

# Gone with the Wind? Four Years after the Arab Spring

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In the Arab world today, there are several major challenges that must be overcome as we seek to imagine a more peaceful, democratic and stable region. Those challenges include the counter-revolutionary impulse of authoritarian states, the open-ended nature of revolutionary processes, and the geopolitical and sectarian nexus of Da'ish.

Many of the authoritarian states of the Arab world today resemble what Jean-Pierre Filiu has called "Mamluk" states. The Mamluks were originally slave soldiers employed by the 'Abbasid dynasty, taken from non-Arab lands. Because they were not Arabs, leaders could trust that they were not torn between conflicting loyalties between competing families, tribes, and communities at home.

Over centuries, however, this Mamluk class gradually gained political and military power until it fully took control over the state by the 12th century. Mamluks thus wielded the authoritarian imperative to monopolize the state without being deeply connected to the societies they ruled, which effectively made them invulnerable except to outside invasion. This Mamlukian impulse, which is highly patrimonial and autocratic, underlies the militaristic republics of the Arab world, such as Syria and Egypt.

These authoritarian regimes see themselves as the guardians of the state and ultimate political authority. They believe they are impervious from their own societies due to their institutional status and nationalistic legitimacy. They internalized a mandate to act as authoritarian trustees that stand above society since the very inception of these states. In some Arab states, this impetus came about during the founding moments of post-colonial independence. For instance, in Egypt, the Mamlukian impulse was reborn in the concept of the *dawlah madaniyyah*, which came about during the administrative reforms of Muhammad Ali Pasha in the early 19th century.

Upon the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the Mamlukian instinct was to defend this prerogative at all costs. They wished to ensure that the state apparatus did not fall into the hands of social forces that they saw as inferior to them. In Egypt, President Mubarak was toppled by the revolution in 2011, but the Sisi coup against the elected Muslim Brotherhood government in July 2013 revealed the military's fear that their institutional prerogatives had come under threat. In Syria, the brutal way that the Assad regime attacked the first peaceful protests similarly exposed its inability to accept that any voice from society could question its authority.

In the broadest sense, this patronizing and defensive mentality is reflected in how all the enduring autocracies of the Arab world have interpreted popular protests and demands for democracy. It is critical to note that geopolitical factors have reinforced their counter-revolutionary strategy. The counter-revolutionary push against democracy morphed at the same time as the regional amplification of the Sunni-Shi'a sectarian divide. The inflated threat of Shi'a expansionism has allowed Sunni Arab regimes to paint much of their domestic opposition in radical and extremist terms, and to justify increased repression and delayed reforms as necessary for national security.

Quintessential examples of this appear in Bahrain and Syria. In Bahrain, the Sunni regime and political establishment have portrayed mass opposition during the Arab Spring as a Shi'a puppet of Iran. In reality, demands for reform far predated the Arab Spring and have existed since the birth of the Bahraini nation. The inverse has happened in Syria, where the Iran-backed Assad regime claims the opposition is part of a wider US-backed Sunni conspiracy to dominate the Middle East. So numerically overwhelming does this Sunni conspiracy appear that the coalition associated with the Assad regime is not a purely Shi'a one, but rather a coalition of minorities that include 'Alawites in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iranian proxies, and the Yemeni Houthis.

Indeed, since the advent of the Arab Spring, we have entered into a new sectarian paradigm of Sunni-Shi'a conflict punctuated by different inflection points. The most recent inflection points are the fall of oil prices and the striking of the US-Iranian nuclear deal, whose consequences have yet to appear.

Another crucial pattern is the conflation of any sign of political pluralism as a threat against national stability in many countries. For instance, in Egypt, the restored military regime has conflated the Muslim Brotherhood, which had previously participated in elections and renounced armed struggle, with violence and terrorism. Repression against Islamists and opposition today has been the harshest since the 1950s, with the regime adopting a strict policy – be either governed by us or be killed. Such strategies of invoking terrorist threats to justify authoritarianism, however, have a circular logic. State repression only instigates greater resistance and counter-violence, which in turn further justifies the army maintaining order. The regime portrays these actions as proof of its very point that terrorism exists and that it is successful in combatting it.

