



The Arab Spring and the Missed Opportunity for Change (Motives - Course - Outcome)

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Abstract:

At the beginning of the 21st century, a wave of social movements known as popular uprisings spread across several countries, referred to as the Arab Spring. These uprisings can be seen as a result of widespread dissatisfaction with living conditions in their various political, social, and economic aspects.

The movement began in Tunisia and then spread to other countries such as Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, with demands for political reform, dignity, freedom, and better living opportunities.

Keywords: Arab Spring, popular uprisings, social movements, political reform, freedom, dignity, living conditions, Middle East.

Le Printemps arabe et l'occasion manquée de changement (Motifs - Déroulement - Résultats)

Résumé :

Au début du XXI^e siècle, une vague de mouvements sociaux connus sous le nom de soulèvements populaires s'est propagée dans plusieurs pays, sous le nom de Printemps arabe. Ces soulèvements peuvent être considérés comme le résultat d'un mécontentement généralisé à l'égard des conditions de vie dans leurs divers aspects politiques, sociaux et économiques.

Le mouvement a débuté en Tunisie, puis s'est propagé à d'autres pays tels que l'Égypte, la Libye, le Yémen et la Syrie, avec des revendications en faveur de réformes politiques, de dignité, de liberté et de meilleures conditions de vie.

Mots clés : Printemps arabe, soulèvements populaires, mouvements sociaux, réforme politique, liberté, dignité, conditions de vie, Moyen-Orient.

Introduction:

It was widely believed—if not taken for certain by many—that necessity no longer makes or shapes history, and that societies living in exceptional circumstances were no longer affected by acts of protest, as class struggle was thought to have ended. However, what happened in the Arab world and in many Arab countries came as a surprise, refuting this belief. In fact, all societies have experienced protest movements aimed at changing or rejecting certain realities. Social change has often been linked to improving living conditions or altering specific policies—some of which were accepted, while others were rejected—with the goal of eliminating all that is considered unjust, whether related to political systems, social structures, or specific policies.

European societies, for instance, have witnessed numerous protests and revolutions throughout history, sometimes driven by rejection and other times by a desire for transformation. Many of these movements achieved their aims, managing to change political and social systems, liberate thought, and reshape the course of history through successive stages.

Similarly, Arab societies have long been accompanied by protest movements. These social protests took on various names and forms but were primarily tied to the colonial experience, as most Arab countries endured foreign domination—albeit in different forms and intensities. The protest movements were initially directed against colonial occupation, later against its policies, and eventually against its very presence.

After independence, many Arab societies continued to experience protest movements—sometimes against political



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regimes, at other times for development, living conditions, or democracy. Yet, these movements largely subsided for long periods, reappearing occasionally in certain Arab countries to express social, economic, or political demands.

Then came a sudden and unprecedented wave of protests that swept almost all Arab countries in what became known as the *Arab Spring*. This movement surprised the world and marked a historic turning point, erupting unexpectedly – even though the conditions for its emergence had long existed. It began in Tunisia before spreading to many Arab nations, toppling some regimes, leading to armed conflicts in others, and prompting political reforms in a few cases.

This raises fundamental questions: *What were the outcomes of the Arab Spring? What has been achieved through the protests witnessed in many Arab countries? And was the Arab Spring truly a genuine opportunity for change?*

Some scholars argue that the term *Arab Spring* has historical roots but only came into popular use in the late 2010s—specifically between late 2010 and early 2011. Beyond its emergence as a term, its political and media resonance, and its intense use in political and social analyses, the phrase carried both symbolic and strategic weight.

The Meaning and Significance of the “Arab Spring”: The use of the term “Arab Spring” was closely tied to the dramatic events unfolding across the Arab region. The expression—soft, appealing, and politically charged—was deliberately used to perform a specific function, especially in a region that was already volatile and ripe for explosion. The term gained massive traction through an unprecedented

level of media promotion and political discourse, aiming to shape perceptions in the Arab street.

The term “Arab Spring” was first used by American researcher and academic **Marc Lynch** in an article published in *Foreign Policy* magazine on **January 6, 2011**, less than a week after the outbreak of protests in Tunisia. The article’s title, “*Obama’s Arab Spring*,” was particularly striking, not only for its predictive nature but also for its linkage between the Arab uprisings and earlier events, such as the Lebanese demonstrations of May 5, 2005—specifically the **March 14 Movement**, which received extensive television coverage at the time.

U.S. officials, including President **Barack Obama**, Secretary of State **Hillary Clinton**, and senior White House advisors, adopted the expression “Arab Spring transitions” instead of “Arab revolutions.” Their statements frequently used terms such as “process,” referring to “the ongoing process,” “the open process,” or concerns that “the process might spiral out of control.”

