

## Reflections on the Arab Spring: Ten Years On

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A decade ago it seemed as if there may be dramatic changes at work across the Middle East and North Africa. As Eric Patterson describes in his reflection piece, [Religious Freedom and Democracy a Decade after the Arab Spring](#):

“On December 17, 2010, an obscure fruit seller named Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire to protest the capricious authoritarian government that robbed him of his livelihood. He lit a spark that inflamed the Muslim world and spread to Egypt, where protests began ten years ago today on January 25, 2011. Although liberty movements swept the region, toppling autocrats like Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak and Tunisia’s Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, an assessment of citizens’ rights and liberties in 2021 is disheartening. Little has changed.

When it comes to the first freedom, that which is tied to speech, conscience, assembly, the press and printing, and private property—religious freedom—the situation remains troubling.”

As has been seen in the [recurring waves](#) of mass protests over the past decade, there are still fundamental challenges in the state-society relationship that have not been addressed. In this assessment of protests over the last decade, the authors highlight key reasons for protests, including “socioeconomic grievances, austerity and corruption, and calls for broader political and democratic rights.” In just the past year, there have been large-scale protests that led to the ousting of heads of state in three more countries: Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon. While the exact circumstances and responses have varied across each country, an important observation can be drawn from this reality. “Overall, the responses over time have consisted of a combination of repression and compromise. Their unifying purpose is to preserve the status quo and avoid substantial changes to the social contract.”

What would this change of the social contract look like? It might be captured in an inclusive sense of national identity that addresses inequalities or marginalization based on religious or ethnic identity. Stated another way, it is the realization of religious freedom equality.

As [Iraqi minorities highlighted](#) at the height of the protests, which were largely led by the Shi'a majority in October 2019, their demands were to change not just the people within the system, but the nature of the system itself. Their goal was to ensure an equality of all before the law, secured by a secular constitution that is not anti-religious but promotes a truly pluralistic Iraq. As a scholar of Iraq's Yezidi community said, "The future prospects for the Yezidis and other minorities in Iraq heavily depend on the nature of the new Iraqi legal system—whether it will be based on Islamic law or a secular constitution which will grant equal rights to all Iraqi citizens."

The demands for the equal rights of all citizens across the Middle East invite questions concerning the relationship of Islam and the state. As has been highlighted in RFI's [Initiative on Islam and the State](#), an ongoing event series exploring these questions, the challenges to religious freedom may emerge as much due to the secularizing, and often authoritarian, nature of the modern nation state as to religiously-based motivations.

In light of this, we invited brief contributions from RFI Fellows on these decade long issues and what might be done to support efforts to make the above aspirations a reality.

In his response, Yusuf Lenfest touches on the importance of freedom of thought alongside religious freedom as a core dimension of promoting individual and societal flourishing. Salah Ali considers the impact of social media, which was a tool that facilitated mobilization but has also become a place of disinformation and discrimination. Osman Softic sets the legacy of the Arab Spring within a regional and geopolitical context and highlights some of the major lingering questions.

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### **Protecting Religious Freedom and Freedom of Thought to Promote Human Flourishing**

*Yusuf Lenfest, Research Fellow, Islam And Religious Freedom Action Team*

In assessing the state of religious freedom in the Middle East and North Africa, we ought also to consider the state of freedom of thought. It is not coincidental that the protection of both religion and intellect are considered foundational aims (*maqāṣid*) of Islamic law. According to the celebrated Persian philosopher and polymath Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), who sought to assess some of the purposes inherent in God's revelation, the preservation of five general goods is essential to human wellbeing, namely: religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property. Later scholars have added to this list, most notably the Tunisian jurist and exegete Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir ibn 'Āshūr (d. 1973) whose major contribution to this discourse would be to propose universal values that could be prioritized as individual and social benefit (*maṣlaḥa*). Ibn 'Āshūr's interpretation encompassed a wider conception of how to approach changing social and political norms, whilst maintaining fidelity to the tradition. He extended the "purposes" of Islamic law to denote the maintenance of "orderliness, equality, freedom, facilitation, and the preservation of pure natural disposition." His

inclusion of “freedom” (*ḥurrīyya*) into the fold, for example, marked a novel usage in keeping with major changes and transformations of thought in the modern world.

Alas, ten years after the Arab Spring, much of the region is beset with civil war; and where a modicum of security or economic stability remains, many contemporary scholars have found themselves pulled into discussions of whether to pursue the priority of peace or justice—not as mutually exclusive, but as a discourse on triage. Such discussions, important though they may be, should not distract us from the crucial ways in which the freedom to believe as well as to practice religion requires freedom of thought. In an increasingly secular world, and with ever-expanding governments and encroaching technologies, the ability to *choose* religion as one’s guiding principles in one’s life is invaluable, for religion is a central source of human flourishing. And, insofar as it imbues one with intrinsic dignity, religion also, ideally, attunes one to acting in the world with compassion and empathy, which are necessary qualities for any society to thrive.

