of the Arab Uprisings' evolution into a democratic wave in the Middle East was the rising number of failed states. By extension, terrorist organizations, militias, and proxy forces become more commonplace. It is possible to trace back the rise of armed non-state actors, informed by ethnic or sectarian identity, to the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, after the September 11, 2001 terror attacks. The axis of resistance, which Iran built after the Revolution of 1979 by mobilizing Shia militias, gave rise to the phenomenon of proxy forces in the region. The U.S. invasion of Iraq, however, lay the groundwork for the future rise of extreme Salafist organizations –including ISIS. That group, whose origins can be traced back to the notorious Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, emerged as a more radical and hierarchical entity than al-Qaeda. It caught the world's attention by capturing Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, in June 2014. ISIS, which claimed to be a state with a large chunk of territory within Iraq and Syria's borders for two years, was also active in Libya and Egypt –especially in the Sinai Peninsula. The group also carried out terror attacks in multiple capitals. Notorious for its foreign fighters, car bombs, and beheadings, ISIS gained support by laying claim to 'the caliphate.'<sup>10</sup> It gained a foothold among Sunnis and former Baathists in Iraq, where Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's sectarian policies caused outrage, and exploited the power vacuum in Syria, against the backdrop

Then and now: deceased Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi (C) and deposed Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (R) and Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh (L) at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Afro-Arab Joint Summit in the Libyan coastal city of Sirte, on October 10, 2010. A family photo of Arab and African leaders, with new Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi (2<sup>nd</sup> R) and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (3<sup>rd</sup> R), ahead of opening session within the 30<sup>th</sup> Arab League Summit in Tunis, Tunisia on March 31, 2019.

## The worst outcomes of the crackdown on the Arab revolts by counter-revolutionary forces were the squandering of all accumulated experience regarding harmony between Islamists and democracy, and the rise of extremist groups such as the ISIS

of that country's civil war, to seize areas controlled by the moderate rebels first. The rise of ISIS, which the Assad regime enabled indirectly, resulted in the formation of an international coalition led by the United States. That coalition, which consisted of 66 countries, defeated the ISIS, but created fresh opportunities for the Hashd al-Shabi, an umbrella organization of more than 40 groups, in Iraq and YPG – a local component of the terrorist organization PKK – in Syria.

As part of Iran's expansionist activities in the region, the Shia militias found fertile ground in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, as the Arab Uprisings gave way to civil wars.<sup>11</sup> Together with Hezbollah and Russia's 2015 military intervention, the Shia militias, under Qasem Soleimani's command, prevented the moderate rebels from removing Bashar al-Assad's regime from power in Syria. In Iraq, by contrast, the ISIS threat has been the main source of motivation for the mobilization of Iranian-influenced Shia militias. Meanwhile in Yemen,<sup>12</sup> the Houthi rebels emerged as an Iranian-backed proxy force that dragged Saudi Arabia and the UAE into the quagmire of civil war. Tehran's frequent and widespread use of proxy forces not only blocked the initiatives of the Gulf States, Iran's adversaries, but also contributed to the transformation of Iraq and Yemen into failed states. The active role that Shia militias play as proxy forces is a top source of concern for Iran's rivals in the Gulf and Israel. In addition, Libya has also become the most important scene of proxy wars as a recent example just before the starting of the political process.

The U.S., in turn, enlisted the services of YPG, the terrorist organization PKK's Syrian branch, as well as Shia militias as proxy forces in the fight against ISIS. Barack Obama, then president of the United States, pursued a policy that deeply disturbed Turkey, a NATO ally, to ensure that American troops did not die fighting that terrorist organization. Despite recognizing PKK as a terrorist entity, Washington viewed YPG as a separate group and armed it to combat ISIS. YPG's creation of a 'terror corridor' along the Turkish-Syrian border, with the help of tens of thousands of truckloads of weapons as well as training, resulted in Ankara's military incursion into Syria. Washington's insistence on using a terrorist organization as its proxy force remains a key area of disagreement between the United States and Turkey.<sup>13</sup>

The emergence of armed non-state actors in the Middle East is directly related to security crises entailed by the seemingly endless civil wars in Syria and Ye-

men, and the failure to restabilize Iraq. Proxy forces, which become tools in regional power struggles, do not just place at risk the sovereignty, unity, and integrity of those countries, where they operate. Having become part of hybrid war methods, such actors also fuel sectarian and ethnic radicalization at the national, and regional levels.