The term *Arab Spring* appeared repeatedly in American academic and policy studies. For example, the **RAND Corporation**—a research institution affiliated with the Pentagon—published in 2012 a 250-page study titled “*Prospects for Democracy in the Arab World*,” prepared by **Lowell H. Schwartz** and six other researchers. The study connected the Arab Spring to global democratic transitions and analyzed the geopolitical motivations behind U.S. support for these movements.

Similarly, the **U.S. National Intelligence Council (NIC)** issued several reports containing recurring expressions such as *Arab Spring*, *transitional regimes*, and *democratic transformations*.



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From this perspective, one might ask: Were the so-called *Arab Spring* events in some Arab countries premeditated as part of international geopolitical agendas? Or were they simply the result of spontaneous popular movements in societies suffering from political, social, and economic pressures—societies whose regimes failed to meet the needs of their citizens?

At the same time, new generations emerged, more educated and conscious of democratic values, eager for political participation, and determined to break the long-standing political stagnation that had characterized much of the Arab world.

The Origin and Historical Extension of the Term “Arab Spring”

Historically, the term *Arab Spring* has Western roots derived from Europe’s own democratic movements—beginning with the *Springtime of Nations* in 1848, the *Prague Spring* in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and finally, the *Eastern European Spring* of 1989.

Was the term “Spring” Arabized—from the European Spring to the Arab Spring?

The label *Arab Spring*—used to describe the wave of protests that erupted across several Arab countries—is said to have originated from the *advice of Arab experts working in American institutions*. Evidence supporting this view lies in the fact that between 2000 and 2010, U.S. political discourse and academic literature used the term *Greater Middle East* instead of *Arab World*. This concept deliberately avoided recognizing the Arab world as a distinct geopolitical entity,

opting instead for a vague geographical framework—the *Greater Middle East*—whose boundaries and objectives were intentionally undefined for ambiguous strategic reasons.

Why was the term “Arab Spring” used to describe these events?

The appeal of the term:

The expression *Arab Spring* is soft, poetic, and emotionally appealing. It evokes a sense of renewal rather than conflict, which made it easily accepted in Arab societies. The term carried no explicit threat or fear; it suggested hope, peace, and democratic transformation. For this reason, it spread quickly and was embraced not only by the general public but also by elites—intellectuals, opinion leaders, and politicians—without deep reflection on the geopolitical agendas or strategic objectives behind it.

The wide acceptance of this term reflected a collective longing for change in societies that had experienced long-standing political stagnation. The emergence of a younger, educated generation aspiring to democracy, political participation, and leadership created fertile ground for the adoption of such terminology.

Furthermore, the *Arab Spring* concept gained traction through **intensive media marketing** and the emotional power of images depicting protests across the region. Modern technologies, particularly social media and what came to be known as *citizen journalism*, amplified the spread of the term and helped create a powerful narrative of change—often without a full understanding of its underlying motives or implications.



1. The Arab Spring: Dimensions and Objectives Behind the Use of the Term

The term *Arab Spring* was deliberately chosen because of its optimistic and peaceful connotations. It appealed to societies that perceived themselves as victims of authoritarian rule, political repression, and the denial of freedoms. It suggested democratic renewal rather than violent upheaval. For Western policymakers and media, the expression served as a rhetorical tool—a *bright and non-threatening concept* that could penetrate Arab societies and frame the events as democratic transitions rather than revolutions or conflicts.

The Arab Emergence of the Term

The term *Arab Spring* first began circulating around 2005 among Arab intellectuals and activists often referred to as *advocates of Arab democracy*, many of whom received support from the United States. The earliest usage appeared in the phrase “*Damascus Spring*”—a label applied to opposition movements in Syria following the death of President **Hafez al-Assad** in 2000. These movements, supported by Western powers, sought political reform and greater openness. The expression resurfaced in 2005, after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister **Rafic Hariri**, when anti-Syrian protests once again invoked the metaphor of “spring.”

According to scholar **Ahsan Muhammad Al-Zein**, the repeated use of the term signaled an underlying **American project in the region**. The phrase *Arab Spring* had no roots in Arab intellectual or cultural history, nor was it found in Arab sources describing political or social movements. Its introduction, therefore, served an external purpose:

influencing Arab societies through a positive, non-threatening term that implied progress, freedom, and democracy while masking deeper geopolitical objectives—chiefly the fragmentation and reconfiguration of the region.

The term gained further influence thanks to **mass media**, **social networks**, and **digital technologies**, which created an immediate and participatory environment. Arab citizens could document and transmit events in real-time, effectively bypassing traditional media. Western media channels amplified these narratives, often displaying clear biases and steering public opinion. The use of social media platforms provided both visibility and legitimacy to the movements, while Western political leaders openly supported the protests when it suited their strategic interests—abandoning allied regimes once they lost control.

