# Comparative political mutations in the Maghreb and the Mashreq, seven years after "the Arab Spring"

By Ihssane Guennoun

Summary

In the wake of recent developments in the MENA region marked by disarray, civil war, and deteriorated economic performance, the OCP Policy Center has published a collectively written book chronicling developments since the advent of the Arab Spring entitled Comparative Political Mutations in the Mashrek and Maghreb seven years after the Arab Spring. This book was instigated by Professor Abdallah Saaf, Senior Fellow at the OCP Policy Center, during a conference held in December 2016. Authors from different backgrounds each provide a specific thematic reflection in their respective chapters on a region from their spectrum of expertise. This Policy Brief discusses the ''Arab Spring'' in its relevance to understanding events characterizing the MENA region today. It is structured around two parts. The first depicts the waves of protests starting in 2011 and the second discusses various chapters of the book.
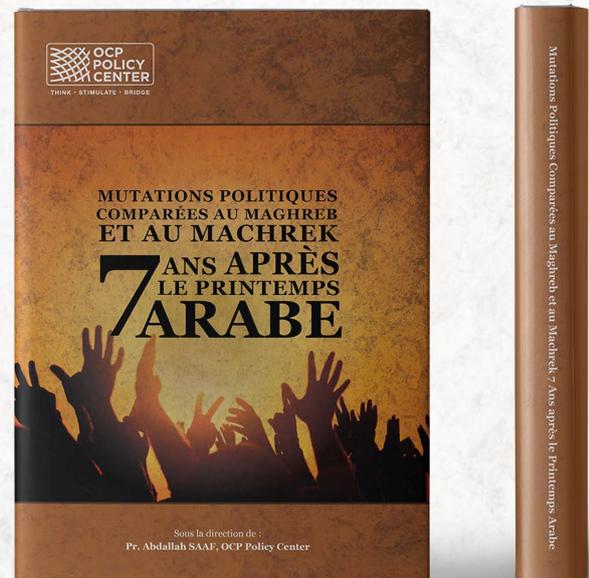
I.   What's next for the "Arab Spring"?

The expression "Arab Spring" was coined in 2011, in reference to the "People's Spring" that marked Europe in 1848. This phenomenon refers to the waves of popular protests that spread from Tunisia to various neighboring countries in the Maghreb and the Mashreq, at varying magnitudes. A number of countries were impacted because of a history of authoritarian regimes that citizens could no longer accept. Many of these regimes failed to provide primary public services (health, education, etc.) to their populations, fueling popular unrest. Regardless of similarities, the nature of these revolts and the context of their emergence imply that a generalized analysis must not be applied in all countries affected by these waves of protests.

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The Arab Spring brought to light the complexity of different societies and the challenges that they face in striving to coexist amongst these differences. The protest movements united citizens who would not have found themselves together in any other context; demonstrators represented different social classes and political affiliations. They were united by a mutual desire for structural reforms of the state system and for the removal of the incumbent government.

Similarities emerged in the causes behind the popular uprisings throughout the affected region, though, to reiterate, it is important not to generalize each situation. These similarities became key topics in debate. The root aim of most, if not all, of the "Arab Spring" protests was to reform the state system to meet peoples' demands for governance, social justice, democracy, and the rule of law. Protestors also denounced the corrupt systems and ineffective governments. Though not identical, many

Arab countries shared similar causes at the root of these uprisings. In Tunisia, for example, not all aspects of the socio-economic situation predisposed the country to uprisings. Under Ben Ali, Tunisians enjoyed an education system considered then among the best in the MENA region and a middle class among the largest. On the other hand, restrictions on freedom of expression and the predation of resources by the Ben Ali family were incentives - among others - that prompted Tunisians to demonstrate. In Egypt, demonstrators in Tahrir Square denounced the government's inability to provide the population with quality public services as well as the way in which the former Raiss, Hosni Mubarak, ruled the country without governing. These factors, combined with unemployment, fuel public discontent, resulting in what became known as the "Arab Spring."

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Events unfolded so rapidly that both regimes and international actors were caught off guard. The popular demands differed and the regimes were reluctant to make concessions leaving the outcome of the various protests tinged with unpredictability. Sometimes seen as revolution, sometimes as insurrection, sometimes as protest, or simple demonstration, there was no shortage of names to describe events by the international community. External actors reacted differently in declarations and in deeds. These dynamics help distinguish between states that had remained neutral towards uprisings, states that have taken a stand or those that have intervened at a distance or directly on the ground. The West perceived the "Arab Spring" revolts as a struggle between democratic aspirations from below and dictatorships imposed from above,[1] while Russia was skeptical of any reaction and refrained from taking a stand. The turning point of Russian policy in the Arab world took place in Libya; Russia condemned foreign intervention, equating it with a resumption of the US intervention in Iraq in 2003. Russia then expressed its firm opposition to any foreign intervention in Syria.

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1. Vysotsky, Alexander. "Russia and the Arab Spring." Connections, vol. 14, no. 1, 2014, pp. 41–64. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/26326385.