## Islamists and the Experiment of Democracy

The failure of the Arab Uprisings has nothing to do with the orientalist and essentialist argument that democracy cannot take root in Muslim societies. Democracy, which Arab societies desperately needed, was suffocated at the moment of its birth, jointly by multiple players. As such, it is necessary to identify that shortcoming with the aggressive campaign of counter-revolutionaries, the pro-tutelage attitude of armed forces, the failure of elites to reach consensus, U.S. and European support for counter-revolutionary and authoritarian regimes, and the misguided policy choices of regional players, which ultimately encouraged civil war. In other words, one cannot account for the failure of the Arab Uprisings with the Arab peoples' perceived lack of preparation for democracy or the Islamists' 'hijacking' those revolutions. Challenged by rioters, the relevant regimes proved sufficiently resilient and capable of adapting to changing circumstances to crush this new wave of democracy.<sup>14</sup>

Without a doubt, the worst outcomes of the crackdown on the Arab revolts by counter-revolutionary forces were the squandering of all accumulated experience regarding harmony between Islamists and democracy, and the rise of extremist groups such as the ISIS. Clashes between *Salafist* and Shia extremists, including ISIS and Hashd al-Shabi, spread sectarian polarization all across the region. In addition to certain false decisions by Mohamed Morsi's Administration, it was the Gulf States' treatment of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization (which reflected their concerns about the nascent wave of democratization) and support for Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's military coup that paved the way for the rise of uncertainties in the region. As more and more people came to believe that elections did not lead to power (and that elected leaders could not survive anyway), the discourse of violent organizations, such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, canceled out the peaceful message of the Arab Uprisings. Notwithstanding, Tunisia's Ennahda Movement and its leader, Rachid al-Ghanouchi, agreed to share political power and won over the country's secular elite—which demonstrated that Islamists could indeed embrace democracy.<sup>15</sup> For the record, the ultimate absence of cases, which reflect harmony between Islamist movements and democracy, does not necessarily mean that this debate is over. The case of Turkey sets an example today, which is no less prominent than it was ten years ago. Furthermore, the debate over 'Islam's compatibility with democracy'—which was popular in the 1990s— is long over. The defin-

ing factors are elite attitudes, socio-economic elements, and the decisions of regional players, rather than the relationship between Islam's core principles and democracy. Although the Arab Uprisings did not create a domino effect and bring down authoritarian regimes altogether, it is a well-known fact that democratization in Muslim societies predates those revolts in the first place. In this regard, democratization will clearly continue, even after the Arab Uprisings soured into 'winter.'<sup>16</sup>

## The Rise of Fragile Status Quo Blocs and the New Era

The modern Middle East, which emerged in the aftermath of World War I, has experienced multiple moments of historic rupture to date. The first point of rupture took place after World War II, as countries around the region attained independence and the State of Israel was established in 1948. The second point was Egypt's 1978 decision to sign the Camp David Accords and the Islamic Revolution in Iran the following year. The third point of rupture was the end of the Cold War, which undermined the bipolar world order. Subsequently, the Gulf War in 1991 fueled anti-American sentiment across the Middle East. The frustration over the presence of the U.S. forces in the lands of Islam laid the psychological groundwork for September 11, 2001 attacks.

The U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq created a power vacuum in the Middle East, which boosted the influence of and provided additional room for maneuver to Iran and Turkey. Furthermore, as Iraq was dragged into a civil war, there was no major power left to speak for the Arab world. The regime of Hosni Mubarak, whose foreign policy was fully aligned with the U.S. and Israel, ended up lacking credibility on the Arab street and was crushed under the weight of injustice that its failed policy of economic liberalization generated. The Arab revolts, which reflected the popular demand for the end of the existing order, started in late 2010 and created a fresh rupture in the region.<sup>17</sup>

Although the Arab Uprisings undermined the status quo, they did not result in the emergence of a new order on the back of that new wave of democratization. Russia, along with competing for regional powers, filled the geopolitical vacuum that the U.S. left behind, as it gradually withdrew from the Middle East. Regional powers, including Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, strived to manage the process of change and to create a new and unique regional order.<sup>18</sup> The targeting of the Muslim Brotherhood and similar movements by the status quo powers in the Gulf resulted in the 2013 military coup in Egypt and the rise of radical organizations like ISIS, and emboldened Iranian expansionism. Consequently, new blocs, which were fragile and in favor of the status quo, emerged. The polarization between the Gulf and Iran also deepened civil wars, from Syria to Yemen, through proxies.<sup>19</sup>

Barack Obama, then president of the U.S., delivered a fancy address about democracy in Cairo, Egypt in 2009, but ended up distancing himself from those principles when they were tested on the ground. Having replaced the George W. Bush Administration, which was aggressively interventionist, the Obama Administration pursued a foreign policy with references to values but a narrow definition of interests. It promoted 'institutional multilateralism' in the international arena, yet adopted a position that served to escalate the power struggle in the Middle East and created more room for local players.