Thus, the source of the term *Arab Spring* was not Arab but **Western**, and its introduction was part of a broader communication strategy aimed at soft power influence. Its success lay in its **linguistic charm and emotional neutrality**—it did not evoke images of violence or instability but instead projected ideals of democracy, freedom of expression, and political participation. Consequently, the phrase penetrated Arab societies easily and resonated deeply with populations yearning for change.

Multiple Meanings and Interpretations

The term *Arab Spring* has been interpreted in many ways. It has been referred to as an *uprising*, *revolution*, *transition process*, and more—depending on the source, perspective, or political agenda. These varying interpretations came from individuals, organizations, research centers, and even



Soumission : 11/02/2024 Acceptation : 21/06/2025 Publication : 15/08/2025

governments, each driven by its own motives and geopolitical interests.

Were there early indicators or predictions of these events?

Some observers argue that numerous warning signs preceded the Arab uprisings. As writer **Suhail Al-Khalidi** noted,

“What has been happening in the Arab world for years did not surprise me, nor did it surprise many others. I said in the 1980s that blood would flood the streets of Arab cities, because where there is hunger, there is inevitably blood.”

He further stated that a year before the Tunisian uprising—specifically in 2010—he predicted that *2011 would be the year of chaos in the Arab world*. This raises key questions: Were the Arab uprisings inevitable outcomes of internal conditions—poverty, repression, and social frustration—or were these same conditions **exploited by external powers** to advance **predefined geopolitical agendas** aimed at reshaping the Arab world’s political map?

Egyptian researcher **Yassin** emphasized this perspective in his article “*A Cognitive Map of the Arab Spring Revolutions*,” where he questioned the connections between Arab uprisings and **U.S. strategic plans** designed to weaken and restructure certain Arab regimes through civil society networks and political activism.

From this viewpoint, one might argue that the Arab Spring was **not entirely spontaneous**, but rather a **planned or at least anticipated process**—part of a broader strategy to reorganize the **geopolitical landscape of the Arab world** under the guise of democratic change.

The Outbreak of the “Arab Spring” and the Major Powers’ Ride on the Wave of Social Protest in the Arab World

What began as a single act of protest in Tunisia soon escalated into widespread unrest and chaos that engulfed many Arab countries. Major world powers, along with certain regional states, managed to **ride the wave of these events**, each according to its own interests, strategic calculations, and degree of influence. These powers exploited the uprisings to **intervene, guide, or accompany them** at various levels—using diverse tools and methods depending on their relations with the affected countries and their anticipated gains from these developments.

The **internal fragility of Arab regimes** made such intervention easier. Many opposition figures, long exiled abroad, took advantage of the situation by mobilizing **international public opinion**, directing the protests, and portraying themselves as **symbols of resistance** against authoritarian regimes. Their efforts resonated deeply among broad sectors of Arab societies that were already disillusioned with their political systems.

As the scholar **Amin Noor** observed,

“The pulse of Arab society in Tunisia shifted from a localized social movement into a wave of chaos stretching from the Maghreb to the Mashreq. The major powers quickly rode the momentum of Arab street movements because Arab rulers are not true politicians, but administrators who merely relay instructions. They failed to grasp or comprehend the dynamics of society. Hence, in the Arab world, we see the state on one side and society on the other; in many cases, Arab regimes even stand against the Arab individual.”



This disconnection between the state and society allowed the great powers to **penetrate Arab countries and societies**, infiltrating political parties, sects, ethnic groups, and even professional associations. Each segment came to have **external references or sponsors**, and thus foreign powers succeeded in steering the Arab street toward chaos—reducing the Arab world to a **pre-national condition**, reminiscent of ancient divisions: *Assyrians versus Babylonians*, tribes against tribes, with the state retreating into a **system of clans and tribalism**.

1. External Involvement and Preplanned Engagement

The involvement of major Western powers in what became known as the *Arab Spring* was **not coincidental**. Rather, it appeared **prearranged and anticipated** in varying forms and intensities. A telling example emerged in **Egypt in July 2011**, when the Egyptian Minister of Justice opened an investigation into the **activities and funding of numerous NGOs** operating in the country. This investigation was initiated at the request of the then Minister of Planning and International Cooperation, **Fayza Abul-Naga**, and revealed that **U.S. organizations** had allocated around **\$40 million** in 2011 alone to fund political activities—a figure that had doubled from previous years. Such funding served as a **clear indicator of Western intervention** in supporting and shaping the movements that came to be known as the *Arab Spring*—or, as some analysts have called it, the *Western Spring*.

Was the Arab Environment Ripe for the “Arab Spring”?

It can be said that the **Arab social environment** was indeed fertile ground for upheaval and instability. Multiple

political, social, and economic pressures combined to create societies on the brink of explosion.