" While it is true that democratic demands had always existed, they were only truly strengthened through better popular organization on social networks. These provided a voice for those previously without, and allowed them to speak without a bureaucratic platform for dissenting voices."

The ''Arab Spring'' was stimulated by the massive use of social networks, primarily in Egypt and Tunisia. People organized themselves online to plan events and used virtual means of communication to exchange and debate political issues of interest to their country. Social networks thus served as an uncensored platform for exchange, on which citizens expressed their democratic aspirations without fear of reprisals from the most authoritarian governments. While it is true that democratic demands had always existed, they were only truly strengthened through better popular organization on social networks. These provided a voice for those previously without, and allowed them to speak without a bureaucratic platform for dissenting voices. A study conducted by the Project on Information Technology and Political Islam[2] demonstrated through three findings that the role played by social networks was undeniable. Indeed, one of the three findings suggests that mass demonstrations were often preceded by revolutionary conversations taking place online.

Although the events described above took place seven years ago, the subject remains relevant. Popular uprisings, revolutionary, insurrectional and protest movements have produced mixed results depending on the specifics of each country. Some countries have made political, social or economic progress, while others have not achieved satisfactory results in the eyes of their populations. In some countries, authoritarian regimes were gradually replaced by new political bodies. Overall, four types of outcomes can be identified in "Arab Spring'' countries. While some chose to introduce reforms easing social tensions, others used massive force to suppress protests. Other countries saw the overthrow of the regimes in place while one "Arab Spring'' occurrence ended in civil war.

The spectrum of change can be seen with substantial policy change in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco while other

2. Howard, Philip N., et al. "Opening closed regimes: what was the role of social media during the Arab Spring?" (2011).

countries have seen some semblance of reforms, and others are still shaken by certain events, the consequences of which are still visible today. The events of 2011 have also called into question the role of the State in meeting social demands. People defied the state so that it would take the situation in hand to reform institutions and ensure the well-being of citizens. Tunisia, often cited as an example of democracy, is still in the process of freeing itself from the legacy of the Ben Ali system. The aftermath of the crisis in Libya is visible beyond the country's borders to the Sahel and the Mediterranean. In the Syrian case, the country has not experienced any regime change but the situation remains unstable with a significant human toll. As for Egypt, it has returned to the former regime with military man at the head of the State, a fact that has had major national and regional repercussions.

It is clear that the reconsideration of the role of the State has been a common outcome for all countries of the region. These, and other examples, call into question the real results of the Arab Spring, which is the purpose of the book we are considering.

While analysts and external actors do not agree on the impact of such events, the collective work directed by Professor Abdallah Saaf proposes a comparative approach to studying the different countries of the Maghreb and the Mashreq.

II.   The advantage of the comparative approach

The collective work revolves around chapters covering cross-cutting themes, regional or even country-specific themes. The book's most compelling feature is to be found in the original analyses and comparative readings that it provides by nature. Rather than discrediting opposing opinions, this book leverages each unique perspective to further a broad understanding and critical analysis of the Arab Spring. It is comprised of fourteen chapters, each featuring a different perspective to examine the various scenarios and patterns, seven years after its occurrence.

Three chapters are dedicated to analyzing Morocco's role by setting out the political and social demand landscape. Through the prism of the February 20 and Hirak movements, the authors explain that while demonstrators managed to obtain political reforms, social and economic aspects did not garner much interest from the State. Indeed, social

and territorial measures are deemed insufficient and taken merely to play the appeasement card. Specifically, Mohamed Naimi and Nassim Hajouji present the main developments in Morocco since 2011. Mohamed Naimi thus proposes an explanation of the successes and limitations of the February 20 movement, while Nassim Hajouji wonders if the Hirak movement was not an "Arab Spring" revival. The author uses a sociological approach to highlight underlying causes of the uprisings in the Rif region in 2017. He also attempts to identify the nature of the Hirak movement through a comparison with the civil rights movements in the United States as well as a comparison with "Arab Spring" events.

In order to better understand the stakes of protest movements in Morocco, it is fundamental to understand the State reform and its constitutional foundations. Abdelmajid Aboughazi focuses on legal, political and societal reforms. In his view, the 2011 Constitution has given rise to a new type of relationship between the State and citizens; a relationship designed to renew the confidence pact and broaden the scope of political debate. This Constitutive Charter also establishes a new understanding of democracy whereby citizens participate in public debate.

While Morocco stands-out as a nation whose stability wasn't jeopardized by the "Arab Spring," Libya experienced a totally different situation. The author of this Policy Brief focuses on the challenges of state reconstruction in Libya following the events of the "Arab Spring" as well as on the analysis of the uprisings that led to Gaddafi's removal, including the role of external actors.

> *" Abdallah Saaf offers an overview of the Maghreb and Mashreq regions to place the "Arab Spring" into perspective. He first examines Moroccan interactions with events in Tunisia and Egypt. He then analyzes the insurrections through practical and theoretical expressions to highlight the key factors that generated them. "*

In more general terms, political dynamics post "Arab Spring" in the Maghreb region have evolved in a variety of ways. With the aim of providing a comprehensive and interpretative framework for analyzing the nature of change in the Maghreb countries, Mhammed Belarbi turns to transitology to analyze comparative institutional reforms

in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania and Libya. The author thus presents an inventory of institutional practice and democratization experiences. He also proposes an analysis of geopolitical impacts using a comparative approach.