## **The Middle Eastern peoples' demand for political participation was thus abandoned to the iron grip of authoritarian regimes and the fire of civil war**

The Middle Eastern peoples' demand for political participation was thus abandoned to the iron grip of authoritarian regimes and the fire of civil war. During the Obama presidency, when the so-called Arab revolts witnessed the seasons of spring and winter, the bankruptcy of Western liberal values became unmistakable. As such, multilateralism, human rights, and democracy ceased to be legitimizing values in politics. Donald Trump, Barack Obama's successor, built on that legacy of bankruptcy to adopt a policy that recklessly advocated 'commercial interests' and 'the mighty' without reservation. Keeping in mind that the Obama effect gave rise to the first wave of chaos in the region, it is possible to argue that the Trump presidency entailed the second wave. Attending the Riyadh Summit on May 20-21, 2017, Donald Trump encouraged status quo powers in the Gulf for the sake of selling more weapons and attracting additional investment. In light of Washington's decision to backtrack from the nuclear deal and adopt a policy of maximum pressure toward Iran, the Gulf States reached the conclusion that they could address both of their main problems, the Muslim Brotherhood and the perceived Iranian threat, simultaneously. For the record, the former had already been largely neutralized when Egypt's Mohamed Morsi was overthrown, and the Muslim Brotherhood was designated as a terrorist organization. Emboldened by the Trump Administration, they attempted to strongarm Qatar into ending its support for Hamas, along with other Islamic movements in countries like Libya and Syria, in order to neutralize the supposed threat of 'Islamist democracy' for good. As such, the Gulf States aimed to facilitate the emergence of an anti-Iran bloc by imposing a blockade on Qatar. At the same time, they assumed that this blockade would curb Turkey's regional influence.

The ambitious crown princes of Saudi Arabia and the UAE emerged as key players in the plan to reshape the Middle East's regional order.<sup>20</sup> Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman, who secured the Trump Administration's support and gained control over his country's royal princes, attempted to unite the



Palestinian Muslim worshippers gather in Jerusalem's al-Aqsa mosque compound, the third holiest site of Islam, on May 21, 2021. AHMAD GHARABLI / AFP via Getty Images

Gulf States around Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt. To accomplish the goal of forming an anti-Iran bloc, the supporters of that plan sought to discipline Qatar by imposing a blockade on that country. Meanwhile, a new brand of secular Arab nationalism formed the ideological basis of the attempt by Mohammed bin Salman and his partners to create a new regional blueprint. This time around, they –in sync with the West and Israel– strived to distill Arab nationalism from an apolitical type of Salafism. This ideological pursuit, whose ‘other’ was ostensibly Iran (and, without acknowledgment, Turkey), came to be portrayed as a kind of ‘moderate Islam.’ That discourse was intended to facilitate rapprochement with the United States and Israel by abandoning the Palestinian question. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia, which came under fierce criticism after 9/11 terror attacks over its rigid ideology of *Wahhabism*, managed to blame the rise of radical Islamism on the Islamic Revolution in Iran as well as the Muslim Brotherhood. It also alienated Turkey and Qatar, whom it portrayed as defenders of the Muslim Brotherhood.

It is no secret that Turkey, as a player attempting to restore the balance of power, prevented a coup attempt in Qatar by providing financial, political, and military support to that country.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s vocal criticism of Donald Trump’s decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, along with Turkey’s successful attempts to get the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the United Nations to condemn that decision, discredited Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt (which pursued rapprochement with Israel) in the eyes of the Arab peoples. In this regard, Ankara emerged as

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'a formidable bulwark' against the attempt to reshape the Middle East. The Gulf States responded to Turkey's actions by throwing their weight behind terrorist organizations like FETÖ and PYD, and by launching a smear campaign against Turkey, which they accused of attempting to restore the Ottoman caliphate, and pursuing a policy of expansionism in Syria, Iraq, and Libya.<sup>22</sup>

Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the Gulf's ambitious powers, failed to contain Iran or impose a new blueprint on the Middle East, despite numerous attempts during Donald Trump's presidency. In the end, the plan to reshape the region accomplished little more than to deepen the pre-existing chaos due to Iran's resistance, the Gulf's inadequate capacity, and Washington's incomprehensive strategy. As such, it proved impossible to redesign the Middle East, which was shaken by the Arab Uprisings, and to establish a new status quo. Nor could the Gulf States weaken Iran's influence over Lebanon and Yemen, rebuild Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, compel Palestine to settle with Israel under Mohammed Dahlan's leadership, contain rival powers in the Gulf (starting with Qatar) through economic and possibly military pressure, or to rejuvenate the pre-Arab Spring elite ideology.<sup>23</sup> In 2019, when Iranian-backed groups targeted Saudi Arabia's petroleum facilities with missiles, the U.S. President Donald Trump shocked the Gulf States by keeping silent. That (lack of) response led the Gulf States to believe that the U.S. was going to abandon them in case of a military confrontation with Iran. Finally, Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 U.S. presidential election resulted in an overhaul of Washington's Middle East policy, whose cornerstone will presumably be the reinstatement of the nuclear deal with Iran.