1.1. The Closed Political Sphere in the Arab World

Arab political systems are, for the most part, **authoritarian and exclusionary**, rejecting dissent and closing the political arena to emerging or existing opposition forces. The absence of a **genuine political field**—in the modern sense of an open public sphere that allows free competition, political pluralism, and democratic participation—constitutes a fundamental problem in Arab governance.

Opposition parties are **denied the space** to operate, articulate alternatives, or engage the public in peaceful competition over ideas and policies. Even in countries where some level of opposition is tolerated, it often exists **only formally or superficially**, lacking any real power or representation.

This **political closure** has led to the **exclusion of vast social energies**, depriving citizens of participation, expression, and representation. Over time, it fostered **resentment and frustration**, creating a volatile environment ready to erupt in protest and rebellion.

1.2. The Absence of a Genuine Public Sphere

In many Arab states, the political arena is **virtually non-existent** as a space of public ownership. The ruling elite monopolizes this sphere, treating it as **private property of the regime**, not as a common arena for society. The absence of **democratic practice** has resulted in **widespread political alienation**, silencing dissenting voices and denying citizens their right to political participation and



expression. Consequently, anger accumulated beneath the surface until it exploded in the form of what came to be called the *Arab Spring*.

Political, Economic, and Social Factors

The *Arab Spring* did not emerge from a single cause but rather from a **convergence of multiple factors**, both **internal and external**, which collectively fueled social unrest and political violence. Among these were:

- **Economic stagnation and rising inequality**, stemming from failed development policies and widespread corruption.
- **Social injustice and deteriorating living conditions**, which deepened the gap between rich and poor.
- **Authoritarianism and human rights violations**, which eroded public trust and legitimacy.
- **Mismanagement of diversity**, leading to tensions among ethnic and sectarian groups.

These interconnected elements reflected a **structural crisis** in the **formation of the modern national state** in the Arab world.

The Crisis of Building the Modern Nation-State

At the heart of the Arab predicament lies the **crisis of the modern nation-state**—manifested in the weakness of its institutions, its inability to impose legitimate authority, and its failure to formulate inclusive public policies. Many Arab states have struggled to establish a **shared national identity** capable of uniting their diverse populations around the principles of **citizenship and human rights**.

This failure generated a **legitimacy crisis**, which can be analyzed through two key dimensions:

1. **The legitimacy of the state itself** – its capacity to foster a sense of belonging among citizens.
2. **The legitimacy of the political regime** – its ability to earn the acceptance of the governed through effective governance and protection of rights.

In much of the Arab world, **the state and the regime are indistinguishable**: the fall of the regime is seen as the collapse of the state itself. Historically, **power preceded the state**, and the state has remained dependent on those in power, rather than the reverse.

The **colonial legacy** further deepened this crisis. Colonial powers shaped the political geography and structures of the Arab region in ways that hindered the development of stable, legitimate, and democratic institutions after independence. As a result, Arab societies remained vulnerable to internal fragmentation and external manipulation—conditions that made the “Arab Spring” both possible and, to some extent, inevitable.

2. The Centralization of Political Power in Arab Regimes

One of the most distinctive and defining features of Arab political systems is the **centralization of power**, which has historically revolved around two main dimensions:

2.1. Concentration of Authority in the Hands of the Head of State

In most Arab regimes, the **head of state** monopolizes the essential levers of power—**military, political, and security institutions**. The president (or monarch) personally controls sensitive strategic positions, both politically and militarily, to safeguard and consolidate his authority. This concentration of power manifests itself through **coercive and**



repressive measures aimed at preserving political stability and the continuity of the regime, often at the expense of freedoms and civic rights.

2.2. Centralization of Economic Power in the State Apparatus

The second dimension of power centralization lies in the **state's domination of the economy**. Arab regimes have historically sought to **monopolize economic functions**, transforming the state into the **primary employer** and economic actor—a structure often referred to as the “**rentier state**.”

By controlling the economy, these regimes effectively **neutralized independent political initiatives**, preventing the emergence of alternative power centers. Whether in **republican or monarchical systems**, regardless of their ideological orientation, this rentier logic has remained constant. These regimes are characterized by **hyper-centralization, authoritarianism, and the systematic use of violence and coercion** as instruments of governance.

As a result, many ruling families have evolved into **de facto political institutions**, treating the state as **their private property**. The **security and intelligence apparatuses** have been strengthened—often with **foreign backing** from major powers whenever regimes felt threatened—thereby substituting **the legitimacy of force for traditional or constitutional legitimacy**.