The geopolitical gamble made by all these Mamlukian regimes is that fears of terrorism and jihadism spreading in the region will make the West turn a blind eye to domestic repression and return to supporting stable authoritarianism at all costs. Ironically, however, many of these autocracies play a double-game with extremism by attacking opposition at home but also enforcing policies that fuel that very extremism.

Examples from across the region abound. In Libya, the Western-backed forces of General Haftar have deliberately overlooked the spread of Da'ish in the region of Derna and instead focused upon attacking the competing government. In Syria during the Arab Spring, the Assad regime notoriously freed many jailed Islamists from prison while keeping other oppositionists in jail. In Yemen, the government has proclaimed the Houthis as a terrorist movement backed by Iran, yet have also engaged in negotiations with Al-Qaeda in favor of a truce. Finally, in the Gulf, regimes have declared Da'ish in Syria and Iraq as the gravest threat to regional security, but have done little to constrain NGO financing with links to Islamist networks abroad.

Such double discourse shows many Arab regimes are not serious about eradicating the legitimate threat of terrorism and jihadism. It serves as a never-ending justification to postpone democratization, and stems from the Mamlukian imperative to prevent the resurgence of another Arab Spring.

These efforts, however, may be futile given the open-ended nature of revolutionary processes. Many commentators in the West have declared the Arab Spring to be over, with the new democracy in Tunisia as the only real success story. The Arab regimes also assume the era of revolutions and uprisings has ended. And indeed, it is true that after the democratic high watermark of the Arab Spring, an authoritarian riptide as swept across the region as many authoritarian regimes attempt to restore their supremacy. However, we also know from history that revolutionary waves are cyclical, and that popular demands for dignity and freedom will inevitably emerge again whether governments are ready for them or not.

Today, the lack of revolutionary explosions does not mean that revolutionary processes have stopped. The structural dynamics and economic processes that caused the first wave of popular insurrections remain identical, if not worse, than in 2010. The unemployment rates of most Arab countries are virtually the same as before, with most economies still burdened by inefficient public sectors and small private

sectors. Societies still feature very large and rapidly growing youth populations, which are overwhelming the service provisions and economic opportunities offered by governments. Educational systems are still based upon credentials rather than merit, and churn out graduates who lack the skills necessary to compete in the globalizing economy.

Above all, political regimes continue to deny citizens a meaningful voice in policymaking, especially when it comes to the distribution of resources and their own material well-being. In addition, an unhealthy collusion between politics and economics still festers, with small cliques of elites dominating not only political institutions but also circles of wealth and privilege. For these reasons, the myth of developmentalism has been decisively shattered for many publics, because increased growth as measured by empty statistics like GDP did not generate sustainable opportunities for jobs, careers, and dignity for the new generation of young citizens. Other socioeconomic problems including worsening inequality, failing infrastructure, deficient education, and endemic corruption remain, as well.

Yet while these structural problems have not changed, and if anything have worsened, the social and cultural fabric of Arab societies has irrevocably shifted in a new direction. Everyday citizens are no longer in fear and awe of authoritarian states, and they can no longer be cowed into obedience by threat of force or the persuasion of ideology.

Of course, out of fear or exhaustion, many people have become convinced that genuine reform is impossible. The fear comes from the spread of Da'ish and jihadism, in addition to the slow collapse of states like Syria and Yemen. The exhaustion comes from the failed efforts to install new democratic governments after the defeat of old autocracies in countries like Libya and Egypt. It also comes from the demoralization of being outmaneuvered, as in the case of Morocco and Jordan, or from the failure of democratic activists in other states to translate reform concessions by regimes into real institutional gains. Such disappointment from the first revolutionary uprisings may have also induced apathy in some, resulting in *de facto* support for regimes simply due to lack of any other alternative.

However, in the same way that fear, exhaustion, and apathy are only temporary states of mind, regimes cannot delay reform forever. The very failure of authoritarian governments to enact credible reforms was what caused the initial Arab uprisings in

the first place. The choice is reform now or revolt later, and rumblings even now hint that this dilemma will not disappear.

