Publication of the Arab Forum for Alternatives on social movements and democratic transition in the Arab region

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Since its foundation, the Arab Forum for Alternatives has been dealing with the Arab region as a unified entity for despite the specificity of each country, all countries in the region are constantly influenced by one another. This was particularly demonstrated in the uprisings that took place in the region. The Arab region witnessed two waves of the Arab Spring. The first started in Tunisia in December 2010 and included Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Libya, and Bahrain while the second started in Sudan in December 2018 and included Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq. The two waves cannot be seen in isolation from social movements that had started years before. This was the case in Egypt with the creation of the Egyptian Movement for Change, also known as Kefaya, and the establishment of independent trade unions. The same applies to Tunisia with the eruption of the Mine Basin uprising in Gafsa in 2008, in Syria with the protests known as the Damascus Spring in 2000, and in Yemen with southern movements in 2007.

Like it is not possible to isolate the Arab Spring from earlier movements that paved the way for it, it is also not possible to separate the two waves of the Arabic Spring from one another and the same will apply to future waves. This is because political changes, together with preceding or subsequent developments, cannot be seen independently for they are waves that at times flow and at others ebb, yet they never stop.

Arab Spring countries faced several challenges that were mainly related to the transition from authoritarianism to democracy. These included the reformation of state institutions especially security, the judiciary, and the media, the shape of the new political system and whether it should be presidential or parliamentary, and ways of initiating democratic transition especially the question of whether elections or the constitution should come first. Added to these were a number of issues pertaining to citizenship such as religious and ethnic minorities, the status of women, social and political rights, and the relationship between the center and the periphery. The reformation of municipalities was also a pressing issue.

Dealing with those issues was far from easy following decades of authoritarian rule that led to undermining state institutions. Different political factions also committed mistakes during the transitional period, ones that accentuated polarization within each society especially between Islamism and secularism. On the other hand, several revolutionary groups also chose to take up

arms, leading to the eruption of civil conflicts. Both developments led to the failure of the Arab Spring in all first wave countries. In Egypt and Tunisia, the polarization between Islamist and secular factions reached its peak. The Egyptian army toppled the Muslim Brotherhood in July 2013 while Tunisian president Kais Said suspended Al Nahda controlled parliament and took over all legislative and executive powers in July 2021 then dissolved the parliament altogether in March 2022.

Many scholars assumed that the Arab Spring was over and the discourse about the Arab region not being ready for democracy returned to the forefront. Sudan, however, proved them wrong when in December 2018 people took to the streets and called for toppling Omar Al Bashir's regime. Like what happened in the first wave, other countries followed suit as Algerians staged protests against Abdel Aziz Bouteflika's regime while protests against sectarianism erupted in Lebanon and Iraq. Similar to its predecessor, the second wave was also faced with several challenges, on top of which was the Covid-19 pandemic that put an end to all protests, hence putting all demands on hold.

Looking back at the past decade, it becomes obvious that the Arb Spring is far from over. This was not only demonstrated by the second wave, but also by the fact that social, political, and economic demands of the people have not been met and a formula has not yet been reached that achieves stability in the region. It is also important to take into consideration that since the start of the first protests, the Arab region has undergone a lot of substantial changes that need to be addressed. While those changes vary, they can fall under three main categories: fear of the collapse of state institutions, increased social polarization, and the prioritization of social and economic demands.

In 2011, protestors from Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen had little concerns about the collapse of state institutions. In fact, when several regimes started using the "we or chaos" discourse to put an end to protests, which was particularly the case in Egypt, protestors did not take that threat seriously and continued their protests. However, when civil wars erupted in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, the threat materialized and fears of the collapse of state institutions intensified. Upon realizing that the discourse on the link between revolution and chaos is not totally fabricated, people started eying all calls for protest and regime change with suspicion and protecting state institutions became the main priority.