Economic Failure and Declining Regime Legitimacy

Most Arab states have experienced **chronic economic underperformance**, reflected in their inability to ensure

decent living standards for citizens. The state's failure to meet social expectations has fueled **public discontent**, deepening the legitimacy crisis. At the same time, **ruling elites' corruption and ostentation** have intensified frustration among the populace, creating an environment ripe for unrest and protest.

Lack of Democratic Power Alternation

Another defining trait of Arab political systems is the **absence of democratic alternation in power**. These regimes lack **clear and stable rules for democratic political activity**, relying instead on **personalized and clientelist governance**. During the 1970s and 1980s in particular, most Arab regimes were dominated by a **single ruling elite**, leaving no room for political competition or genuine electoral alternation.

Failure to Integrate Emerging Social Forces

Arab regimes have also **failed to absorb and mobilize new social forces**, especially **the youth**, within legitimate political frameworks. Governments have not succeeded in creating institutions capable of channeling young people's **energy, aspirations, and political engagement**. Consequently, large segments of society have lost trust in existing political institutions, viewing them as incapable of representing their interests or shaping their future. This alienation has further **undermined the legitimacy** of ruling systems and contributed to the rise of protest movements.

Authoritarianism and the Monopolization of Power

These characteristics collectively define the **authoritarian or coercive state**, which represents the **modern form of despotism** in the Arab world. Such regimes seek to



monopolize the sources of power for the benefit of the ruling elite by:

- **Penetrating civil society** and transforming its organizations into extensions of state apparatuses.
- **Using coercion and violence** as substitutes for democratic legitimacy.
- **Absorbing and subordinating the economy** under direct state control.

These regimes thus rely on **oppression and coercion**, rather than **constitutional legitimacy**, to sustain their rule. This has produced a profound **disconnect between state and society**, fueled by additional socio-economic factors that have repeatedly triggered protests and confrontations.

Socio-Economic Problems and the Failure of Development

The **economic and social dimensions** have been major catalysts of violence and confrontation in Arab societies. The repeated **failure of development plans** has resulted in structural crises marked by:

- Rising **unemployment rates**, especially among youth.
- Continuous **price inflation** of goods and services.
- **Declining living standards** for large segments of citizens.
- Deterioration of **essential public services**, including healthcare, education, housing, and transport.

These conditions have produced a broad social base of disaffected citizens, prone to **social unrest and protest**, especially in the absence of open political channels and a vibrant civil society.

Among the main reasons for the **stagnation of development** in the Arab world are:

1. **Lack of coherent, integrated development strategies.**
2. **Absence of clear priorities and long-term vision.**
3. **Ineffective implementation of policies and programs.**
4. **Widespread administrative and political corruption.**
5. **Externally imposed reforms** by institutions such as the **IMF and World Bank**, which often worsened inflation, unemployment, and inequality.

These combined factors have led to **deep social and economic polarization**, marginalizing low-income groups and fueling **protest and violence** in many Arab countries.

Widening Social Inequalities and the Absence of Social Justice

The **absence of social justice** has further aggravated tensions, providing fertile ground for unrest. Inequality in **wealth and income distribution**, as well as disparities in **public services between rural and urban areas**, have become starkly visible.

Even within major cities, contrasts between **affluent neighborhoods** and **impoverished slums** are glaring. The **lack of equal opportunity** across various sectors has led to a coexistence of **extreme wealth and extreme poverty**, often side by side—one of the most visible markers of the social crisis in the Arab world.

Another factor was represented by

The Spread of Administrative and Political Corruption: Political and administrative corruption is one of the main factors that contribute to creating a fertile environment for violence and protest. Corruption, in its simplest sense, refers to *various practices involving the misuse of power or the exploitation of public office for personal gain*—whether these



Soumission : 11/02/2024 Acceptation : 21/06/2025 Publication : 15/08/2025

gains are moral or material, or serve a specific group, individual, family, or entity – through the violation of laws.

Manifestations of **administrative corruption** include bribery, favoritism, nepotism, embezzlement of public funds, and the exploitation of public office for private benefit, among others. As for **political corruption**, it is particularly reflected in *electoral fraud* and the *enactment of laws and legislations* designed to serve the interests of specific groups rather than the general public. Moreover, political corruption is reinforced by the limitation of judicial independence through interference by the executive branch, as well as by the failure of state institutions to comply with judicial rulings issued against them, or by circumventing these rulings through various means.

Thus, administrative and political corruption constitute key factors that fuel violence and extremism in all their forms. Corruption undermines positive social values, contributes to the failure of development plans—whether economic or social—destroys social justice and equitable distribution of wealth, and obstructs reform initiatives. It reinforces the dominance of certain groups that thrive under the spread of corruption, thereby creating an environment ripe for the emergence of violence and protest.

