
QUALITATIVE REPORTS

A TRANSFORMED MEDITERRANEAN: NATIONAL AND REGIONAL LANDSCAPES

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The initial belief in a possible wider extension for the Arab awakenings was quickly postponed.

From the beginning, the Arab Spring brought hopes of witnessing considerable changes in the MENA region. The bravery with which Tunisians went out on the streets at the end of 2010 to express their frustration with their regime created a chain effect. The result was the fall of several regional leaders: Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, Gaddafi in Libya and even Saleh in Yemen.

It is not surprising that the Arab Spring failed to produce further chain effects. MENA countries have their own particularities and their unique histories. This is why the initial belief in a possible wider extension for the Arab awakenings was quickly put on hold. Arabs are ready for change, but this does not mean that they want change at any cost.

The results of the IEMed Survey indicate that both citizens of the northern and the southern shores of the Mediterranean share a very cautious optimism when it comes to expecting significant changes in the MENA region. Generally, the same reaction can be seen in the 28 European states. This caution is justified by the troubling news and chaotic developments that people have witnessed in contemporary Arab history. However, some of the ongoing realities in the region warrant reasons for their moderate expectations. The majority of the interviewees agree that Maghreb countries do not necessarily have a bleak future, but Libya is there to remind them that threatening risks do also exist. In the Mashreq, motives for pessimism are much more serious, and the fears shared by most interviewees are justified by concrete examples. While Syria is in a disastrous situation, Egypt did not head towards the establishment of the “democratic process” that many people wished for. Moreover, the stagnation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also puts a limit on any positive expectation.

Maghreb

Compared to the Mashreq, the Maghreb is presenting better prospects.

With the exception of Libya, the Maghreb is presenting good prospects compared to the Mashreq. In Tunisia, the cradle of the Arab uprisings, citizens have faced both socio-political and ideological tensions that led to a national polarisation. However, despite their disagreements, Tunisians shared similar concerns over the future of their country. The divide between Islamists and seculars is a reality, though it should not obscure another significant element: the socioeconomic rift and the division between developed touristic coastal areas and underdeveloped, more conservative, inner regions. Nevertheless, paradoxically, the Islamist party Ennahda had good electoral success in what was known as a secular country, thanks to its good organisation, the unpreparedness of the so-called secular parties and/or the fragmentation of the political scene. Tensions prevailed following the October 2011 legislative elections, and although there were some peaks of violence, they cannot be compared to the situation in nearby Egypt at that time. Most obviously, this is due to Tunisians' high level of education, their agreement on an implicit national pact, and the ability of the Ennahda party to come with proposals and decisions that continue in the spirit of a democratic system. Nothing indicates that Ennahda will necessarily lose the coming elections scheduled for the end of 2014.

Morocco has also been able to avoid serious risks and consequences. Contrary to most predictions, the Moroccan King has been quick to divert possible threats for popular protest, embodied by the 20 February movement. He was successful in establishing a constitutional committee to write a new Fundamental Law, but this is only part of the answer. Generally, Moroccans are well-known for their profound observation of two red lines not to be crossed: matters related to the Western Sahara conflict, and the King. Although critics of Mohammed VI do exist, they are eclipsed by the majority of the citizens. Fears of the security forces' repression may play a limited role. The existence of parliamentary elections in Morocco is, to a certain extent, an illusion; but Moroccans do not feel they have to fight against the situation. They favour stability.

Similarly, this quest for stability is part of the reasons why Algerians abstained from manifestations in the streets despite the catalytic social context. Algerians consider that they initiated their own Spring starting from 1988. Furthermore, they share a collective trauma dating back to the dark and violent Islamist-related years in the 1990s. Aside from this, the way NATO decided to participate in toppling Gaddafi's regime in Libya also dissuaded them from going to the streets: Algerians are proud of their country and of their history, and consider themselves the masters of their own fate. While they want change, they do not feel they need to be part of the global regional "trends". The day they decide to confront their regime will be the day when they feel that their own specific moment has arrived. Meanwhile, it is clear that Algeria also suffers some deficits in the potential and activities of its syndicates and civil society. Even youths willing to contest the Algerian regime lack coordination, making it easy for security forces to limit their demonstrations.

Last but not least, in Libya, popular demand for change is still present. However, with the lack of agreement on power-sharing and the absences of a well-defined roadmap towards a political landscape, the country is likely to remain hostage of its most powerful leaders. Libyans have not had the opportunity to experiment with strong institutions and representative leaders, and therefore the growing pains of reaching an institutional consensus and nation-building can be understood. However, the positioning of rival leaders along with the presence of weak institutions and lack of a national army complicate the prospects for serious engagement in a positive transition process. The pessimism over Libya's future is justified; the strong leader needed to provoke consensus and to guide the country towards a positive future has yet to appear. Conversely, this does not guarantee Libya's implosion in the long run. Rather, it implies that the population's aspiration to greater stability and positive prospects still lack strong and determined representation.

The Mashreq

Events in the Mashreq generally lead to pessimism, though there are always exceptions. Obviously, none of the countries of the Mashreq can claim enduring stability, even Israel, where social tensions have been increasing in the last few years. However, while cautious optimism is permitted (to a very limited extent) in the case of Jordan, the rest of the region is clearly under heavy pressure.

