

Assessment Four

The Impact of the 'Arab Spring' and its Relationship with Islam and Muslim Identities

Muslim Politics

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Introduction

The Arab Spring of 2010-2011 was a monumental set of events that affected and threatened multiple non-democratic regimes in the Middle East region. Interestingly, the events illustrated a reinvigoration of Islamic identity, as compared to previous movements in the Middle East, similar to the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979 under Ayatollah Khomeini. Along with the reinvigoration of an Islamic identity, there was also the emergence of the relevance of Islamist parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. The foundational values of Islamist parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, offered an alternative option for regime change, simultaneously contrasting the system of administrative values of previous regimes.

Yet, it is important to note, that the prompting of the Arab Spring was not solely due to issues related to religion, although factors of Islamic identity and the allowance of public religious practice are significant. Political factors, as well as socioeconomic disparities, are crucial factors to analyze the exposition of the Arab Spring. However, Islamist parties offered a solution to the frustration of the middle-class population, who felt that western modernization and Arab socialism were a failure, prompting a desire for an alternate system.¹ This allowed for the relevancy of Islamist parties, who were often ostracized, irrelevant, or banned, and reinvigorated a concept of Islamic identity in the public sphere of politics and economics. This is depicted by the success of Islamist parties after the Arab Spring in subsequent elections in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, as well as promoting civil unrest to existing regimes in Libya, Syria, and Yemen.²

This paper is going to examine the Arab Spring and its relationship and relevance with Islamic and Muslim identities. Part I is going to examine the social, economic, and political factors that led to the Arab Spring, as well as the relevance of Islamist parties during the movement. Part II is going to examine the changes that occurred during and after the Arab Spring, illustrating the reinvigoration of Islamic identity, specifically of attempts at reforming institutions to accommodate a larger Islamic identity.

¹ John P. Entelis. 2014. "Islamic Awakening," *Great Decisions*: p. 42 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43681114>

² Oliver Roy. 2017. "Review: Political Islam After the Arab Spring: Between Jihad and Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, 96.6: p. 129 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44823828>

Part I.

There are significant similarities between the genesis of the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979 and that of the 2010-2011 Arab Spring, particularly the social environments of both movements which led to their successes, as well as attempts at perpetuating an Islamic identity. When analyzing the Pahlavi regime of Iran, there was a firm attempt at western modernization, along with the regime stressing a national Iranian identity rather than an Islamic one.³ Similarly, Tunisia, which marked the beginning of the Arab Spring movement that spanned throughout the region, held a relatively limited Muslim identity in terms of government and national identity, despite being 98% Sunni Muslim.⁴ Another key feature in the commonalities of the pre-Islamic Revolution of Iran and before the Arab Spring movement was the limits of religious freedom within the public sphere. In 1930s Iran, Reza Shah banned the *hijab*, traditional clothing, as well as the *Moharram* processions, which at times were implemented with force.⁵ Similarly in Egypt, Hosni Mubarak banned the public proclamation of religious faith in 1985.⁶ In both cases, there is a clear practice in the limitations of religious freedom by the ruling regimes, prompting a religious tenor in later rebellions, illustrating a vigor display of Islamic identity in subsequent regimes.

Yet, economic, technical, and social factors were a key component in the demand for regime change during the Arab Spring movement. The Middle East is not immune to the globalized efforts of instant communication and the rapid spread of information, including perspectives on Islamic identity. As compared to preceding generations in their respective countries, young Arabs of 2010-2011, as well as currently, make more use of technology than previous generations, prompting a different form of social interaction. Political, economic, and religious ideologies are more feasibly spread, providing various perspectives, and exhibiting attachments to different values and more practical concerns.⁷

³ Kamran Scot Aghaie. 2004. *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press) p. 47

⁴ Evelyn Mary Aswad. 2015. "The Role of Religion in Constitutions Emerging from Arab Spring Revolutions," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 16.1: p. 154 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43773677>

⁵ Aghaie, p. 52

⁶ Yvonne Y. Haddad. 1987. "Islamic 'Awakening' in Egypt," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 9.3: p. 239 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41857930>

⁷ Youssef Mohamed Sawani. 2012. "The 'End of Pan-Arabism' Revisited," *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 5.3: p. 383 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48599901>

Interestingly, the internet, primarily social media, was an active area in showcasing public participation in the Arab Spring movement, with ideas and commonalities spreading to nearby countries. Although internet access and widespread availability were not a common feature in public discourse, such as in Egypt, it provided a great deal of significance for building organized networks of opposition, primarily with those sympathetic to the Islamist cause. With the utilization of social media, activists could engage in debate and discuss issues without the fear of retribution, and where political dissidents could lead organized movements. Although the Mubarak regime attempted to limit internet access during the tumultuous period of his regime, the effects backfired, possibly inciting more public displeasure with the regime and sympathy for Islamist opposition groups.⁸

With the failure of the economic prosperity of existing regimes, Islamist parties, often banned and ostracized within the public domain, seized an opportunity for relevance and authority. Their use of Islamic rhetoric and religious tenor were utilized to criticize, not just the performance of existing regimes and to address grievances, but to attack the values of these regimes, simultaneously criticizing the Western influence on the regime and imperial history.⁹ Islamic identity and tenor, such as the use of Islamic terminology, were at the forefront in providing a common identity, crossing various socio-economic boundaries. Therefore, an idealized public Islamic identity is proposed as a useful alternative to the nationalist, socialist policies of preceding regimes.