The Biden Administration's decision to identify democracy and human rights as the backbone of Washington's new policy –'America is back'– opened to question the potential impact of political changes in the U.S. capital on the MENA region. The idea that this new policy should contribute to the de-escalation of regional tensions and encourage pre-existing authoritarian regimes to concentrate on reforms is suitable –albeit quite optimistic.<sup>24</sup> The U.S. policy of 'democracy promotion' under President Barack Obama was primarily responsible for the ultimate failure of the Arab protests' ambitions of freedom and change. A Democratic president has yet again assumed the U.S. presidency,

## The region's leading nations are currently repositioning themselves and looking for ways to work together on their strained bilateral relations again

ten years later, as Joe Biden talks about his plan to form an alliance of democracies –which closely resembles Barack Obama's emphasis on democracy during his trips to Egypt and Turkey.<sup>25</sup> It is obvious, however, that Biden's idea of an alliance of democracies is quite different from previous versions of 'democracy promotion.'

To clarify, hardly anyone expects the 'democracy' agenda, as promoted by Obama's former vice-president, to actually have a 'democratizing' influence on the MENA region. Washington, which has refocused its attention on the Asia-Pacific region, clearly does not pursue any policy of democratic transformation in the Middle East.

Nonetheless, the question of how the Biden Administration's Middle East policy stands to impact the regional order, on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Arab Uprisings, remains to be answered. After all, it is possible to predict that the Biden Administration will be unable to stop dealing with the region's problems for two distinct reasons. Primarily, the current U.S. presence in the Middle East –from Afghanistan to Syria and Iraq– and the problems that it will face there, will continue to require close attention from Washington. At the same time, the Biden Administration won't be able to escape the implications of its goal of containing China and Russia –which it sees as a strategic threat and an adversary, respectively– on the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia. For the record, it would seem that Beijing's growing commercial influence and Russia's ability to fill political vacuums will be permanent features of Middle Eastern politics. As such, both countries will attempt to form new alliances by exploiting Washington's potential missteps. In this regard, managing the phenomenon of a 'post-American Middle East' stands to remain a costly endeavor for the United States. Indeed, the Biden Administration delivered its initial messages to the region by abandoning Saudi Arabia in Yemen, 'downgrading' its relations with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and talking about the possibility of concluding a fresh nuclear deal with Iran.

In the meantime, on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Arab Uprisings, the Middle East experiences heightened activity, as a broad range of developments and discussions seem to be intertwined: Turkey and Egypt monitor each other's movements in the Eastern Mediterranean, as Ankara sends warm messages to Tel Aviv just before Israel's attacks on Gaza in holy month of Ramadan, in May 2021. At the same time, the foreign ministers of Turkey, Russia, and Qatar held a trilateral meeting on Syria. Iranian-backed groups have been targeting U.S. elements in Iraq, which Pope Francis visited earlier this year. Russia has stepped up its pressure on Syria's Idlib and Jarablus, as Saudi Arabia came under fire, more and more frequently, from Yemen. Finally, Iranian media out-

lets have expressed concern over the possibility that Turkey and Saudi Arabia could work together in Yemen. All those developments indicate that global and regional powers alike have been taking stock of their areas of competition, confrontation, and cooperation. It is also possible to make the case that the Biden Administration's Middle East policy, which is gradually taking shape, contributes to the aforementioned pursuits. Nonetheless, it is obvious that one cannot account for the most recent levels of activity in the Middle East with reference to that development alone. The regional players have been revisiting their post-Arab Spring policy choices as well as their alliances and terms of engagement –which they tested during Donald Trump's presidency. Some of those efforts are intended to cement gains, whereas others are geared toward making up past failures. Yet others are linked to their fresh perceptions of threats and opportunities. The region's leading nations are currently repositioning themselves and looking for ways to work together on their strained bilateral relations again. It would seem that Turkey, Iran, and Israel will play an active role in the fresh repositioning of Middle Eastern players. At this point, it would be useful to discuss Israel's growing regional influence.

## **Israel's Growing Influence**

There is no doubt that Israel (more than any other country in the Middle East) reaped the benefits of the Arab spring souring into the Arab winter. That development presented Tel Aviv with a unique opportunity, as Israel, without lifting a finger, ended up facing no Arab country that could challenge it. Furthermore, with the help of the Trump Administration's policy of 'maximum pressure' against Iran between 2017 and 2020, Israel found itself in a position to lead the anti-Iran bloc.

