

Transformation of Arabic Identity during the Arabic Spring*

Hüsamettin İNAÇ

Associate Professor of International Relations
Dumlupınar University
Kütahya, Turkey

Abstract

Social movements many times may drastically change the national identities and perception of life. Even upheavels and social turmoils can accelerate this kind of identity transformations and wavings. The movements we encounter in Middle East is a stance against the dictatorships and anti-democratic governments in this region. These movements are really interesting because they derived from the peoples' own initiatives and without any leader and manipulation. For this reason, these movements have been called as 'Arabic Spring' borrowed from the 'Prag Spring of 1968'. Probably, these kinds of definitions and descriptions may reflect some early feelings and excitements because dictatorships and anti-democratic regimes couldn't overtake yet. In this study, we will try to analyze the main socio-political parameters which shape these social movements and elaborate the changing character and transformations of Arabic identity towards the modernization/westernization issues and human rights demands.

Key words: Arabic identity, Arabic Spring, identity transformation, democratization, social movements, social media

1. Introduction: Arab Spring as a Social Movement

Uprisings, upheavels, riots, rebels, protests, challenging resists so-called revolutions and transformations we witness in Arab world since December 2010 is called and stigmatized as social movement in general meaning in world-wide media. In this sense, social movement can be defined as collective, organized, sustained, and noninstitutional challenge to authorities, powerholders, or cultural beliefs and practices. These movements are conscious, concerted, and sustained efforts by ordinary people to change some aspect of their society by using extra-institutional means (Goodwin & Jasper 2006: 3). Some of these movements have looked for opportunities to claim new rights while others have responded to threats or violence. Movements have regularly had to choose between violent and nonviolent activities, illegal and legal ones, disruption and education, extremism and moderation, sometimes they may use more spontaneous actions such as riots. On the other hand, a revolutionary movement is a social movement that seeks, at minimum, to overthrow the government or state.

The term "Arab Spring" was chosen over "Maghreb Crisis", since it does not allegorise an ideological indoctrination. Albeit words such as crisis or conflict are commonly used by the media and by many politicians, they are easily perceived as being biased (Harari 2011: 27). Speaking of a "crisis" in that context conveys the impression of a purely geopolitical point of view and is most likely perceived as very cynical by the people that are directly affected by oppressive regimes. While the term "protest" may not reflect the full scale of the political transformation process, the term "revolution" implies that the overthrowing of the authority is yet accomplished. In the light of the smouldering civil war in Libya, an overhasty conclusion. Albeit the upheaval of Zienel Abidine ben Ali was successful, political struggles continue in Tunisia. In Libya, the protest movement turned into a bloody civil war, where the heinous crimes of Muammar Muhammad Al-Gaddafi triggered a military intervention by NATO.

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In December 2010 the protests in Tunisia set the park for what would become a conflagration of the whole Maghreb region. An unprecedented event, which has the power to transform the political structure all over the Arab world. For people living under constant repression, the reaction of Western countries is of utmost importance, since their effort can help to overcome the suffocating diktat of despotic regimes.

As a matter of fact, the wave of political activism that started in southern Tunisia in December 2010 has now reached all parts of the Arab world, from Morocco in the west to Oman in the east. The fate of these popular uprisings remains in the balance, but it is already clear that they have produced the most dramatic changes in the region since the end of the colonial era in the middle of the 20th century. The “Arab Spring”, however, is a seasonal misnomer (Brown 2011: 63). Since the removal of the Tunisian and Egyptian dictators in January and February 2011, protest movements have stirred but have not flowered. Uprisings in Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria have all led to military confrontations of varying intensity, but the regimes are still in place (except the rulers in Libya and Yemen). In Libya, only NATO intervention has prevented Colonel Muammar Qadhafi’s regime from reimposing its writ over the entire country following a rebellion in February in the eastern city of Benghazi. Bahrain’s uprising has been stamped out with Saudi assistance, and the efforts of a more liberal wing of the royal family to foster a constitutional monarchy disowned. The Syrian regime is mercilessly crushing a popular uprising, and digging in for prolonged resistance to Western diplomatic and economic pressure.