Yet, while groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, engaged in the spreading of ideas of a common Islamic identity and religious tenor to voice opposition, there was a pragmatic approach to furthering the Islamist cause. Although an idealized conception of a unified Islamic state, such as the Caliphate, may be desirable to Islamists, it wasn't necessarily a pragmatic goal they set to establish or implement. Islamist parties, like the Muslim Brotherhood, sought to be genuine movements, looking to make change within existing institutions, primarily at the grassroots level of society, such as in charitable causes.¹⁰ The aspect of pragmatic social change, and sidelining

⁸ Catherine O'Donnell. 2011. "New Study Quantifies Use of Social Media in Arab Spring," *University of Washington News* <https://www.washington.edu/news/2011/09/12/new-study-quantifies-use-of-social-media-in-arab-spring/>

⁹ Sawani, p. 130

¹⁰ Roy, p. 128

of idealized Islamist causes was significant in the mainstream relevance of Islamist parties, generating a unified Islamic identity.

Part II.

The Arab Spring undoubtedly had a lasting effect on Islamic identity, which can be witnessed by the subsequent changes in attempts at institutional reforms, some of which are still relevant in contemporary Arab societies. For instance, when analyzing both Egypt and Tunisia, two of the most significant areas where the Arab Spring occurred, there is an increased emphasis by the newly appointed Islamist regimes, on a unified Islamic identity.

When analyzing the Egyptian Constitution of 2012 after the election of Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, there is a clear emphasis on the public role of Islam within Egypt's government and national identity. The Article I clause of Egypt's 2012 Constitution emphasized that Egyptians were a part of a larger set of "Islamic nations," with national citizenship and identity not being listed as a premise.¹¹ This clause introduced by the Morsi government, proposed a unified Islamic identity, limiting a nationalistic one. This clause provides a network of a much larger Islamic identity extending beyond Egypt's borders, a significant departure from the previous nationalistic policies of Egypt and the wider region.

Tunisia's subsequent Constitution post the Arab Spring movement in 2014, also witnessed an increased emphasis on Islamic identity, as well as Islam's role within the administrative institutions in Tunisia. In the preceding Constitution of Tunisia, Islam was rarely mentioned and made the concept of *Sharia* not being the main source of law for the land definitive. However, there is a departure from the secular sentiment of Tunisia's later Constitution after the Arab Spring. Although the 2014 post-Arab Spring Constitution did not designate *Sharia* as being the source of legislation, the Islamist elements strongly considered adding it to the Constitution, a significant departure from preceding Tunisian traditions.¹²

Additionally, in Tunisia's 2014 Constitution, a clause was introduced illustrating the importance of an Islamic identity, as well as Islamic reform within the public domain. In paragraph 3 of the preamble, the clause states that Tunisia is "committed to Islamic teachings

¹¹ Aswad, p. 161

¹² Aswad, p. 164

and reform based on Islamic identity,” with a later paragraph illustrating a similar sentiment to Egypt’s post-Arab Spring Constitution, in which Tunisia seeks to build a “[consolidated] affiliation to ‘Muslim nations’ and towards complementary unity with Muslim peoples.”¹³ Most significantly, although stating that all Tunisians are equal before Tunisian law, the presidency is limited only to a Muslim national, effectively excluding non-Muslims from the presidency.¹⁴

Yet, Egypt’s constitutional reform was short-lived, with the subsequent military takeover of Egypt, ousting the Muslim Brotherhood and Mohamed Morsi. To counter any prospective movements associated with Islamist political parties, the newly implemented 2014 Egyptian Constitution featured a return to much of Mubarak’s Constitution, such as in Article 74, which bans the formation of religious political parties.¹⁵ Although the tenure of the Muslim Brotherhood and their attempts at reformation of the Constitution may have been short, it was nevertheless significant, with it being reflected in the 2014 Egyptian Constitution. While the Constitution limited the formation and expression of Egyptian’s Islamist parties, some provisions continued to feature aspects of the 2012 Constitution. This is primarily witnessed under Article 2 which maintained Islam as Egypt’s official state religion, along with the affirmation that the *Sharia* is the primary source for legislation, although its implementation can be questioned.¹⁶

Conclusion

The Arab Spring movement of 2010-2011 provided a monumental shift in the political structure of the Middle East, primarily in its reinvigoration of Islamic identity. Aspects such as the relevance of Islamist political parties, as well as institutional reforms aimed at emphasizing a shared Islamic identity, illustrate the effects of the Arab Spring. Yet, in the case of Egypt, the change was short-lived. After the Mohamed Morsi-led regime failed to provide the economic stability it promised, many Egyptians welcomed military rule in 2013.¹⁷

Egypt’s short-lived tenure with the Muslim Brotherhood also illustrates the possible limitations associated with a perpetuation of Islamic identity, in which religious rhetoric and

¹³ Aswad, p. 165

¹⁴ Aswad, p. 166

¹⁵ Aswad, p. 163

¹⁶ Aswad, p. 162

¹⁷ Roy, p. 130

identity don't satisfy economic priorities or even an idea of a uniformed identity. Although not the purpose of this study, it is important to note various aspects of identity that are significant in its coexistence with an Islamic identity. Ethnic identity is a significant aspect of identification across the Arab population of the Middle East. This is corroborated by a study reflecting how 71% of respondents across Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Sudan, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania are unified in the belief of Arab identity, as well as identifying the Palestinian cause as a pan-Arab cause.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the Arab Spring revitalized an Islamic identity across the region, with its effects relevant to the contemporary political landscape.

¹⁸ Sawani, p. 385

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