The Muslim Brotherhood's ability to crown Mohammed Morsi as Egypt's first democratically elected president led the Gulf States, which feared that the wave of democratization could reach them, to take action. Those countries supported Gen. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's military coup in 2013 and, later, pursued a direct or indirect alliance with Israel –a deeply influential and major change in Arab politics.

With the help of U.S. President Donald Trump, four Arab nations established diplomatic relations with Israel. Perhaps more significant than the re-establishment of diplomatic relations, however, was that Israel ceased to be viewed as an enemy from their perspective and emerged as a potential ally against Iran and Turkey. Consequently, Israel not only neutralized the threat posed by Arab countries, such as Syria and Egypt, which could wage war against it. At the same time, the country elevated itself to a new position, whereby it could exert influence over competition between the Arab states, on one side,

and Iran and Turkey, on the other side –as well as competition among those Arab states.

It is possible to describe the Trump Administration's campaign to promote 'normalization with Israel' as Washington's third intervention in the Middle East over the course of two decades. Indeed, Israel emerged as the consistent beneficiary of different kinds of U.S. interventions under presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. The first intervention took the form of U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in response to the September 11, 2001 terror attacks –which resulted in Saddam Hussein's demise and Iraq's transformation into a failed state. The second intervention refers to the Obama Administration's policy choices in the face of the Arab Uprisings, which kicked off in late 2010. President Obama, despite keeping Israel at arm's length and pursuing rapprochement with Iran, permitted the Gulf States to crack down on democratic revolutions in the region –and, by extension, contributed to the emergence of new failed states in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. In light of those developments, the violent clashes across the Arab world gave rise to fresh suffering that seemed to overshadow the Palestinian question. Finally, the third intervention took place during Donald Trump's presidency, whereby the United States bridged the gap between Israel and the Gulf States in the name of containing Iran.<sup>26</sup>

There is a growing gap, however, between Arab governments and people when it comes to their attitude toward Israel. That those administrations pursue new policies, which may be seen as abandoning the cause of Jerusalem and Palestine, threatens to deprive them of legitimacy in the eyes of the masses. That was possibly why Saudi Arabia proved reluctant to pursue normalization with Israel and the process of normalization lost momentum following Donald Trump's departure. Although there is no reason to believe that the Biden Administration would overhaul Washington's pro-Israel policy, the slightest references to providing humanitarian aid to Palestinians and the two-state solution alone stand to slow down the pace of normalization between Arab administrations and Israel.

## The Suffering of Refugees

Another important outcome of the uprisings in the MENA region was the death of hundreds of thousands of people and that millions more ended up having to leave their native countries. The Assad regime's commitment to massacre Syrian citizens resulted in the outflow of 3.7 million refugees to Turkey, whereas nearly one million Syrian nationals sought refuge in neighboring Lebanon – which, crushed under their weight, faced the danger of becoming another failed state. Turkey, in turn, was compelled to launch military incursions in order to prevent YPG, the terrorist organization PKK's Syrian component, from creat-

ing a 'terror corridor' in northern Syria. Although Ankara established 'safe zones' in Syrian territories controlled by the Free Syrian Army, the province of Idlib remains highly problematic vis-à-vis security concerns and the possibility of a new refugee wave.

The overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees, in turn, hope to relocate to the European Union, where the 2015 influx of asylum seekers fueled instability and propelled the rise of far-right movements. Although that influx was brought to a halt, thanks to the refugee deal between Turkey and the European Union, Ankara and Brussels continue to negotiate the fate of refugees. It is abundantly clear, nonetheless, that the European Union failed to live up to its self-proclaimed values (in terms of democracy promotion as well as its treatment of refugees). At the same time, a series of terror attacks, perpetrated by ISIS militants in European capitals, aggravated the pressure of far-right movements on mainstream politics across the continent. The wave of isolationism, fueled by a combination of Islamophobia, xenophobia, and racism, proved so powerful that French cabinet ministers, serving under President Emmanuel Macron, came to criticize Marine Le Pen, the country's most prominent far-right figure, for being not tough enough on Islam in February 2021.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the Western world's unimpressive performance in the face of the unfolding humanitarian tragedy in Syria amounted to the bankruptcy of its claim to 'Western values.' In this regard, the Arab Uprisings went down in history as a sign of Europe's own crisis.



