The ‘Arab Spring’ is the popular rejection of the political and economic scenario that has prevailed across the Arab world from Morocco to Yemen over the last 100 years. In the post-colonial era following the Second World War, country after country in Asia, Latin America and, recently, in Africa moved towards establishing a democratic political system. But the Arab world was excluded from this political evolution and remained mired in despotic and tyrannical rule over polities that were politically and economically stagnant and functioned primarily to serve the interests of the despots and their immediate coterie, as well as Western interests, rather than those of their own population.

This Arab order emerged from the arrangements put in place after the First World War by the Versailles and other agreements. David Fromkin described the Versailles-created political scenario in the Middle East as follows:

The Middle East became what it is today . . . because the European powers undertook to reshape it . . . During and after the First World War, Britain and her Allies destroyed the old order in the region irrevocably; they smashed Turkish rule of the Arabic-speaking Middle East beyond repair. To take its place, they created countries, nominated rulers, delineated frontiers, and introduced a state system of the sort that exists everywhere else; but they did not quell all significant local opposition to those decisions.

The settlement of 1922, therefore, does not belong entirely or even mostly to the past; it is at the very heart of current wars, conflicts, and politics in the Middle East . . . 1

The leaderships that headed the Arab polities before the Arab Spring consisted of authoritarian rulers who were either traditional monarchs or the products of military-led coups d’états. Western intervention and the exercise to control the political order of West Asia—North Africa (WANA) began as early as 1912, when the British began to power their navy with oil instead of coal, the resource that was available most plentifully and economically in the Gulf region. Throughout the 20th century, Western domination over the polities in WANA remained in place, although the Anglo-French alliance was replaced after the Second World War by the United States as the lead role-player for promoting Western interests.

The principal US interests in WANA were, first, ensuring steady oil supplies to Western markets to sustain their economic growth and lifestyle and, second, the
‘security’ of Israel, which in effect meant supporting at all times the maximalist Israeli agenda articulated by its right wing elements working closely with their supporters in the US political establishment. Flowing from these two points, the US interest also included ensuring that no other player, regional or extra-regional, who was antagonistic to Western interests be allowed to emerge or become influential in the region. Although there was, in the early part of the Cold War, some degree of competition between the USA and the USSR, which impacted politics in the WANA region, the scale soon tilted in favour of the West whose interests were supported by the traditional monarchies as well as by Egypt after Camp David I.

This scenario ensured that the political evolution of the WANA countries remained stunted and they failed to experience the free and democratic order that was emerging in other parts of the world. The creation of Israel in 1948 and the overwhelming Arab military defeat in 1967 generated a deep sense of defeat, demoralisation and despair across WANA. This was aggravated by the failure of the Arab political systems to provide economic opportunities for their people. While the oil boom significantly transformed the infrastructure and lifestyles in the Gulf monarchies and some parts of North Africa, it was characterised by crony capitalism at the top, with the exclusion of the bulk of the population from the economic fruits of the oil wealth.

The failure of the Arab political and economic systems was well documented in the First Arab Human Development Report (AHDR), published by Arab scholars in July 2002. The AHDR presented a devastatingly negative picture of the political and socio-economic situation prevailing in the Arab world compared with other regions. It spoke of three deficits in the Arab world—freedom, empowerment of women, and knowledge—and called for comprehensive reform. This AHDR was followed by four more reports that focused on specific issues highlighted in the first report.

The pervasive malaise across the Arab world and the failure of the leaderships to respond to them led some Arabs to fall into the embrace of radical Islam, represented primarily by Al-Qaeda, and to pursue a campaign of violence and terror both against Western targets and Arab regimes seen to be affiliated to Western (and, by extension, Israeli) interests. The climate of radicalism was engendered by the successful jihad in Afghanistan, and, through the 1990s, it proliferated across many Arab countries, with Al-Qaeda elements and their local affiliates perpetrating numerous acts of terror in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco and Yemen. This violence culminated in the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington. These events, as well as the later US-led attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq, further enhanced the seductive allure of Islamic extremist groups, which pursued particularly virulent campaigns in Pakistan and Iraq.

Separately, after the events of 9/11, there was a ‘reform debate’ across the region up to 2005, when the Bush administration promoted the cause of comprehensive political, economic and socio-cultural reform across the Arab world to eradicate the religious extremism that had taken up arms against the West. However, with the failure of the USA to control Iraq and make it the base and model for ‘reformed’ polities across West Asia, the enthusiasm for reform in the US administration withered away and it reaffirmed its ties with its traditional allies—the despots across the Arab world.