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**Arab Spring: Mohamed Bouazizi, Social Media, Youth, and the incomplete chapter.**

*Salah Ali, Fellow, Middle East Action Team and General Coordinator, Iraq Religious Freedom Roundtable*

The Arab Spring brought hope for a better future for societies who had lived under authoritarian regimes for ages. Yet, in the post Arab Spring-era, most of the societies were marked instead with sectarian violence, religious freedom restrictions, political and economic instability, and the legacy left by the former regimes.

This is not to blame the revolution or those who participated for these realities. The deterioration in the aftermath of Arab Spring was due to a failure to resolve the foundational issue that inspired Mohamed Bouazizi’s act of protest. The primary purpose of Bouazizi’s act of self-immolation, although he may not have verbally said so, was to highlight the absence of equality and fundamental human rights. Bouazizi’s story, which resonated with the experience of so many others, took the region by storm. These stories spread dramatically through social media and ignited the revolutions in other Arab countries.

Social media was one of the prominent features of those events. It was a critical factor in mobilizing youth to join the revolution. Yet, in the post-Arab Spring Middle East, the positive role of social media has largely been distorted. Social media has become a platform for conveying and fueling hatred on the basis of religion, ethnicity and political affiliation.

Social media will remain a defining feature of communication. Youth in particular have an opportunity to promote unity and equality for all, regardless of religion, ethnicity, or political ideology. More attention should be given to utilize social media in a constructive way, in an effort to build that type of society. In other words, it is vital to continue the work to build a society that protects the fundamental rights of all people.

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## **Reflections on The Causes of The Arab Spring's Failure**

*Osman Softic, Project Coordinator, Islam and Religious Freedom Action Team and Senior Research Fellow with the Islamic Renaissance Front*

The Arab Spring was a spontaneous movement of people across the Middle East and North Africa region, who rose up in hope of creating a new abode of freedom, empowerment, political emancipation, social justice, economic prosperity and much more.

Participants of this tumultuous, and yet significant, political rupture like to call them revolutions, even though they were far from what truly qualifies as a revolution in a real sense of what revolution entails. The Arab mass protests movements were nothing like what the American, French, Russian or Iranian revolutions were all about. Arab Spring protests did remove from power some of the most brutal Arab dictators and their inner cliques. However, they failed to usher in a new dawn of democracy, freedom, liberty, let alone, social justice, affluence, and prosperity, as they were aspiring to achieve. It would have been naive to expect that the Arab Spring would produce liberal democracies, as was once hoped for by the American administration under George W. Bush. President Bush's vision of liberal democracy in the Arab world spreading from Iraq has proven to be utopian from the start.

However, it would also be a gross mistake to claim that Arabs and Muslims are incapable of producing democracy or a semblance of just and equitable political order free from arbitrary power of autocratic rule. Every nation and every human yearns for freedom and dignity, peace and betterment. Yet, hierarchical values in the West and in the Arab world may not be the same. Perhaps, this fact could partially explain what many describe as a failure of the Arab Spring.

Judging from the real outcome of the Arab Spring, one could say that, on the one hand, the Western interests were partially satisfied by what transpired from the Arab Spring. The recalcitrant, erratic, totalitarian, and anti-Western dictator, Muammar Qaddafi of Libya, was removed from power and disposed with, albeit in a manner of which no one should be proud.

For balance, Hosni Mubarak, the ailing Egyptian pro-Western autocratic president, whose regime was backed by the military, was also forced to relinquish power under severe pressure. This, however, was achieved by a combination of the people's power and Egyptian military pressure, who were happy to see him go as it offered a convenient occasion to prevent his family members from taking the reign of power and continuing dynastic republican rule. This event was the case in Syria after the departure of Assad senior.

Syria is a special case and deserves a separate assessment. The reason being, it is strategically located where three major Middle Eastern powers collide over geopolitical and security concerns, namely Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. It is in Syria where a peaceful uprising turned violent and its regime, due to multidimensional structural reasons, proved resilient. Here the Arab Spring had unintended consequences for global competition. It provided an opportunity for the re-emergence of Russian power, it enabled a tacit and discrete alliance between Russia and Israel and became a guarantor that the emerging Iranian power will be checked so the US can pursue its pivot to Asia unabashedly. Traditional Arab Gulf monarchies and their security architecture were ruined by Arab Spring divided loyalties.

However, the US can be assured that emerging regional power rivalry between Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia will produce what John Mearsheimer calls emergence of regional hegemon, or an alliance of powers to challenge the US's dominant role. The Arab Spring provided an opportunity for Arab monarchies to reassert themselves as militant jihadism hijacked and compromised the revolution and Arab revolts. Iran, which would otherwise encourage revolutions had they been anti-Western in character, was pleased to see the protests compromised, allowing it to reassert its own geopolitical, hegemonic designs on the region, posing as the protector of the downtrodden (Mustazafine) and the Palestinian cause. Once again, an opportunity was squandered.

But the seeds of Arab awakening have been sown and may emerge in the future. What it looks like, however, will be different.

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