From this perspective, it is important to appreciate that the transformation of Arab world is probably still in its early stages. To talk about “revolutions” is exceedingly premature. So far its most dramatic achievements are the overthrow of the elderly rulers of Egypt and Tunisia. However, the basic structure even of these regimes remains intact. For example, Hosni Mubarak may no longer be Egypt’s president but the army is still firmly in command. There is also a concerted push back against the protestors by regimes such as Bahrain, Yemen, Syria often with the support of regional players such as Saudi Arabia.

2. The Internal and External Dynamics of Arab Spring

Populations in the Middle East demand a structural change in autocratic regimes and implementation of economic and political reforms that ignited a transformation in the Arab world (Aras 2003: 47). The magnitude and scale of this transformation, however, cannot be understood without considering the turbulent history, the religious and ethnic mosaic, almost fanatical allegiance to identities and a variety of other political and economic differences that created latent fault lines. These fault lines, combined with rampant corruption, political strife, a growing middle class and the liberating effect of the Internet to start ‘the Arab Spring’. Despite the comparative differences among the content and context of transformation in individual countries, the resounding message for a democratic Middle East is shared across the region. It will not be an easy journey. Yet, according to Altunışık, we have every reason to be optimistic that the new era of democratic, secular and effective governance in the Middle East will reverse the fates of a region long characterized by conflict and bring peace, stability and prosperity to the Middle East (Altunışık 1999: 86).

In theoretical perspective, effective governance and permanent peace is requisite for security, stability and prosperity in the Middle East (Arı 2008: 32). In this context, the Arab Spring presents a historic opportunity but the challenges ahead require reforms, reconciliation and resolve. The Arab Spring has demonstrated the potent role social media can play in the mobilization and empowerment of traditionally disenfranchised populations. The extreme lengths authoritarian states go to suppress the civil society is no coincidence. A robust civil society is a democratic check and balance on state authority and one of the most efficient ways of promoting effective governance, which is vital for a free and democratic future. Despite considerable reforms and achievements in the last decade, there continues to be a critical divergence between the textual and actual rights attested to civilian actors in the Middle East and sweeping reforms will be needed in all ranks of the society to form this bedrock of a democratic future. In collective identity representation matters, Berting asserts that the collective representations are very functional, serious and even nasty character. In a given social entity, they do not pose problems in intergroup relations. In fact, the analysis of such intergroup problems is one of the central themes of this contribution (Berting 2006: 84).

In this context, it can be argued that three levels of analysis which are interwoven and interactive among them. Firstly, economic and social factors including the rising food prices and the emergence of a better educated but socially frustrated young population.

Secondly, the demise of the traditional sources of legitimacy of the Arab regimes. Neither the Pan-Arabism, nor Anti-Siyonism, and or the political Islam have the purchase they once did in the Arab world. Thirdly, the decline of western influence, particularly of America, in the region. Both the economic and international factors point to the potential for greater instability. On the other hand, the weakening of the legitimacy of Arab regimes is a more ambiguous trend. Although the opposition threatens to destabilise the regimes with its limited goals could, paradoxically, put a self-imposed brake on political change.

2.1 Economy

Poverty and high levels of unemployment were enough to provoke a revolt then the Arab world have permanent uprisings over many decades. Here in order to explain the shift from the relative stability to mass unrest, it is necessary to focus on what has changed rather than what has stayed the same. For instance, high unemployment too is not a new development and has been largely structural during the decades. However, on closer inspection, it is clear that something has changed. In essence, the unemployment have typically become much better educated than in the past. For instance, in Egypt, unemployment rate broadly stable from 1984-2010. However, unemployment for educated youth increased by factor of 10 over the past two decades. What seems to be happening is that many more youth are receiving a higher education but they are often finding it hard to find jobs afterwards. In this context, it is significant that Mohammad Bouazizi, the Tunisian whose self-immolation sparked off the protests, was reportedly a university graduate. In any case, it is this high level of educated youth unemployment that probably helps explain the use of facebook and twitter in organising the protests. It is not that social networking tools were a cause of unrest. Social networking has in turn become a symbol of new generation.