Towards the end of the first decade of this century, it was already clear that extremist Islam was losing its efficacy and its appeal of articulating the anti-regime and anti-West anger and frustration of the Arab people, and the region was ready for a broader and more comprehensive upsurge by the bitter and marginalised populace.
Sources of Arab agitations

While there is an ongoing debate over the factors that led to the first popular agitation in Tunisia from mid-December 2010 onwards, and its quick spread across different parts of Arab world, the sources of discontent are clear. There was deep frustration among young people, including those educated and well qualified, about their persistent unemployment and under-employment, and the exclusion and humiliation they endured. They witnessed in their polity widespread poverty and economic mismanagement, and contrasted this with the rampant corruption, the vulgar wealth and gross self-indulgence of their leadership and those around them. This pervasive frustration and sense of marginalisation led the youth to demand an economic order based on transparency and accountability. This was but a short step from seeking a reformed political system based on popular participation in the political process.

A Saudi commentator, writing in February 2011, described the situation thus:

What is happening in Egypt is a historical transformation which has not been witnessed by the Arab world in its modern history. What the demonstrations of the youth are demanding is not less than a complete break with the current era at all political, economic and social levels. We, nowadays, are witnessing a radical transformation in the history and geography of the Arab world. Hence the Arab world, after these days, will not be as it was previously.

The Arab Spring, with political changes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, has the following significant characteristics:

(i) For the first time in modern Arab history, four prominent Arab leaders have been overthrown primarily as a result of domestic civil action.
(ii) The economic and political demands articulated by the Arab youth were anchored in domestic concerns, were largely secular in character and very similar across the Arab world.
(iii) Political mobilisation was radically transformed: transnational satellite television broadcasting, and specifically Al-Jazeera television, played a major role in highlighting the people’s unrest in every corner of the Arab world. Other instruments of modern technology were also used to articulate grievances and demands and mobilise mass movements, such as the mobile phone with camera and internet connection.
(iv) Above all, the Tunisian, Egyptian and Yemeni events exposed the fragility of the regimes and, in spite of several decades of power, showed how thin and narrow their support base really was.

The Arab Spring began with the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia, itself an unprecedented act, described by Farhad Khosrokhavar as ‘a daring action, denoting a rupture with Islamic rhetoric and reflecting a high level of secularisation’. Throughout the agitation in Tunisia and Egypt and later in Yemen and Bahrain, the demands articulated were those of freedom, democracy and dignity, constituting for the first time in recent West Asian history the true globalisation of the popular aspirations in the region.

Patterns in the uprising

The uprisings began in those Arab countries where young people had already had experience of street mobilisation, i.e. those countries where despotic leaders used to
organise state-sponsored public demonstrations to affirm support for their regimes. Tunisia, Egypt and Syria fall into this category. Later, the other countries that witnessed uprisings were those where there were political parties and some limited political activity in the form of elections, to generally toothless national assemblies; these countries included Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Jordan and Yemen. In these countries, the people simply demanded the replacement of the present bodies by empowered assemblies from which a popularly supported prime minister would emerge; in the monarchies, this meant the demand for a constitutional monarchy.

In countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) which had provided for some political participation, i.e. Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman, oil had been discovered and commercialised early in the last century, before other parts of the Gulf. This meant active British involvement in the countries concerned, leading to the development of a socio-cultural order based on widespread modern education and emancipation of women. Consequently, in these countries a more developed political consciousness was in place well before other GCC countries, such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, which have had no experience of street politics or limited elections and have largely remained politically inert.

The present scenario

The present scenario across the Arab world is made up of the following. Firstly, in three countries—Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen—despots who ruled for 30 years or more have been evicted from their positions as a result of an indigenous popular upsurge. These countries are likely to witness major political changes on democratic lines over the next two to three years.

Secondly, in two countries—Libya and Syria—the leaders concerned dealt with the uprisings militarily. In Libya, this led to a civil war situation, with Western countries (along with some Arab allies) overtly supporting the opposition and covertly providing military assistance to the insurgents. This culminated in the grisly death of the leader, Muammar Gaddafi, and has been followed by widespread murder and mayhem, with the motley groups that participated in the uprising now jostling for power, influence and financial advantage. Following elections, a ‘liberal’ has emerged as prime minister, but the country continues to experience discord and disorder. As a French observer has noted: ‘real power will continue to be held by people who have a monopoly on violence and no interest in a budding political life’. The validity of this observation is affirmed by recent events in Libya when well-armed extremist Islamic militia attacked the US official facilities in Benghazi and killed the US Ambassador and other American officials.