For instance, in Lebanon, mass protests exploded this summer in response to the government's inability to collect garbage and maintain sanitary conditions on the street. These demonstrations mobilized across sectarian and ethnic divisions, as Lebanese youths shared deep frustration against dysfunctional governance. This is the continuation of a civil movement against a confessional system that many people see as outdated, and which has long dictated politics in Lebanon. It favors instead a more democratic system that puts all citizens upon an equal playing field rather than abide by artificial sectarian and ethnic formula engineered by elites.

In Algeria, an environmental protest movement mobilized in rural areas last spring to block hydraulic fracturing for shale gas. These activists rallied against this government project despite the perceived economic benefits, due to the environmental destruction and pollution that fracking would create. This represents the example *par excellence*, because we can trace one origin of the Arab Spring to Algeria in 1988, long before the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia. The rise of the Islamic Salvation Front, grass-roots mobilization for change, the violent military seizure of power, and the resulting civil war all revealed a long struggle between state and society that encapsulated the essential struggle of the Arab Spring. These episodes of mobilization prove that the spirit of the Arab Spring still has a unique resonance, and that popular resistance against the state can result in meaningful change.

The major lesson learned from the first years of the Arab Spring, however, is that political change requires more than just moments of mobilization. Democratic transitions require sustained commitment on part of activists, revolutionaries, and visionaries that stretch out over years. Even after the downfall of an autocratic regime, opposition forces need comprehensive organization, political craftsmanship, and institutional vision that adopts a long-term view for democratization. If participatory structures are to replace autocracy, they must be stable and coherent, able to withstand numerous pressures while ensuring democratic representation. The failures of the Egyptian opposition to develop these strategies after its brief victory in 2011 resulted in the consequent return to authoritarian power by the army. For many people, this implosion of a democratic transition represents a major reason for why the Arab Spring ended.

Still, while most protest movements committed these mistakes during the first wave of the Arab Spring, with the exception of Tunisia, they have learned their lesson and will likely perform better during the next uprisings. As these internal dynamics evolve, however, a final problem must be addressed – the geopolitical and sectarian nexus of Da‘ish, which is another major reason why many believe the era of uprisings has ended.

The rise of Da‘ish implicates both the weakness of existing states as well as the destructive influence of geopolitical forces and outside intervention. To understand this destructive trend, we must engage the deficiencies of state formation and political governance that existed prior to the Arab Spring.

It is ironic that Da‘ish flourishes in Syria and Iraq, because for decades they were held up by scholars as the archetype of durable, coercive, and unitary states that seemed impervious to change by virtue of their domination over society. While the radical beliefs of Da‘ish represented a new phase in the ideology of jihadism, the raw human materials required for its growth were already in place. In Syria, the initial expansion of Da‘ish required not just foreign recruits but also substantial local support. Those bases of support existed in part because the original project of Syrian statehood never completed its goal of linking popular interests with an effective government that could respond to local needs and secure mass support.

A different yet parallel dynamic is at work in Iraq, where Da‘ish draws upon disenfranchised Sunni communities underserved by the Shi’a-dominated regime of Maliki. Maliki’s regime employed Shi’a militias that suppressed and brutalized much of the populace. They also cannibalized what was left of the Iraqi army. For those militias, the ideal model of organization has been Hezbollah in terms of brand recognition, military capacity, and organizational outreach. In this way, Da‘ish can be seen as not only an external impetus but also an internal response to repressive and disconnected governance.

In addition, Da‘ish differs from Al-Qaeda in notable and innovative ways. Al-Qaeda holds that the only legitimate form of jihad is military attack, with no notion of holding territory or building state institutions. It sees itself as a nomadic and globalized network of fighters that sees militaristic struggle as an unending obligation that would extend far beyond their lifetimes. For recruits, joining such an organization requires commitment, credentials, experience, and a complex initiation process.

By contrast, Da'ish believes the fruits of struggle lie in the present, not in the afterworld or the future. It sees violence and its implementation as not merely a means to an end, but the goal itself and a natural extension of its ideology. At the same time, it also prioritizes the creation of an actual territorial entity. Da'ish seeks to hold land, build pockets of governance, and wage jihad within the confines of geography and the present. Unlike Al-Qaeda, its membership model resembles an open call for recruits, in which any committed supporter can join without a deep layer of secrecy. In addition, unlike the virtual network of Al-Qaeda, Da'ish has become a biological enterprise in seeking to cultivate a stable population to underpin its statist aspiration. It is attracting many women, and emphasizing the creation of new family units, however coerced or manipulated. In addition, foreign recruits are not merely foot soldiers, but are designed to be the vector of image of an ummah that Da'ish projects to the outside world. Da'ish thus presents a very specific view of Sunni state-building that competes with other Sunni forms of legitimacy and statehood, which is one reason why such a broad Sunni Arab coalition has mobilized against it.