Abdallah Saaf offers an overview of the Maghreb and Mashreq regions to place the "Arab Spring" into perspective. He first examines Moroccan interactions with events in Tunisia and Egypt. He then analyzes the insurrections through practical and theoretical expressions to highlight the key factors that generated them. He also looks at the political and social changes brought about by the Arab Spring. To enhance his arguments, Mr. Saaf thoroughly examines the political and institutional systems as well as the actors and their interactions in the region under study.

Demographic imbalances in the Gulf countries are forcing States to resort to expatriating workers. Academic El Mostafa Rezrazi argues that this trend forms the basis of these countries' national security doctrine. This new issue is of increasing interest to the international community, which is concerned with protecting workers' rights. In this context, Mr. Rezrazi addresses the demographic factor in GCC countries through the events of the First Gulf War and the repercussions of the "Arab Spring."

The Gulf region, more specifically Saudi Arabia, is also the subject of analysis by Abdelhamid Benkhattab, in which he examines the impact of the "Arab Spring" in the Kingdom. While the country showed political and social stability before the events of 2011, its weaknesses were revealed following waves of protests. The author explains that, despite its resources and wealth, Saudi Arabia can no longer meet its regional and international ambitions.

Reconstruction is still a major issue in Syria, since the events of the "Arab Spring" resulted in an endless escalation of violence. Salam Kawakibi argues that while not impossible, reconstruction will require identifying culprits and providing a just truth. In his opinion, the "Arab Spring" has given rise to a Syrian civil society that is an important factor in the reconstruction of the country. He believes however that the backlash from the war will continue beyond stabilization in Syria.

These different developments show that most Arab countries were significantly affected by the events of the "Arab Spring." Alongside social impacts, there are political consequences that need to be explored in the book.

Abdelmalek El Ouazzani examines the problems of state collapse and reconstruction. In his chapter, the author contrasts the examples of countries that have managed to rebuild themselves with those that have collapsed and whose survival is uncertain.

The approach proposed in the book would not have been complete without an analysis of the security and geopolitical situation post Arab Spring. Indeed, political, social, and economic changes have continued to take place amidst relative stability and in some cases, the wake of civil wars and regime change. Abdelhak Bassou, Senior Fellow at OCP Policy Center, looks back at the Arab Spring events studying the MENA region as a whole. He thus places events in their regional context to study security repercussions in the region.

Mohamed Haddy, approaches the events of the "Arab Spring" through a sociological and philosophical prism. While asserting that such events are not new in the world, he makes a point of qualifying them as new to Arab countries. This is true both given their nature, in seeking to protest existing policies, and their heterogeneous composition. He also explains the very purpose of these social movements in the Arab world, before revealing the role played by the West and the media at the very outset of events.

From the very start of the revolts in the various Arab countries, the reaction of the European Union (EU) was not long in coming. The EU has tightened conditions for financial cooperation with the countries of the region since the Arab Spring. Erwan Lannon demonstrates that this EU policy has shown its limits given the scale of violence and instability that has continued to occur with humanitarian crises. The author focuses his analysis on the review of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) initially, before focusing on the consequences of the revolts on Euro-Arab dialogue and cooperation. For his part, Álvaro Vasconcelos stresses the need to rethink the EU's approach towards MENA countries. He claims that the EU must not yield to the temptation of supporting authoritarian regimes given the fervor of popular aspirations for freedom and justice. The analyst explains that the EU must find a more positive way to apprehend its relationship with southern Mediterranean countries.

Conclusion

Depending on the country, the "Arab Spring" was sometimes a success, sometimes a failure and, in some cases, a return to a pre-"Arab Spring" system. While revolutions sparked the phenomenon, counter-revolutions have also taken place, re-establishing the pre-revolution regime when popular expectations are not met. The question of whether or not the ''Arab Spring'' is over remains complicated as seen by the varying opinions demonstrated throughout the book. However, events continue to make their mark and are recurring to different degrees leading to more discussion, more understanding, and more research. The Arab Spring has raised political awareness at all levels of society, which no longer hesitates to give free rein to its discontent. It also helped traditionally less well organized or fragmented opposition and dissident forces better consolidate the effectiveness of their movements through social networks. It is sure that governments have understood that in order to defend their legitimacy, they must deal with the demands of the people and make concessions in order to survive. Some have relinquished power, others have grabbed on to it with an iron fist, while others have simply proposed reforms to "buy" social peace.

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Ihssane Guennoun is Program Officer in the Geopolitics and International Relations program at OCP Policy Center. Prior to that, she was a trainee for six months at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, Brussels Office, where she contributed to the activities of the Wider Atlantic program. She has graduated with a double degree Master in International Relations and Affairs from EGE, Rabat, Morocco and Sciences Po, Aix-en-Provence, France with a focus on International Economic Relations. Her areas of interest include security issues in the Sahel region as well as West Africa's economic and political development.

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