In Syria, there is an ongoing bloody civil conflict, with increasingly shrill Arab and Western criticism of the Assad regime and calls for its replacement. The Syrian uprising acquired a sectarian character when the government reacted to it with ‘systematic violence and killing’, and in the process converted the democratic movements into a sectarian conflict. Alawite elements were armed and encouraged to launch attacks on Sunnis on the grounds that Alawite survival was linked with the survival of the Assad regime. Thus, as Khosrokhabar has noted, a sectarian mould has now been imposed on a movement that started out as non-sectarian in nature. There are reports of active Arab and Western military and financial support to the insurgents through logistical and training bases on every border that Syria has with its neighbours. While Russia and China have so far vetoed UN Security Council resolutions sanctioning external
intervention, given the powerful array of forces ranged against it, the Assad regime is likely to experience intense pressure and has an uncertain future.

The third aspect of the scenario is the attempt in the GCC countries to curb domestic uprisings through coercive force, with simultaneous sops to the populace to buy peace and maintain the status quo. In Bahrain, in March 2011, the national security forces were buttressed by a Saudi military intervention with about 1,000–1,200 National Guard elements. The dissidents were dispersed and several leaders arrested. The king has since offered a revival of dialogue with opposition figures, but public demonstrations continue and the situation remains uncertain and unstable.

In Oman, public agitations have been defused for now, with the Sultan acting quickly to offer financial benefits to young people, particularly the unemployed, thoroughly revamping the council of ministers and setting up a commission to study political reform. In Bahrain, in March 2011, the national security forces were buttressed by a Saudi military intervention with about 1,000–1,200 National Guard elements. The dissidents were dispersed and several leaders arrested. The king has since offered a revival of dialogue with opposition figures, but public demonstrations continue and the situation remains uncertain and unstable.

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In Saudi Arabia, the leadership has set aside huge financial outlays, estimated at $140 billion, to provide immediate financial support to certain disadvantaged categories, including the unemployed, and loans on easy terms to those in immediate need, particularly in the shape of housing loans. However, low key Shia protests in the Eastern Province continue.

Saudi Arabia, after its media initially welcomed the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, drew a firm line against political change in Bahrain. By characterising the unrest in Bahrain as a conspiracy engineered by Iran, it has gone on to use some strong rhetoric against Iran’s attempts to dominate the Arab world, and has affirmed that it will compete with Iran for influence in different theatres in the region, such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. Unfortunately, the Saudi–Iranian strategic competition has now acquired a sharp sectarian hue. The articulation of popular aspirations at Pearl Square in Bahrain had been largely devoid of sectarian slogans or demands, and had included participation of major Sunni groups with chants of ‘Neither Shia, nor Sunni, only Bahraini’. However, fearing Shiite ascendancy in Bahrain in a reformed polity and its possible spillover effect in the rest of the GCC, and seeing Iran play a catalytic role in precipitating these unacceptable developments, Saudi Arabia has vigorously led the opposition to the Iranian nuclear programme and its ‘hegemonic’ aspirations. An editorial in Al-Watan reflects Saudi thinking most clearly:

Quite simply, the Iranian nuclear program is proceeding as the leadership in Tehran wishes. It is based on the dream of reviving the Persian Empire and reinstituting its control over the region, subjecting its nations by force to an agenda that is no longer secret to anyone. This agenda is based on territorial/confessional [Shiite] expansionism, digging up the past from its grave in the service of this expansionist policy.

The Iranian project in the region is no longer a secret. Even if it assumes different forms and adopts various guises such as ‘backing the resistance against Israel’, it ultimately aims at ensuring Tehran’s control over the so-called ‘Shiite Crescent’. This is the prelude to taking over the rest of the region—something that the region’s states and nations should be wary of.

The GCC countries have been in the throes of change since the cataclysmic events of 9/11. While progress has been slow, the polities themselves have experienced considerable transformation. Hence, according to observers, the GCC countries are at present experiencing ‘continuity and change’. It is unlikely that these polities will witness any dramatic change, and the present patron–client ties between rulers and their citizens can be expected to persist. This scenario will be further strengthened by high oil prices, which will provide the rulers with sufficient resources to take care of their people’s
material needs and, for some time at least, curb their enthusiasm for major political reform.