In addition to Da'ish, we also see ever-growing efforts by outside powers to intervene and manipulate local events far outside the framework of supporting counter-revolutionary authoritarianism and inflaming sectarian tensions. The threat posed by Da'ish has become a useful alibi in allowing outside powers like Russia and Turkey to exercise greater ambitions in the Arab world. Russia's military intervention in Syria, and potentially in Iraq, is connected to Da'ish but also must be contextualized as part of its broader geopolitical desire to reassert its might across the world. For Russia, direct involvement in Middle East conflicts is part of a gradual resurgence of military power since the fall of the Soviet Union. Supporting the Assad regime in Syria also gives Russia more bargaining leverage in Ukraine, and other disputed territories that might invite Western interference.

Whereas the West has a grand strategy but little resolve to carry it out, the opposite is true with Russia given its current intervention. Current Russian efforts to project strategic force within Syria are aimed at freezing the status quo by giving the Assad regime a sanctuary state. Russia identifies this sanctuary state by its Alawi ethnic base. Its very survival precludes the formation of any other alternative government, whether Da'ish or pro-Western. At some point, however, the intervention will become self-exhausting because the returns on this military investment will dwindle to zero. Still, the current Russian strategy renews a very traditional way of seeing the

region through the lens of different ethnic groups and national identities rather than juridical states.

Partly for this reason, the new Russian-Syrian alliance could also encompass Iraq at some point. The Iraqi government has gradually retreated from having an Iraqi national agenda that supports the reintegration of Sunnis. It has become dominated by Shi'a interests. For that reason, it is not heavily invested in expelling Da'ish from Iraqi territory, which draws heavily upon disenfranchised Sunni communities. Instead, the Iraqi regime may appreciate a Russian umbrella of military security, one that might even replace the American guarantee.

The weak side to this strategy is that protecting Shi'a client states in Syria and Iraq will radicalize Sunni Islamists against Russia. However, Putin does not fear blowback, such as increased Islamist terrorism at home or more unrest in the Caucasus. While a bomb in the subway of a Western capital will expose the vulnerability of the government, in Russia it paradoxically strengthens the political strategy of Putin. Indeed, Putin rose to power largely because terrorism and territorial disputes had weakened the Russian state. His vision of resurgent Russian strength at home and abroad requires a constant perception of external threats.

Yet Russia is not interested in truly crushing Da'ish, because Da'ish is vital to weakening Western interests and containing the Western-backed opposition in Syria. Indeed, in a bizarre way, Da'ish has become a convenient crutch for all other actors. The Turks use it to attack the PKK; the Syrian regime needs it to deflect attention away its rule; the Saudis exploit its staunchly anti-Shi'a ideology; and finally, the Iranians see it as a potential way to counter its Sunni rivals.

Besides Russia, Turkey is another critical regional player that is escalating this conflict. Turkey originally began as a member of the Sunni Arab coalition backed by the West against the Assad regime, and which framed Da'ish as an existential threat to the entire region. More recently, however, Turkey has used the threat of Da'ish as an alibi to attack the PKK in Syria and Iraq, which runs counter to the détente previously reached between the Turkish government and PKK.

The logic behind such a strategy is primarily domestic, creating polarization and seeding tension in order to recover from the AKP's electoral setback months ago. President Erdogan and his Islamist government attempted to refract attention away from their eroding domestic popularity in the face of rising opposition. Still, like

Russia, Turkey's military escalation in Syria and Iraq may bring about further instability and inflame another axis of conflict, all for the sake of propping up the current government's electoral position.

In retrospect, these three issues – the counter-revolutionary impulse of authoritarian states, the open-ended nature of revolutionary processes, and finally the geopolitical and sectarian nexus of Da'ish – represent major challenges facing the Arab world today. They are complex and intertwined, but understanding them is the first step to overcoming them.