In addition to this, another significant factor contributing to social unrest and violence is:

Mismanagement of Societal Pluralism:

This factor is particularly significant since societal pluralism reflects the presence of minorities characterized by diverse *ethnic, linguistic, religious, sectarian, and tribal* affiliations within the same nation. These minorities,

however, are not inherently sources of political violence or instability. Rather, it is the way political systems handle these diversities that often turns them into sources of internal conflict and civil wars—especially when such pluralism is marginalized or politicized.

In many countries where political systems manage ethnic diversity effectively, pluralism becomes a source of strength and social cohesion. However, in many Arab countries, it has become a source of tension, protest, and violence. Numerous Arab societies composed of multiple ethnic groups have witnessed *conflicts and tensions rooted in sectarian, religious, and tribal divisions* due to poor governance of diversity. In some Arab countries, such clashes have remained defining features of violence, tension, and protest that continue to afflict their societies.

The Absence of Democracy, Human Rights Violations, and Political Authoritarianism: Political authoritarianism is a common feature among Arab political systems, though its degree varies from one country to another depending on each system's historical and political trajectory. While some states initiated political reforms during the 1980s, these reforms did not lead to genuine democratic transformation; rather, they merely renewed forms of authoritarian control. This authoritarianism has been closely linked with the absence of human rights protection. Together, these two factors have contributed to the creation of a social environment conducive to various forms of violence and protest across the Arab world—or at least in many of its societies.

Collectively, these factors have generated a state of tension, instability, and volatility in Arab societies, creating conditions primed for explosion at any moment. This



became evident in the context of what came to be known as the “**Arab Spring.**” Several additional elements emerged in this context, contributing to the spread of protests in many Arab countries and even leading to the downfall of certain political regimes. Among these elements was the phenomenon known as:

The Contagion Effect of Protest and Demonstration:

The success of the Tunisian revolution in toppling the Ben Ali regime had a profound impact across the Arab region. Although the use of the term *revolution* to describe what happened in Tunisia remains debatable—since the true meaning of revolution differs from what Tunisia experienced, which was primarily a sustained and organized protest movement—it nonetheless succeeded in dismantling the existing political system and removing its head.

This event had significant repercussions across the Arab world, where the *contagion of protest and demonstration* spread to numerous countries, breaking the walls of fear and hesitation, even in states characterized by powerful security apparatuses and authoritarian regimes. The wave of protests managed to overthrow several regimes, while others were forced to initiate varying degrees of political reform—such as revising electoral laws, allowing political parties, and lifting restrictions on civil society organizations. Furthermore, efforts were made to strengthen *guarantees for the protection of human rights*.

These elements have been, over successive periods, fundamental drivers of protest and violence witnessed in the Arab world, and some countries continue to experience them today. The legitimacy, centralization, and

authoritarianism of political power remain key factors in the emergence of violence and political protest, as well as in the failure of development plans and the rise of socio-economic crises.

The **Tunisia uprising** thus became a catalyst for widespread change across the region, shattering the barriers of fear and inspiring other Arab societies to challenge entrenched authoritarian regimes once thought immune to collapse.

The Role of Media:

The media played a major role in spreading protests across several Arab countries and had a decisive influence in many of them. In others, it continues to shape public discourse as societies struggle to regain stability. The protest movement soon escalated into armed conflicts, acts of violence, and the resurgence of ethnic and tribal tensions – especially following the intervention of major powers seeking to protect their interests and support one side over another.

Media, particularly through the rise of *digital and social media platforms*, played a pivotal role not only in disseminating protests but also in *directing and framing events*. These modern communication technologies became powerful tools for mobilization, coordination, and shaping public opinion during the Arab uprisings.

Did the Arab Spring Achieve the Aspirations and Ambitions of the Uprising Peoples?

What was achieved during the events known as the **Arab Spring** can be summarized primarily as the *breaking of the wall of fear* that had long characterized the societies in which these uprisings took place. These were countries ruled by authoritarian political systems based on coercion, repression,



Soumission : 11/02/2024 Acceptation : 21/06/2025 Publication : 15/08/2025

and the denial of freedoms. The revolutions succeeded in shattering the long-held assumption that Arab societies were static, submissive, and incapable of mobilizing to change their dire social and political conditions under regimes that seemed destined to last forever.

The **Tunisian Revolution** stood out as the most successful example, particularly regarding its **political outcomes**, such as expanded political participation, the emergence of new political elites, democratic practices that had been absent under the former regime, as well as freedom of expression, media pluralism, and the rise of opposition movements. To a certain extent, the **Egyptian Revolution** also displayed several indicators of change in various areas. Moreover, other Arab states initiated reforms—especially political ones—though many of these proved to be merely superficial.