**Taking stock of the situation, ten years after the Arab Uprisings, Turkey undoubtedly would be the single most important country**

## Turkey's Priorities after One Decade

Taking stock of the situation, ten years after the Arab Uprisings, Turkey undoubtedly would be the single most important country. The country, which inspired the Arab revolts with its successful experiment with democracy, also represents a success story in the eyes of the Arab peoples due to its struggle since 2013 and its skillful moves since 2016. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who also chairs the Justice and Development Party (AK Party), increased his country's global and regional profile by surviving the Gezi Park riots and the coup attempts of December 2013 and July 2016, and by making significant progress in the fight against PKK-YPG terrorists. In particular, the fight against terrorist organizations, such as FETÖ and PKK-YPG, showcased the resilience of Turkish democracy and the power of the Turkish state. Turkey's abandonment by its Western allies in the face of the influx of Syrian refugees and the challenge of terrorism, indeed altered Ankara's foreign policy perceptions. Especially Turkey's 2015 confrontation with Russia over Syria

## The economic, social, and political problems, which triggered the riots in 2011, have not been mitigated a decade later, if anything, they have grown deeper

Turkey's use of hard-power to consolidate its regional influence, too, transformed the nature of its relations with the U.S., the European Union, and other regional powers. The country came to be taken more seriously in multiple conflict zones, as it became the target of more intense reactions and propaganda efforts intended to undermine Turkish power. During the same period, President Erdoğan, as the only national leader capable of speaking up against the international system's unjust aspects, consolidated his reputation in the eyes of ordinary people. The Arab people, therefore, continue to monitor the Turkish experiment very closely. Indeed, Turkey was affected more severely than other nations by the fact that the Arab Uprisings ended in 'winter' as opposed to 'spring.' Ten years on, it is possible to summarize Turkey's transformation in light of the Arab Uprisings in four points.

Primarily, Ankara, which bolstered its bilateral cooperation with its Arab neighbors, and as a step toward promoting region-wide economic integration, was compelled to update its policy of 'zero problems with neighbors' due to changing geopolitical realities. Turkey's rapprochement with Syria, which reached the point of strategic cooperation, gave way to Turkish pressure on Bashar al-Assad to implement reforms and, later, active support for the Syrian regime's opponents –when Assad started killing his country's own citizens. The Syrian civil war, which resulted in the influx of some 4 million refugees into Turkey, had several stages. In 2014, ISIS captured Mosul, Iraq before rapidly occupying opposition strongholds across Syria. The anti-ISIS campaign by the U.S. and its allies enabled YPG, the terrorist organization PKK's Syrian component, to control a large chunk of territory along the Turkish-Syrian border. In response to the PKK-YPG's creation of a 'terror corridor' in northern Syria, Turkey was compelled to carry out multiple military incursions, from August 2016 onwards, in line with the concept of 'preventive security': Operation Euphrates Shield against ISIS, and Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring against YPG. As a regional power, which was forced to stage a military intervention as a last resort, Turkey assumed the responsibility of protecting and keeping alive some 4 million Syrian nationals, including the residents of Idlib, as of early 2021.

entailed a new kind of relationship between Ankara and Moscow. Having overcome the crisis, which was sparked by Turkey's downing of a Russian military jet, the two countries learned to simultaneously compete and cooperate in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Between 2016 and 2021, Ankara subscribed to a proactive idea of national security to take new steps in Syria, the Eastern Mediterranean, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey's



Protesters hold placards and demonstrate outside the InterContinental Hotel in London Docklands during the visit of President of Egypt, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, on January 20, 2021.

STEVE TAYLOR / SOPA Images / LightRocket via Getty Images

The second point is that Turkey became a safe haven for Arab dissidents, who opposed the new authoritarian regimes that emerged out of the crackdown on the Arab revolts by the status quo powers. That İstanbul had become the new political and intellectual capital of the Arab world was an argument repeatedly featured in the media.

Thirdly, Turkey was compelled to compete with countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, as the Arab Uprisings gave way to proxy wars. In Syria, Iran implemented a destructive policy, through its proxies, after having persuaded Russia to stage a military intervention in 2015. During the Trump Presidency, some Gulf states, which moved closer to Israel, aimed to contain Turkey alongside Iran. As such, the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa emerged as a new site of competition. Those countries, led by the UAE, collaborated with Greece and France and were unsettled by Turkey's growing influence. It is no secret that the active foreign policy that Turkey, a country that could take a stand against the West and Israel when necessary, pursued translated into popularity in the eyes of the Arab peoples –and set a democratic example that put pressure on the relevant regimes.