In Egypt, none of the objectives for consolidation of democracy have yet been achieved. After the failed experience of the Muslim Brotherhood in power, the following coup d'état saw the establishment of the military at the head of the country (General Abdul Fattah al-Sisi) in the May 2014 presidential elections. The already limited prospects for separation of powers, independence of the judiciary, and respect for freedom of expression have entered an era of regression. Obviously, the huge economic problems that Egypt faces due to overpopulation,

The quest for stability resulted in the abstention of most of Algerians and Moroccans from the street protests.

The prospect of Libyan transition is endangered by the rivalry between leaders, weak institutions and the lack of a national army.

Apart from the cautious optimism about Jordan, the rest of the Mashreq is under heavy pressure.

Syria's crisis may have a spill-over effect on the situation in Lebanon and Iraq.

corruption and poor democratic performances further complicate the search for efficient long-term solutions. Furthermore, President Sisi faces broad responsibilities given the fears of the population regarding the violent groups in the Sinai Peninsula, and the mounting need to address pressing livelihood issues, such as access to basic services. Nevertheless, Egyptians are likely to be disappointed if they expect too much, too soon, from their new president. The Gulf-originated effusion of Egypt's economy delays any serious solutions. Similarly, if people were to go back to the streets and criticise Sisi's rule, finding solutions in the foreseeable future would be considerably postponed.

Pessimism concerning Syria's future is justified by the stark realities. More than three years of war have destroyed the Syrian social tissue with more than 150,000 deaths, 2.5 million refugees and 6.5 million Internally Displaced Persons. Two or three Syrian generations have already been sacrificed and it will take the country many years to recover, regardless of what the political outcome is – Assad staying in power or his regime being toppled. However, a further issue with Syria's crisis is the spill-over effect. While political and religious tensions in Lebanon are on the rise, the affirmation of Jihadi and Salafi groups fighting in Syria fuelled the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)'s motivation to seize major towns in the western part of Iraq.

Prospects for peace between Israel and Palestine continue to stall.

As for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, prospects for peace continue to stall. After almost seven decades of an official state of war, Israelis and Palestinians are still lacking the conditions to solve their conflict. The situation becomes further complicated with the increasing fragmentation of Palestinian and Israeli positions. The times of the political dinosaurs (such as Arafat and Sharon) that had the power to make an unpopular decision and impose it on their people are behind us. The international community is increasingly reluctant to commit to any concrete steps that would allow the start of a new peace conference. In addition, the US is not pushing for courageous decisions that both Israelis and Palestinians need to take in order for them to achieve peace. This further impedes the hope for attainable peace for both. Nevertheless, the state of fragmentation prevailing on the ground lacks a straightforward solution. Even if Palestinians and Israelis agreed to move forward towards the creation of a Palestinian State or (unrealistically) a bi-national state, they would have to face strong internal (popular and political) opposition to either of these options. Unfortunately, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will most probably continue to cause violence even on the day a solution is found, though this must not impede both Israeli and Palestinian leaders from agreeing on a courageous and historical dialogue in the future.

Overall assessment and future of the region

The rift between Sunnis and Shiites results from manipulations by states for political and strategic purposes.

The future of the MENA region will not necessarily remain bleak. While the news of the seizing of several Iraqi towns by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Mashreq in early June 2014 was alarming, populations on the ground generally refrained from radicalising to jihadist and violent attitudes. Even the rift between Sunnis and Shiites is not a serious line of fracture between the two communities. It is rather the attitude of the states and governments and their manipulation of this historical disagreement for political and strategic purposes that leads to the impression of an inter-community apocalypse.

Although the MENA region will not stabilise any time soon, reasons for hope exist. Thanks to the Arab Spring, people have taken back their stolen dignity and found their voice, taking to the streets. However limited their impact was, elections in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt opened the eyes of the Arabs to the possibility they had of changing their own fate. Despite some appearances, for the era of dictators the beginning of the end is underway. Things may still move forward at their own slow pace, and periods of instability and violence will most probably prevail for some time. Nevertheless, the absence of any convincing example of a successful political transition does not mean that the Arab world will be heading backwards. It is already experiencing its transition.

However, the question remains: what will transition look like, and what will be the face of the MENA region in the coming 10 to 20 years? Most certainly, some communities will reorganise, while the internal boundaries of some countries (Iraq, Yemen, and Libya) will change. To some extent, this is the post-colonial order's last breath. The exact shape of the Arab world 2.0 remains unknown. But this uncertainty makes it even more important for actors external to the region to defend what is worth defending; for this they must contribute both positive and reasonable perspectives to the people to inform and nurture the transition process.

When Arabs went to the streets starting from 2010-2011, they argued for greater representation via a political system that would guarantee their basic rights. Putting an end to brutal state policies and choosing their leaders were part of their demands. However, they also appealed for access to employment and better economic opportunities. These demands remain.

Analysing the region through a geopolitical angle is relevant and unavoidable. However, people's basic aspirations and who is responsible for fulfilling them (that is, mostly current regional leaders and governments and their necessary adequate policies) must also be kept in mind. Otherwise, Arabs will continue to be disconnected from their national political leaders, and external players involved in the region will continue to be ignored. Geopolitical considerations bring negative predictions for the future of the region; however, human-related prospects put the objective less out of reach. When populations are reassured of their socioeconomic future, the rule of law is sure to follow. Regional stability will then be close at hand. However, it is imperative to save what can be saved now, starting with preserving the sense of national belonging, wherever this is still possible.

Although the MENA region will not stabilise any time soon, the end of the era of dictators is underway.

Geopolitical considerations bring negative predictions for the future of the region; however, human related prospects are rather positive.