Conversely, there were disastrous consequences and negative repercussions, particularly in the cases of **Libya, Yemen, and Syria**, where uprisings degenerated into armed conflicts, divisions, and military confrontations. These situations became matters of international concern as their societies descended into fragmentation, loss of life, mass displacement, and economic collapse. Foreign powers intervened in their internal affairs, military institutions disintegrated, and national capacities were destroyed. These states have yet to regain stability, and the dreams of change have vanished. The previous eras of authoritarianism and political oppression have even come to be nostalgically remembered as comparatively “better times.”

The Arab Spring: Trajectory, Outcomes, and Fate

Every protest movement has its **motives, trajectory, outcomes, and consequences**. So, what did the Arab Spring actually achieve—from its initial motivations to its ultimate results?

Judging from the aftermath, its objectives now seem distant. The initial spark that triggered the uprisings was not guided by far-reaching goals, but rather by an *isolated incident* reflecting a deeply deteriorated social condition and a socially repulsive act of injustice. The protests began spontaneously in **Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia**, which became the cradle of the Arab Spring. They were not preplanned, organized, or based on articulated objectives and strategies. Instead, they were *reactions* to dire socio-economic circumstances in a society primed for explosion.

What distinguished this protest movement—at first a solitary act—was that it snowballed rapidly, turning into a powerful wave of demonstrations that swept across Tunisian cities and reached the capital. The demands escalated, eventually transforming from isolated grievances into calls for the **overthrow of the political regime**. Even the most optimistic observers could not have imagined that an entrenched Arab political regime—known for its authoritarianism, coercion, and security grip—could face such mass mobilization calling for its downfall.

Thus, the objectives of the protests, primarily the **toppling of the regime**, took clearer shape as the demonstrations spread and the wall of fear was broken. The **Tunisian Revolution** shattered that wall and became an inspiration for other Arab societies demanding change.



Patterns and Variations Across the Arab Uprisings

The trajectory of these uprisings—from Tunisia to other Arab states—was largely consistent in both *methods and demands*, though some differences existed. The Tunisian Revolution was particularly inspirational because of its **peaceful approach**, which was unfamiliar to many Arab peoples accustomed to violent repression by their regimes. This peaceful strategy gave the Tunisian movement both strength and legitimacy, enabling it to achieve its goal with minimal confrontation or bloodshed—hence its popular designation as the “*Jasmine Revolution*.”

Although the Tunisian Revolution’s objectives evolved during its expansion, it achieved the most significant and precedent-setting result in Arab history: the **overthrow of an authoritarian regime**. It is worth noting that this was not the initial goal of the protests, which began as spontaneous reactions to harsh socio-economic realities. Nevertheless, the revolution proved effective in achieving change and set a historic precedent. (The post-revolution phase of Tunisia, with its own challenges, lies beyond this discussion.)

Egypt experienced a **similar yet distinct** situation. Like Tunisia, the **Egyptian Revolution** led to the downfall of the ruling regime. However, it differed in that its initial slogan was explicitly “*the overthrow of the regime*”—indicating that its objectives were defined from the outset. Another distinction lay in the methods of protest: though generally peaceful, the Egyptian uprising saw moments of division and confrontation, such as the infamous “*Camel Incident*.” Despite the casualties, the Egyptian Revolution succeeded in toppling the regime, marking another historic turning point and ushering Egypt into a new political phase.

The Violent Paths: Libya, Yemen, and Syria

In contrast, the cases of **Libya, Yemen, and Syria** diverged sharply. Initially peaceful, their protests quickly escalated into armed conflicts, sectarian divisions, and foreign interventions. Violence became the dominant feature, and both Libya and Yemen descended into **civil war** and prolonged instability. Although their regimes eventually collapsed, neither country achieved the hoped-for democratic transition. Instead, both entered extended periods of bloodshed, fragmentation, and humanitarian crisis, with ongoing instability and recurring violence.

The **Syrian case** began much like the others, with peaceful protests inspired by the wider Arab uprisings. However, it soon mirrored the Libyan and Yemeni trajectories, devolving into armed conflict, societal fragmentation, and heavy international involvement. The main difference was that Syria's **ruling regime endured** for a much longer period—owing to the distinct structure of its military and political institutions, as well as substantial **support from major foreign powers**.

In conclusion, the **Arab Spring** represented a historic moment of awakening that shattered long-standing barriers of fear and submission across the Arab world. However, its **outcomes were deeply uneven**: while some nations witnessed limited reforms and newfound freedoms, others descended into chaos, civil war, and foreign domination. The aspirations for democracy, justice, and dignity that ignited the uprisings remain, for many, **unfulfilled dreams**.



Conclusion

What can be inferred from the experiences of many Arab countries in the context of what came to be known as the **Arab Spring** is that, while almost all Arab states share certain common features or characteristics, their historical trajectories nonetheless show varying dynamics due to several contextual factors. The common denominator, however, lies in the **colonial legacy**—most Arab societies experienced domination by major foreign powers, and the spirit of protest and resistance was present from the very moment of colonization, continuing throughout its duration and even after independence.

