

# Sectarian Policies in the Middle East Region: the Confessionalisation of Political Conflict

**Radwan, Ziadeh**

Executive Director

Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies,  
Washington, DC

Arab societies are experiencing deep divisions between ethnic, religious and sectarian components, which have coexisted throughout their long history, and today are looking increasingly disintegrated. This is not due to the nature of these components or their structure, but rather these divisions were made more evident as far back as the collapse of the foundation of the modern Arab states and the failed transition during the Arab Spring.

## Arab Transition

The 'Arab revolutions' as the young Arab activists liked to call them, started in Tunisia then continued in Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria succeeding in overthrowing the Arab dictators who had been in power for decades. These uprisings also destroyed the 'traditional hypothesis' repeated in Western studies regarding Arabic exceptionalism when it comes to democracy, or the so-called cultural factor that many researchers relied on when analysing the absence of democracy or its development within many non-Western societies, especially Arab ones (Laffin, 1975). One of the components of this direction in Western literature focused on the characteristics of the Arab people, such as: hypocrisy, irrationality and honour-related social norms which directly contradict the concept of democracy (Puyce-Jones, 1989). Some might blame this on 'Islam,' its lack of distinction between the spiritual and temporal worlds making it incompatible with democracy (Cesari, 2014).

The Tunisian revolution has completely upended this prior hypothesis, and reaffirmed what we have always said: that we should not look at culture or values statically. It is closely associated with the present political climate, which may promote the creation of some kind of rule of law or indulge corruption and nepotism, it might support accountability and what comes with it such as honesty and responsibility or become a fertile environment for stagnation, waste, and an irresponsible use of public money.

## The Failure of Arab Transitions and the Rise of Sectarianism

With Yemen's following the same fate to Libya and Syria, after the Houthis took control of the capital, Sanaa, has turned the Arab Spring into a fully-fledged autumn exactly five years after its beginning.

Why have most Arab Spring countries, such as Egypt, Syria, Libya and Yemen, failed to accomplish the political transition towards building a democratic and liberal system and thus achieve the dream of the youth at the forefront of the demonstrations and the millions that filled the streets of Arab capitals? Why did democratisation in these countries fail, despite the success of the transformation process in other parts of the world like in countries of Eastern Europe in the nineties and Latin America in the eighties?

Why have Arab Spring countries failed to shift from military or authoritarian regimes to democratic ones and instead are almost all on the brink of or already plunged into civil war? It is difficult to predict when or how it will end, whether these countries will return to the traps of military rule as in Egypt, or become like Yemen, Syria and Libya; failed states in chaos and with a complete absence of state institutions.

In fact, there are several reasons for this failure, none of which stems from the isolated nature of the Arab region and lack of similarity to other parts of the world, but are rather entirely built on the elements of the modern Arab states that ruled in those countries. And since these countries never addressed the issue of sectarianism, it was easy for this element to explode during the transition.

It is true that the Arab countries have different types of authoritarianism. There are authoritarian regimes which allow a minimum level of competitiveness in the elections and the media and have a multi-party system. They may be rigging the election results and constantly arresting political dissidents, but there is a degree of liberalism in dealing with the opposition (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Egypt under Mubarak and Yemen under Saleh would be examples of this. Then there are authoritarian systems that are hegemonic, which means that election results are known in advance, that there is no pluralism in the political system or in the media, like Syria under Assad or Libya under Gaddafi. In the first model of authoritarianism, regimes are competitive and there is a high probability of transition towards a democratic system, while the probability of transition in hegemonic authoritarian regimes is very low. Even if the transition occurs, it could lead to instability in the political system, or back to military rule.

If we look at the countries involved in the Arab Spring, like Syria and Libya, both are the most closed of the Arab region (perhaps in the whole world with the exception of North Korea). Both Yemen and Egypt are certainly competitive compared to Syria and Libya, although both attempted to follow the same path in recent years, through their leaders' personalisation of state institutions to enable power to be transferred to their sons, Jamal in the case of Egypt and Ahmad in the case of Yemen. In this way they became increasingly described as family regimes and this of course opened the door towards the weakening of state institutions and strengthening of special interest networks inside and outside the country at the expense of national interests, which often vanish or take a back seat to the interests of the ruling family.