2.2 Legitimacy of Arab States / Regimes

Perhaps the most misunderstood aspect of the protests relates to their political character. Western commentators in particular are quick to see the shadow of Islamic fundamentalism behind every protest. It would be better to see the protests as the result of the crisis of legitimacy of Arab regimes. Many of the rulers have their roots in an earlier era rather than having a close connection with contemporary Arab societies. For instance, Egypt's Mubarak was essentially the last representative of the Free Officers Coup of 1952. In essence, all the traditional sources of Arab legitimacy have been eroded. Pan-Arabism had been exhausted by the 1960s, anti-Zionism by the 1990s, and most recently political Islam has lost support. In a sense then, the mood in the Arab street can be defined as post-Arabist, post-anti-Zionist and post-Islamic. In order to avoid misunderstandings, it is necessary to explain the terms we mentioned in this section.

2.2.1. Pan-Arabism

During the first phase of the independence of the Arab regimes until 1967, the borders of the Arab regimes were largely seen as artificial impositions of the West. There was a widespread popular desire for the leaders to transcend and for the recognition of a single Arab nation. There was often a serious attempt to turn Egypt and Syrian into a unified country during this period (Ari 2008: 46-49). The aspiration of Pan-Arabism were dealt a devastating blow with the Arab-Israeli war of 1967. In just 6 days, Israel destroyed the armies of the surrounding Arab countries including that of Egypt, the most populous Arab states and the leading driver of Pan-Arabism. A unified Arab nation no longer seemed like a realistic possibility.

2.2.2. Anti-Zionism

Arab regimes used to be able to use anti-Israel rhetoric as a way of winning popular support from their population. The Arab world would generally present itself as supporting the struggle for Palestinian freedom against what it saw as the Zionist enemy and its western supporters (Hatina 2007: 69). In any case, the tactic of winning popular legitimacy by proclaiming support for the Palestinian struggle has lost purchase because of Oslo Accord of 1993 which settles the Egypt's accommodation with Israel and western powers. Actually, it is really plausible and apprehensible that the Jewish identity is other of the Arabic identity in many sociological and historical respects. However, some Arabic politicians and dictators overemphasized and exaggerated this otherness issue and hostility in order to legitimize their cruel and brutal politics and attach the citizens against the common threat. Whereas, in theory, according to İnaç, identity is created by means of interaction and hostility between the self and other. Actually, in identification process, somebody or unit automatically combines the similarities and differences in different sets. If the line between self and other or similarities and differences overemphasized provokatively, there would be no chance to live different cultures together (İnaç 2005: 77).

2.2.3. Political Islam

The question of political Islam is probably the most misunderstood factor in the Middle East. Many western commentators seem to see a straight line from handscarves and the Islamic regime in Iran to jihadi organization such as al-Qaeda. From this perspective, the question is how extreme they are. In reality, Islam is as varied as Christianity with its multiplicity of community in terms of those who act in its name (İnaç 2005: 99). In many cases, there is little in common between different Islamic groups and trends. For instance, even though many of the Egyptian population are religious, they keep their faith separate from their political demands. In this sense, the movement of Arab Spring is secular. There is a paradoxical case in Egyptian state. That is, according to the Article 2 of the Egyptian Constitution: “Islam is the religion of the state”. Nevertheless, the society is not convenient with the model of theocratic state. Religion is a part of national identity. It was cultural but not political notion.

In this context, newly established Turkish Republic during 1923 and onwards, with the influence of the anti-democratic structure of the Europe which is composed of Nazist, socialist, and fascist governments was favour of the radical laicism borrowed from the France. According to this version of laicism, the state is bound to press and control the religion. The citizen should believe and pray in accordance with the principles determined by the state. Nevertheless, in line with the democratization of Europe and EU membership process of Turkey, Turkey shifted from the radical laicism into the democratic secularisation process. Actually it was transformation from the Central European law into supremacy of law principle. The first version of law depends upon the distinction of state and society before law. That is; according to Lewis, the state dictates law and the society obeys, the citizen is perceived as threat against the state, the citizen should accept the ideology indoctrinized and imposed by the state, the state is subject of public law which gives priority for the state, the individual is subject of common law which weakens him / her against the crimes committed by the state. On the other hand, the principle of the supremacy of law is originated by the society and the individual and state should obey these rules created by the state equally (Lewis 1993: 42-48). This approach makes the society much more harmonized and homogenized. There is no authoritarian attitude and the dictation of religion for the citizen.