Last but not least, the new wave of authoritarianism, which eliminated the wave of democratization that was born in Tunisia in 2010, brought about a new era, beginning with Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's 2013 military coup, that also affected Turkey. Through the Gezi Park riots, the judicial coup attempt of December 17-25, 2013, and the July 15, 2016 *coup* attempt, Turkish politics ended

up experiencing plenty of turbulence. Under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Ankara strived to overcome those challenges and, for this purpose, adopted a proactive approach to national security and foreign policy. Turkey's decision to take initiative in its neighborhood –when the Arab spring soured into the Arab winter and it became necessary to fill the geopolitical vacuum that the U.S. left behind– encouraged some Middle Eastern governments to launch an ideological counter-campaign. In addition to accusing Turkey of pursuing an 'expansionist and ideologically-charged foreign policy,' media outlets and commentators frequently used keywords like neo-Ottomanism, Islamism, and pan-Turkism.

## Conclusion

The Arab Uprisings paved the way for the rise of oppressive authoritarianism, sectarian radicalization, proxy wars, and regional interventionism –as opposed to democratization. The protestors successfully destroyed the old but failed to create new regimes. That vacuum was filled by civil wars, ISIS and Shia militias. Authoritarian regimes, such as Egypt, learned valuable lessons from the 2011 revolts and developed new instruments to keep social media and civil society under control. It would seem that the resilience of authoritarian regimes, along with their ability to learn, played a critical role in preserving the status quo. Failing to see that those are merely short-term results and thinking that authoritarianism can live on, however, would be to draw the wrong lessons from the Arab Uprisings. The economic, social, and political problems, which triggered the riots in 2011, have not been mitigated a decade later, if anything, they have grown deeper. Moreover, the Arab youth are increasingly disappointed in their national regimes.<sup>28</sup> It would be a fatal mistake for those authoritarian regimes to assume that they have entered a period of stability.

Although the dreams and ideals, which inspired the Arab Uprisings, did not become reality, people across the region remain committed to them. In light of the bitter lessons learned, it is difficult to estimate when the next wave of riots could emerge. Nonetheless, it is clear that the current authoritarian regimes have grown more fragile than they were back in 2010. In the absence of consent, participation, freedom, and economic welfare, the possibility of Arab people rising up and protesting anew will remain a scenario that will keep all existing authoritarian regimes up at night. Furthermore, corruption, failed economies, increasingly underfunded social services, the rising number of refugees and displaced persons, human rights violations, and youth unemployment, among other problems, are more severe today than they were ten years ago. Protests broke out across the region in 2019 –from Algeria and Sudan to Egypt, Lebanon, and Iraq– and came to be seen as 'Arab spring 2.0.' Rioters participating in this second wave learned valuable lessons from the first wave, as they remained peaceful yet more

decisive to remove Algeria's Abdelaziz Bouteflika and Sudan's Omar al-Bashir from power. Having learned that true change does not occur overnight and constant pressure is needed to transition into a new political model, the new generation of protestors could give rise to the third and fourth waves of Arab Uprisings.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which started in March 2020, have further worsened the conditions that originally paved the way for the Arab Uprisings. It is also true for the MENA today that the idea of revolution has been stopped in its tracks and that the current status quo cannot last, even though the *ancien régime* has perished. In this sense, the contemporary regional order, which was shaped by authoritarian regimes that cracked down on the Arab peoples' demands, cannot possibly generate stability.<sup>30</sup>

**Although the dreams and ideals, which inspired the Arab Uprisings, did not become reality, people across the region remain committed to them**

In other words, regional instability, rooted in the transformation of the Arab Uprisings into civil war at the hands of status quo powers in the Gulf, appears to persist today. Failed states, militias, terrorist organizations, spy games, corruption, and regimes detached from their populations have become far more commonplace. The same story applies to all parts of the region, from Yemen to Libya, where regional power compete against one another. Iran's 'axis of resistance' policy, Israel's policy of expansionism and annexation (which was supercharged during Donald Trump's presidency), and interventions by the UAE and Saudi Arabia (which were fueled by their fear of democracy) collectively undermine regional stability. Turkey's post-2016 attempts to restore the balance of power, by using hard power, prevented Saudi Arabia and the UAE from creating a new blueprint for the region under the Trump Administration. The former's influence over Syria, along with the latter's clout in Libya, has been severely reduced as a result. That Israel scored more points than any other country in the Middle East since the Arab Uprisings, however, is beyond dispute.

The policy choices of the global powers –the U.S., Russia, and China– and the alliances and rivalries between the regional powers –Turkey, Iran, and Israel– stand to determine the region's future. The Gulf States' influence over that competition diminishes by the day. It appears also likely that the Biden Administration's new Iran policy will boost Tehran's regional expansionism. Under those circumstances, it remains highly likely for a new equilibrium to emerge between Turkey, the Gulf, and Israel.