The Arab revolutions collided with the harsh tyrannical structures of the ruling regimes, which proved unwilling to initiate a smooth democratisation or transition process, as happened in other parts of the

world, like Eastern Europe or Latin America. On the contrary, these structures played a destructive role not only by blocking the transformation process, but by destroying it, helping to create non-state military organisations, like ISIS in Syria and Iraq, Hezbollah in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen. All these military structures have been formed either directly or indirectly by the previous regimes' structures in order to obstruct the process of transition, and, in so doing, have led these countries into political or military chaos. Unable to withstand the pressure, the already weakened social structures were thus broken down, opening the door to civil war and giving way to rising sectarianism.

**The Arab revolutions collided with the harsh tyrannical structures of the ruling regimes, which proved unwilling to initiate a smooth democratisation or transition process. These structures played a destructive role not only by blocking the transformation process, but by destroying it, helping to create non-state military organisations, like ISIS Hezbollah and the Houthis in Yemen**

Another key factor in the failure to undergo transition, which has ultimately led to the rise of sectarian politics in the Arab Spring countries, was the lack of regional institutions, or at least some kind of mediator or promoter of the transition process, like the role played by the European Union in Eastern Europe. The only regional institution is the Arab League, which is highly traditional, not governed by democratic principles or a legal mandate and uninterested in pushing for democratisation in the Arab world. This has left the Arab nations to carry out their transitions alone, with neither the experience nor the capacity to do so effectively. With the exception of Tunisia, Arab Spring countries, such as Syria, Libya, Yemen and Egypt, are finding out through their transformation processes how the ruling political elites and oppositions have conflicting agendas that

are difficult to reconcile. Added to this was the absence of support for political transition from the international community, which allowed the process to slip into armed conflict and, in some cases, civil war. Unfortunately, the bitter truth seems to be that civil war is the natural successor to the authoritarian regimes that ruled Arab countries for decades, which leads us to the final and most important factor: the foundation of the modern Arab states.

This foundation is not only the framework of the modern Arab State, which suffered a period of disintegration and dissolution because of its inability to govern with democratic principles. Sectarianism may arise from minority or majority groups too as we have seen in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. In this case there are two possibilities: either the recognition of a semi-sectarian balance with guaranteed pluralism but without the abolition of sectarianism or the prevention of any party from controlling any other party, leaving these countries open to the dangers of the coexistence of opposing communities. But the latter does not eliminate the possibility of resorting to sectarian war to resolve controversies caused by imbalances arising from internal or external changes.

Democratic systems are enriched by the consistent and clear devolution of power in a peaceful manner, which allows sectarianism to be bypassed and reduces the need to fuel sectarian feuds, as well as leading to the abolition of religious distinctions or denominational and sectarian discrimination between groups. Democracy does not just mean holding elections but also requires the State and civil society to commit to working hard to develop

an awareness of individuals' needs and upgrade civic awareness at the expense of communal awareness, teaching people the meaning of freedom, equality, justice and public responsibility. Co-operation, solidarity and participation must be brought into the arena of rampant conflict to improve living conditions for everyone. If the concept of citizenship has not been ingrained in our societies today, it is not due to the presence of religious distinctions but moreover a lack of civic education resulting from the desire of the ruling elites to maintain the political control mechanisms by force and dashing hopes for a modern political culture and its accompanying sense of responsibility. The main concern is that by completely erasing the idea of equality and citizenship awareness among individuals, these people can easily become henchmen and supporters of sectarianism.

## References

- CESARI, Jocelyne. *The Awakening of Muslim Democracy: Religion, Modernity, and the State*, Cambridge University Press, 2014
- LAFFIN, John. *The Arab Mind Considered: A Need for Understanding*, New York: Taphing Publishing Company, 1975.
- LEVITSKY, Steven and Lucan A. WAY. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- PUYCE-JONES, David. *The Closed Circle: An Interpretation of the Arabs*, New York: Harper and Row, 1989.