

THE ARAB UPRISINGS: A SPRING OR A HELL?

Arda Jebejian

Lecturer in Applied Linguistics, University of Nicosia

For some, it is “the Arab Spring”. For others, it is “the Arab Hell”. For some, Mouhammad Bouazizi’s self-immolation in Tunisia in January 2011 inspired hopes for democracy, freedom, independence, liberty, openness, and sovereignty not only in Tunisia but also in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Syria and Oman. For others, it unleashed an atmosphere of anarchy, chaos, fear, instability, mayhem, sectarianism, turmoil, violence, and uncertainty.

Those confident of the West’s resolution and support for “the birth of a new Middle East” look at the skeptics with suspicion and dub them treacherous, and unpatriotic. Those wary of the West’s hidden agenda, history and alliances in the region view the anti-regime, pro-democracy elements as anarchists, counterspies, infiltrators, and disloyal. The former camp cites the toppling of presidents Bin Ali and Mubarak after 23 and 30 years in office and the end of dictatorships as unparalleled victories. The latter camp cites the slow pace of the judiciary, daily sectarian clashes, insecurity, looting, military rule (in the case of Egypt), rising unemployment, threat of shari’a rule (in the case of Egypt), and weekly demonstrations as major setbacks and worrying realities.

One thing is clear: Hopes are high on both sides despite mounting tensions and many unknowns.

Summer of 2006: A Similar Scenario?

July 12 marked the 5th anniversary of the war between Hezbollah and Israel. It all started when on July 12, 2006, Hezbollah fired on an Israeli patrol, killing three and seizing two. The Israelis retaliated by bombarding most of Lebanon, killing 1,000 civilians, displacing a million, and destroying much of its infrastructure – roads, bridges, electricity and water plants. In Israel, 158 Israelis were killed and around 300,000 were temporarily displaced. After a 34-day-long war, on August 14, a cease-fire was brokered by the UN that ended hostilities.

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Lessons Learned: Unprecedented Outcomes

In the wake of the war, political and media analyses largely underscored the following: not only Israel’s once unbeatable army was defeated but Hezbollah’s political stature rose enormously in Lebanon and the Arab world.

The latter outcome, besides triggering the rallying of hundreds of thousands of Hezbollah supporters every July 12, created several political stalemates in Lebanon. The most recent one was in January of this year when all 10

Hezbollah ministers resigned from the Hariri cabinet over reports that some of its members may be indicted by a US-backed tribunal for their role in the 2005 assassination of Rafik Hariri.

Five months on, a first-ever Hezbollah-led cabinet was formed, disregarding the Taif Accord that guaranteed the state's unity through the appointment of a national unity government. Reminiscent of the Hamas-led government, this provoked calls from US lawmakers to stop all aid to Lebanon, as Hezbollah is a US-designated terrorist organization. The US federal budget for fiscal year 2011 allotted \$246 million in foreign aid to Lebanon (which has amounted to over \$1.6 billion since 2006, following the Syrian army withdrawal) of which \$100 million is allocated to military aid.

Faced with the dilemma of aid falling into the hands of Hezbollah and of being accused of abandoning Lebanon, the US came up with the middle-of-the-road Hezbollah Anti-Terrorist Act, which basically supports cutting off aid to the Hezbollah-controlled government but retains funding democracy-building and humanitarian projects in the country.

While, based on a recent report by the Agence France Presse (AFP), Israeli commentators still disagree over whether the 2006 war ultimately strengthened Hezbollah. According to the same report, analysts and journalists, however, seem to agree that the fifth anniversary of the 2006 war had faded into the background in Israeli public life: no official events planned for the day, newspapers devoted little coverage, and the public radio simply noted how quiet the border between the two neighbors remains, five years on.

A close examination of <http://www.brookings.edu/iraqindex> and [/afghanistanindex](http://www.brookings.edu/afghanistanindex), for instance, reveals the extraordinary cost of the wars in those countries: billions of dollars, hundreds of thousands of civilian and military lives and millions of displaced persons. Also, a recent report presented to the Congress put the cost of a quick withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan at \$867 billion and a slow one at almost half that amount. With conspiracy theories thriving in everything evolving around and involving the Middle East, the assumption is that the current unrest in the Arab world is a doubly beneficial, God-sent state of affairs: democracy at almost zero cost.