Taking stock of the developments, on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Arab Uprisings, one would conclude that sectarian polarization, extremism, failed states, and proxy struggles stand to continue. The existing Arab regimes are in no position to play a constructive role to bring an end to civil wars in Syria and

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Yemen. Likewise, the policy of polarization with Iran, to which the Gulf States have subscribed, did not yield the desired results. The ambitious policy choices of Saudi Arabia and the UAE resulted in the Qatar blockade, which sowed division among Gulf states. Subsequently, they weakened the Arab world's hand against Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Israel. To be clear, Iran could be contained, to some degree, only thanks to the Trump Administration's 'maximum pressure' policy –after implementing a policy of expansionism with the help of Shia militias that it mobilized anywhere from Lebanon and Yemen. Consequently, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi not only lost their influence over Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon but also emerged as completely affectless

stakeholders in Libya. As such, the region's future seems to hold fragmentation among Arab countries, which will have to settle for a secondary role against the backdrop of competition between Turkey, Iran, and Israel. The Biden Administration's potential reinstatement of the Iran nuclear deal, too, will make more and more difficult the containment of that country's regional expansionism in the eyes of the Gulf States and Israel. Washington's abandonment of Saudi Arabia in Yemen, its possible move to remove the Houthi rebels from its list of terrorist organizations, and its decision to resume humanitarian aid to Palestine encourage the Gulf and Israel to reposition themselves. Keeping in mind that Iran's containment will become more difficult in the future, the relevant players signal their intention to take their relations with Turkey to a new level. Turkey, which resorted to hard-power during the Trump Presidency and made some notable accomplishments, now seeks to cement those gains. Hence, its intention to make a reset with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel, and to normalize its relations with these countries.

On the tenth anniversary of the Arab Uprisings, there are indications that all regional powers are engaging in a fresh strategic assessment. In this new chapter, where the U.S. lacks the commitment to impose a new blueprint on the region, it is possible to argue that Russia, along with regional powers, i.e. Turkey, Israel, and Iran, is gearing up for a fresh round of competition. ■

### Endnotes

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3. Michael Safi, Antonio Voce, Frank Hulley-Jones and Lydia McMullan, "How the Arab Spring Engulfed the Middle East – and Changed the World," *The Guardian*, (January 25, 2021) retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2021/jan/25/how-the-arab-spring-unfolded-a-visualisation>.
4. John L. Esposito, Tamra Sonn, and John O. Voll, *Democracy After the Arab Spring*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 3. The Arab Uprisings were described as a protest movement with no precursors. They were different from the anti-colonial independence movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as a series of revolutions between 1920 and 1973 that brought down monarchies, and the constitutional movements in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. First and foremost, the Arab Spring –as well as the Arab Winter that followed it– was a uniquely Arab experience. See, Noah Feldman, *The Arab Winter*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), p. xii. Again, for an assessment of how the Arab Spring abolished the East-West divide and represented the end of the phenomenon of post-colonialism, see, Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*, (London: Zed Books, 2012).
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11. Abdullah Yeşin, *İran'ın Bölgesel Faaliyetleri ve Güç Unsurları*, (Ankara: SETA, 2017); Bilgay Duman and Göktuğ Sönmez, "Haşdi Şabi'nin Ortaya Çıkışı ve Dönüşümü," in Murat Yeşiltaş and Burhanettin Duran (eds.), *Ortadoğu'da Devlet Dışı Silahlı Aktörler*, (İstanbul: SETA, 2018), pp. 235-263.
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17. Burhanettin Duran and Nuh Yılmaz, "Ortadoğu'da Modellerin Rekabeti: Arap Baharından Sonra Yeni Güç Dengeleri," in Burhanettin Duran, Kemal Inat, and Ali Resul Usul (eds.), *Türk Dış Politikası Yılığ 2011*, (Ankara: SETA, 2012), pp. 20-21.
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28. Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), p. xxi.
29. Megan O'Toole, "Arab Spring 2.0: Five Lessons from 2011 for Today's Protesters," *Middle East Eye*, (December 23, 2020); Georges Fahmi, "Five Lessons from the New Arab Uprisings," *Chatham House*, (November 12, 2019), retrieved from <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/11/five-lessons-new-arab-uprisings>, p. 160. Noah Feldman draws three lessons from the popular movements in Sudan and Algeria in the spring of 2019: i) The original Arab revolts still had the power to set an example. ii) Despite tragic failures, it is still possible to engage in political action with the potential to change governments in the Arab-speaking world. iii) The Arab Spring's alphabet is still within reach for the protestors – and the alphabet of the Arab Winter, for the armed forces.
30. Marc Lynch, "The Arab Uprisings Never Ended," *Foreign Affairs*, (January-February 2021), retrieved from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-12-08/arab-uprisings-never-ended>. Lynch opposes the view that the Arab Uprisings came to an end. Noting that the developments in the Middle East offered little reason to be optimistic, he posited that the Arab Uprisings will take place, sooner or later, and dismantle the regional order –unlike in 2011.