Islamic parties
One of the most remarkable aspects of the Arab Spring is the electoral victory of Islamic parties in the two countries that heralded the spring—Tunisia and Egypt. However, given that Islam constitutes the base of the cultural ethos of West Asia, it should not really be surprising that, in the first free elections, the mass of people should, amidst political turmoil, turn to the familiar and comfortable. Again, through the earlier decades of autocracy and political control, the Islamic parties had led the opposition and paid a heavy price through the execution and incarceration of their leaders and members. Hence, they can now be expected to reap the first advantages of electoral freedom. Above all, they alone among the political contenders have solid grassroots linkages and institutions.

However, while the Islamic parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Al Nahda, are committed to a conservative social agenda, they are not seeking the establishment of an Islamic state based on Sharia. They are functioning within a democratic framework and are facing the secular challenges of governance, economic development and the rights of women and minorities. In due course, with further political evolution, it is likely that these traditionalist parties will be challenged by other movements with a more liberal agenda.

Outlook
Over a year and a half after the ouster of the Tunisian president, the prognosis pertaining to the Arab Spring remains uncertain. While it can be confidently asserted that the Arab Spring is irreversible and the region will not slide back to the earlier despotic order and political and economic stagnation, the nature, direction and speed of change in specific countries cannot be predicted. However, what is certain is that the path of change will be strewn with serious obstacles as existing regimes and their Western allies will make every effort to ensure that the aspirations of the Spring do not overwhelm their polities.

The GCC remains central to Western strategic interests. Hence, Western countries, regardless of their avowed support for freedom and democracy, favour the status quo in the GCC and are happy to use GCC support, particularly with regard to regime change in Syria, which will deprive Iran of a valuable ally in West Asia and a source of military and political support to the Hezbollah in Lebanon. This will change the balance of power in West Asia to Iran’s disadvantage and benefit the West, Israel and the GCC. Strategic competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran across West Asia will constitute the central reality of the regional scenario for the foreseeable future.

Over the longer term (five years or more), the Arab Spring is bound to have a salutary impact across the region, with all regimes being compelled to respond to their people’s aspirations for freedom, democracy and personal dignity, although the process itself will be hazardous, painful and subject to frequent setbacks. The principal challenge before the evolving polities will lie in the economic arena, and it is here that the success of the reform will be judged. Given the several decades of corruption and economic mismanagement, reform in areas such as fiscal transparency and accountability;
Implications for India

Although the Gulf has been in turmoil over several decades, India has been able to steer a careful path and avoid taking sides in intra-regional disputes such as the Iran–Iraq competition and conflict, and the security concerns of the GCC countries vis-à-vis Iraq and Iran. At the same time, India has built substantial and mutually beneficial ties with all the countries of the Gulf, which is the principal source of India’s oil and gas requirements, an important trade and investment partner, and home to over six million Indian nationals who remit to India about $30 billion annually. Taking into account oil imports, two-way trade and remittances, the financial value of India’s ties with the GCC, Iran and Iraq would be nearly $200 billion, much more than the value of India’s ties with any other grouping such as the European Union, The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and North America.

The powerful forces unleashed by the Arab Spring, which have upturned existing autocracies and threaten others in the region, have led to the creation of powerful alliances in contention with each other. All of these taken together are likely to challenge India’s traditional policy of avoiding involvement in the security and strategic issues of the Gulf.

Even before the advent of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia had reached out to India and, between 2006 and 2010, a low key economic relationship was transformed into a ‘strategic partnership’, with the Riyadh Declaration, signed in February 2011, committing the two countries to the significant expansion of their security, political defence, economic and cultural ties.

Separately, the strategic importance of Indo-Iranian ties has been enhanced by developments in Afghanistan where the US withdrawal is likely to leave behind a country dominated by the Taliban, functioning in close collaboration with hardline elements in Pakistan. Beyond shared concerns relating to regional security following Taliban ascendancy, ties with Iran have a significant value bilaterally as an energy and economic partner and, geopolitically, as the corridor for India’s energy and economic links with Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Hence, while it would not be in India’s interest to pick one side over the other in ongoing regional contentions, given its very substantial stakes in Gulf security and stability, it would also not be desirable for India to remain aloof from regional developments to the advantage of other players who are likely to increase insecurity and instability by taking recourse to military conflict in support of what they see as their core interests.