Overall, all three pillars of the legitimacy of the Arab regimes have either been discredited or are in the process of losing it. Neither Pan-Arabism, nor Anti-Zionism nor political Islam is sufficient to give them a convincing claim to political leadership . nor are there any alternative visions on the horizon. In this framework, Turkey’s experience of democracy has vitally importance for the Arab uprising. For instance, Egypt is multicultural country which consists of different religions, sects, and ethnicities. Copts constitutes the ten percent of the population.

In this context, Turkey engaged of the attempts for a new Constitution which will lead to redefine the citizenship and identity issues. In this experience, it is really expected to reach the equal citizenship and the definition of the identity which will be comprehensive and represent every segments of society. Ultimate target of these efforts is to create a multicultural society to promote the rights of the ethnic, religious, linguistic minorities by revising the existing system of education, governance, and political orientation. In international politics, Turkey lives the privilege of having this understanding of secularism. However, Turkey is a unique country which is secular, democratic and law state endowed with the western values even she consists of mostly Muslim citizens (İnaç 2005: 145-147). This character of Turkey may make Turkey role-model for the Arabic countries which seek the more democratic and comfortable life. Nevertheless, this discussion has been occurred in Turkey within the extent of “moderate Islam” and in Middle East the people had some hesitations against the word “laicism”.

3. *Relative Decline of American Influence*

In recent decades, western influence in the Middle East has declined significantly in both economic and political terms. Although the West remains a key player, it does not have the overriding influence it once did. At the same time, the rise of developing East Asia, particularly China, is leading to a global reorientation of economies and politics. And the global financial crisis prevented, limited and lessened the influence of the West over the Middle East.

Actually, America’s influence has declined more in political terms than economic respects (Raymond 2003: 94). From this perspective, the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have underlined the limits of American power.

Despite the massive use of military power, the new Iraq is far from a model of democracy and Afghanistan as the one of the world's poorest countries has not been subdued. Nor has USA succeeded in imposing a final settlement on Israel and Palestinians despite several well-publicised attempts. Actually 9/11 events in 2001 and invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003 by excuse of bringing democracy into the region provoked the discussion of "clash of civilizations" theory developed by Samuel Huntington.

Therefore not only with its political insufficiency but also her economic weakness, USA influence on the Middle East is likely to decline further. Meanwhile, America's foreign policy is shifting more towards East Asia while Europe's influence is declining overall. Therefore, western influence, while still strong, is a long way from its zenith.

4. Conclusion

The area will remain destabilized over an extended period. It is not possible to say that what will happen in the future is not clear. If the Arab regimes fail to deliver on the aspirations of their increasingly educated populations, they are likely to see increased instability. Meanwhile, the continuing decline of the West will decrease the legitimacy of existing Arab regimes. For instance, Syrian government pretended and disguised as willing to make some democratic concessions and if the opposition would compromise with minimal demands, opposition would be coopted by the regimes. Nevertheless, in recent months Syrian leader shed the blood of her people brutally. In those countries, only the most determined opposition is likely to succeed in bringing democratic change. Polity will get polarized and there will be long disputes over new political structures and methods of governance. Democracy chances appear slim. At the wider international level, Arab countries of the region may constitute themselves into a bloc against the western world.

As a result, Arab Spring so far is likely to be only the opening prelude to a long-running process of change. These movements accelerated the waning, changing and transformation of identities which had the possibility to promote and claim as a result of this social movement. Lastly, it is necessary to bear in mind that nobody could predict whether this process would be culminated with democratic tendency.

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