After independence, in both the Mashreq (Eastern Arab world) and the Maghreb (Western Arab world), most Arab countries came to share a defining feature: **authoritarian, non-democratic regimes** marked by an absence of political participation, restrictions on freedom of expression, and development plans that failed to meet the aspirations of their citizens. These regimes mastered the art of self-preservation, reproducing themselves over decades despite crises and shocks. Many came to believe these regimes were destined to last forever, immune to any internal challenge. They succeeded in suppressing and excluding opposition—sometimes eliminating it entirely, sometimes co-opting it—by closing political spaces, rejecting democracy, and responding to developmental challenges with illusory reform programs that rarely addressed the real needs of Arab societies.

These regimes relied on **authoritarian control**, built upon powerful security institutions and repressive apparatuses,

silencing dissent through coercion and intimidation. Added to this was the **external support** many of these regimes received from major world powers seeking to preserve their own strategic interests, which allowed such regimes to maintain their dominance over their peoples for decades.

Against this backdrop, the **Arab Spring** erupted—beginning in Tunisia, whose revolutionary movement was unexpected both in timing and place. Tunisia had previously enjoyed relative stability and had even witnessed earlier episodes of protest in the 1980s, but the scale and outcome of the 2010–2011 uprising were unprecedented. It was particularly surprising given the regime’s authoritarian nature, typical of most Arab states. The spread of the uprisings from Tunisia to other Arab countries revealed the **shared structural conditions** underlying these societies: authoritarianism, concentration of power, exclusion of the opposition, police repression, widespread corruption, the subordination of state institutions to ruling elites, weak development programs, rising unemployment, and pervasive poverty and social frustration.

These shared characteristics created an explosive environment where **the “street” became the arena of expression and confrontation**. In Arab political discourse, the “street” became synonymous with protest movements, often organized without formal leadership or political sponsorship. When political participation was suppressed, the street became the last space for expressing dissent—sometimes peacefully, other times through confrontation and violence. Historically, the street has been a space for change and revolution, but meaningful transformation requires a **legitimate opposition**, constitutionally protected, capable of channeling demands into democratic action.



However, what distinguished the Arab uprisings was the **absence of structured political leadership**. These were **self-organized movements**, driven by socio-economic grievances that soon evolved into calls for political change and regime overthrow. External regional and international factors later became intertwined with domestic dynamics, shaping the outcomes of these uprisings.

Thus, the absence of protest at any given time in a society does not mean that protest potential disappears altogether. In the Arab world, the **conditions for protest**—social injustice, corruption, unemployment, repression—remained latent, ready to re-emerge when triggered. Indeed, this is precisely what happened: protests reappeared, sometimes evolving into **armed conflicts** heavily influenced by regional and international powers, and in some cases, they continue to this day.

Did the Arab Spring Achieve Real Change?

The pressing question remains: *Did the Arab Spring truly bring about the transformative change the Arab peoples aspired to?* Or was it a **missed opportunity**—a mirage that, despite immense sacrifices, merely produced **repackaged versions of old regimes**, cloaked in new constitutional and political facades?

For many countries, the Arab Spring led not to democracy but to **civil wars, violent power struggles, and foreign interventions**. These nations entered new phases marked by fragmentation, insecurity, economic collapse, and humanitarian crises. Political instability deepened, and in several cases, the revolutions “devoured their own children.” Ironically, some populations now endure

conditions even worse than under the former authoritarian regimes.

In contrast, a few countries experienced **limited positive transformations**, particularly in the political sphere—expanded participation, the emergence of opposition movements, and new elites entering the political scene. However, in others, the old regimes **reproduced themselves**, resurfacing under new guises and rhetoric while maintaining the same authoritarian structures. Elsewhere, uprisings descended into prolonged **armed conflicts** and **civil wars** driven by competition for power and fueled by foreign interference, nullifying the sacrifices and aspirations for change.

The **ambitions of reform turned into tragedy**. The peoples' hopes for inclusive political participation, democratic governance, and the rise of new, youthful elites gave way to deeper crises. What was once a moment of collective awakening became, for many, a moment of disillusionment and despair—perhaps even engineered to discourage future movements for change.

Final Reflection

Nevertheless, the **will of the people remains a decisive force**. When nations persist in their pursuit of justice and freedom, history ultimately responds to their determination. The failure to achieve change at one historical moment does not preclude its realization in another. The course of human history shows that **new generations always emerge to reclaim the mission of transformation**. The silence or exhaustion of the present should never be mistaken for resignation; rather, it is often the calm before the renewal of the collective will for change.



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