The positive aspect of the regional scenario is that the importance attached by India to Gulf stability is shared by the principal countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, which have similar energy security interests in the region, particularly with regard to the flow of oil and gas through the choke points, and in their substantial trade, services and investment ties with the region. However, no country on its own can effectively promote stability in the Gulf on the basis of a regional security consensus. It is here that the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) countries, possibly with the inclusion of other countries such as Japan, the Republic of Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia and Turkey, could pursue a strategic partnership by pooling together their substantial resources—technological, financial, human, political and military—in a collaborative...
effort to promote the security and stability of the Gulf. This expansion of the strategic horizons of the principal Asian countries and their participation in a pan-Asian security paradigm will contribute to the development of an alternative and credible power centre which will have far-reaching implications for the reshaping of the global strategic architecture and provide the crucial foundation for the realisation of the ‘Asian Century’.

Notes


2. The AHDR 2002- Creating Opportunities for Future Generations, was prepared over a two-year period by an independent team of Arab scholars and researchers, and published by the UNDP, which supported the project to promote debate on development issues in the Arab world. After some hesitation, several governments did take note of its findings, leading to stimulating discussions in the media and civil society. The 2002 report was followed by four more reports, the last one coming out in 2009. These reports taken together constitute the best possible analysis of the Arab world’s political, economic, social and cultural malaise and provide an excellent blueprint for reform.


4. It is important to note that a few years before the Tunis and Tahrir Square agitations, a number of young Arabs (among other nationalities) were trained in ‘non-violent action and strategy’ at centres in Serbia and other places. The training included ‘mass mobilisation strategies based on the internet’. The training was organised by three US government-financed NGOs—the Albert Einstein Institution, Freedom House and the International Republican Institute. Google, Twitter and Yahoo were also ‘directly involved’ in the training. See Tariq Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening—Islam and the New Middle East*, Allen Lane, London, 2012, pp. 17–18, 158. However, Ramadan (p. 159) emphasises that, while these training programmes reflect the realisation of the need for new strategies in the Middle East on the part of the US, it does not necessarily follow that the events of the Spring were ‘plotted’ by the West, as is confirmed by the present uncertain political scenario across the region.


6. Ramadan acknowledges that the Arab Spring has certainly served to dilute the binary ‘Islam v/s West’ paradigm: ‘The uprisings that have shaken the Middle East and North Africa can be interpreted as a celebration of transcending and of reconciliation, particularly insofar as voices echoing one another can be heard from both spheres of civilization’ (Tariq Ramadan, no. 3, p. 17). But he goes on to argue that this expression of ‘shared values’, to have resilience and authenticity, should lead to ‘a new form of international relations within the existing global political and economic order’ (Tariq Ramadan, no. 3, p. 18).


8. Farhad Khosrokhavar, no. 4, p. 130.

9. Ibid.

10. Farhad Khosrokhavar, no. 4, p. 128.


13. Olivier Roy says: ‘I think that what did happen under the name of the Arab Spring is irreversible. We are now facing a new stage, a new situation’. Tariq Ramadan says: ‘I prefer to take a position of cautious, lucid optimism . . . A barrier has been breached in the Arab world . . . Taken together, these events tell us that something irreversible has taken place’ (Tariq Ramadan, no. 3, pp. x–xi).

14. In the context of present-day ‘reactionary’ pronouncements and actions of certain GCC leaders and the regional media, it is instructive to note the following statement included in then Crown
Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz’s *Charter to Reform the Arab Condition*, published extensively in the Saudi media in January 2003:

Self-reform and the promotion of political participation in Arab countries represent two basic tools for building Arab capabilities. They provide the conditions needed to realize comprehensive and sustainable development, meet the requirements for positive engagement in international affairs, encourage creative thinking and deal objectively with international changes, notably globalization and the rise of mega economic blocks, as well as catch up with the rapid developments in such areas as technology, communication and information.

Again, in the early days of the Spring, between January and March 2011, while analysing the Arab malaise, hardly any GCC editorial or commentator distinguished between the situation in the Arab republics and the monarchies. The following editorial in *Al-Watan* (29 January 2011) was typical:

Some Arab leaders should look into the demands of their people more seriously. The people who start uprisings have some specific demands, and they, of course, do not seek to spread anarchy in their countries . . . The matter may require a real conciliation between Arab regimes and national opposition so that the two sides shall come out with a number of real reforms at all levels which may ward off the spectre of anarchy and destruction from the country.

15. Ramadan sets out these challenges succinctly:

The ‘civil state’, democracy and pluralism can only become concrete realities in the Middle East when peoples and governments focus on the ethics of good governance. The fight against corruption, the demand for transparency, limiting the powers of military establishments and stimulating the emergence of an active, dynamic civil society are the preconditions of success. (Tariq Ramadan, no. 3, p. 160)