As for the second change, it is obvious that religious, ethnic, and political polarization increased remarkably in the Arab region following the uprisings. Dialogue between Islamist and secular forces in Egypt and Tunisia in the 1990s and the early 2000s played a major role in building relative trust between both parties, which paved the way for the Arab Spring, in which both Islamists and seculars called for the toppling of authoritarian regimes. However, this changed when the regimes they protested against were toppled as the rift between Islamists and seculars started deepening even more than before. Seculars accused Islamists of attempting to monopolize power while Islamists accused seculars of allying with former regime loyalists to exclude them from the

political scene. Religious and ethnic tensions also rose after the Arab Spring, which was particularly demonstrated in the Syrian case between Sunnis and Shiites, Arabs and Kurds, and Muslims and Christians. Such tensions make it extremely hard for people to agree on a plan for political reform.

The third change, the prioritization of social and economic demands, became obvious since the start of the protests where protestors linked between political reform on one hand and social and economic rights on the other hand. They assumed that toppling authoritarian regimes will automatically mean solving their social and economic problems, but this is not what happened. In fact, those problems increased to the extent that many people saw that their conditions before the Arab Spring were better than after. In Tunisia, where the Arab Spring started, protests for social and economic demands continued throughout the years that followed Ben Ali's ouster. In 2019, Tunisia witnessed more than 9,000 social protests and in the decade that followed the Arab Spring, protests erupted all over the country and protestors had many demands including job opportunities and public services as well as environmental justice as a result of sea contamination that affected fishing communities. Those protests extended to Sidi Bouzid, where the revolution started with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi. Locals in Sidi Bouzid saw that their conditions are worse than they were before the revolution.

Arab countries that took part in the first and second waves of the Arab Spring were not able to achieve a democratic transition that meets their demands for freedom and social justice. This failure is not uncommon in revolutions. For the past two centuries, steps were taken towards democratic reform in several countries then were retracted, which led people to start struggling for their freedom again and so on. In fact, political change does not move in a straight line in most cases, but rather comes and goes like waves and with each wave, different issues emerge that need to be addressed by politicians and social movements as well as research centers.

Now that 15 years have passed since the foundation of the Arab Forum of Alternatives, a list is compiled of the forum's most important publications on social movements and democratic

transition in the Arab region. The list can be divided into three main focal points: first, the role of social movements in political reform; second, analytical studies of the two waves of the Arab Spring that underline their reasons, transitional periods, and outcomes; third, political change issues in the post-Arab Spring era such as political parties, the media, military-civilian relationships, and citizenship among others.

First: Social movements in the Arab region

1- Book:

Looking for the light: Youths in the Arab region… hopes and outcomes
https://www.afalebanon.org/ar/publication/9387/

2- Book:

Protest movements in the Arab region
https://www.afalebanon.org/ar/publication/8199/

3- Book:

Civil society in the Arab region:
Post-revolutionary developments and challenges
https://www.afalebanon.org/ar/publication/8092/

4- Book:

Youths and militant groups
https://www.afalebanon.org/ar/publication/5825/

5- Book:

Non-conventional political participation of youths in Egypt before, after, and during the revolution
https://www.afalebanon.org/ar/publication/5100/

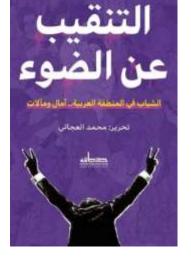## Second: The Arab Spring: Path and outcomes

1- Study:

"The relapse of democracy in the Arab region"

https://www.afalebanon.org/ar/publication/9386/

2- Study:

"Populism and alternative discourse"

https://www.afalebanon.org/ar/publication/8426/

3- Book:

Crises of political development in the Arab region

https://www.afalebanon.org/ar/publication/8090

4- Book:

The left and Arab revolutions

https://www.afalebanon.org/ar/publication/5614/

5- Book:

Arab dignity revolutions: Perceptions on post-neoliberalism

https://www.afalebanon.org/ar/publication/5378/

Third: Issues of democratic transition

1-Book:

Media reformation in the Arab world: Professionalism and institutionalization

https://www.afalebanon.org/ar/publication/6747/

2-Book:

Supporting citizenship through municipalities in the Arab region

https://www.afalebanon.org/ar/publication/6795/

3-Book:

Reforming institutions in the Arab region

https://www.afalebanon.org/ar/publication/5869/

4-Book:

Municipal councils and societal participation: Arab models

https://www.afalebanon.org/ar/publication/5862/

5-Book:

Citizenship and social components in the Arab region

https://www.afalebanon.org/ar/publication/5809/