

The Struggle for a Life in Dignity

A Decade after the Arab Spring: What's left of the historic movement?

Interviews and Editing David Labude and Franziska Amler

Beginning in December 2010, anti-government protests rocked Tunisia and heralded what became known as the “Arab Spring”. All of a sudden, it seemed possible that a strong civil society could transform authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa into democracies. Ten years later, this hope has mostly given way to disillusionment. Tunisia alone experienced a transition towards democracy, other states like Syria sank into war and chaos.

On this occasion, the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation's Syria/Iraq Office takes a look at the epochal significance of these events together with its partners who have witnessed the uprisings up close or who have followed developments in their home countries intensively during this time. We asked six prominent civil society figures from Iraq and Syria to review and evaluate the developments. What is left of the hopes and demands today? How did friends and family react to their involvement, and how do they personally see the future of their country? The results provide very personal insights into the events that unfolded ten years ago and resonate until today.

Rime Allaf, Writer and Political Analyst, Syria:

“The Syrian uprising was, and remains, a Revolution in every sense of the word; in political, social, cultural, and even religious terms, Syrians have – alone – reclaimed their agency and changed the course of their future.”

The mere sight of thousands of people daring to stand together in public spaces, chanting “the people want the downfall of the regime” in unison, sent shivers down our collective spine in the region. This had never been seen before in countries where people had grown up knowing only one ruler, and many wished these protests would spread around the Arab world. Youth were ready for change, knowing that real reform was impossible with the current systems in place. They were also convinced that the democratic world would support their demands.

Syrians named their peaceful uprising the ‘Revolution of Dignity’, and they chanted only for freedom in the early days. In the first months of the Syrian revolution, as soldiers and army officers refused to shoot compatriots and defected to form the Free Syrian Army, chants for the downfall of the regime began to resonate across the country as well. With 40 years of Assad tyranny, everyone knew that the brutality of the regime was inevitable, and that the intervention – political or otherwise – of powerful nations was essential to stop a bloodbath.

The revolution entered every Syrian home, with some members supportive of the revolution, others afraid to stray from toeing the line. I was nevertheless shocked by the attitude of some family and friends, paying allegiance to the regime and slandering the revolutionaries and opposition. Mostly of the so-called velvet society, they did not want to lose their privileges and decried a global “conspiracy” – even as they sent their children to western democracies for their degrees.

Syrians knew the regime would respond violently. What nobody imagined, however, is that the international community would allow Assad to ruthlessly terrorize, imprison, torture, and wantonly kill so many civilian protesters, even in the first months of the revolution.

But it is just as important today for Syrians to look at the many positive developments that the revolution has brought. Syrians have found their voice, and, for better or for worse, they are unwilling to give up this right to free speech. They have taken it upon themselves to apply the principles of civil and civic rights and duties when outside of the regime's control. They have learned quickly to organize their communities and have formed civil society networks that have interconnected entire areas and allowed many to survive.

Syria cannot move forward while the Assad regime remains in place. Only a political transition removing all power and agency from the Assad clan would allow Syria to move forward.

With the brutal regime gone, Syrians must participate – under international protection – in their first democratic exercise in over half a century. Ideally, support will be given to new, young, democratic secular movements to reduce the sway of the religious groups and the heavy influence of foreign actors on the current official opposition. Only this will allow Syrians to get desperately needed education, health, and other basic infrastructure back in motion, and progress from this state of paralysis to rebuild the country they want and deserve.

Manar Rachwani, Editor-in-Chief of Syria Direct, Syria:

“The 2011 uprisings taught us that we can trust each other as Syrians regardless our ethnic or intellectual backgrounds.”

It was the first time since the existence of the Arab States that we saw people from different backgrounds take to the street to challenge the Arab brutal regimes. I wanted to believe that freedom and dignity are within reach, but I was afraid that the regimes would quickly kill that hope by responding with brutal force against the peaceful protesters. However, in the next two years, it was possible to feel hope, confidence, and pride among the people.

My demands were similar to the vast majority of people in the region; I wanted a country that I can call home. This means a country free of tyranny, where people enjoy fundamental human rights as the crucial pre-requirement of prosperity.

As a columnist at *Al Ghad* daily newspaper of Jordan, my contribution to the Syrian revolution was writing columns defending the revolution and the Arab Spring in general and having meetings with western politicians, researchers, and journalists to explain the situation on the ground. My family was so supportive, and my brothers took part in demonstrations out of Syria to support the revolution. On the other side, the Arab Spring, in general, and the Syrian revolution, in particular, was a turning point in my relationship with several friends, mainly leftists and Arab nationalists, who adopted the Arab regimes' (including the Assad regime's) narrative that the Arab Spring is a western conspiracy.

Needless to say that we failed to achieve most, if not all, of our goals. Competition between the so-called “friends of the Syrian people” has led not only to divide the opposition but also contributed to the rise of warlords and, more importantly, the dominance of extremist groups that hijacked the revolution and turned it into a sectarian civil war. The other mistake was over trust in the international community. The 2013 chemical massacre in Ghouta is enough proof.

As a consequence of the Arab Spring's failures several countries, including Syria, currently suffer from civil wars, while millions have been displaced and become refugees or IDPs. Further, Arab dictators seem to feel more secure than ever, as they succeeded in suppressing all kinds of dissent by using the pretext of fighting terrorism.

However, the Arab Spring was a turning point in challenging not only the political authority but other authorities, especially religious authorities, that supported (intentionally or unintentionally) the authoritarian rule in the Arab world and allowed for the rise of extremist groups. The ongoing

revolution against corrupt, defunct non-political authorities is a significant step on the way to topple the dictators and create free countries.

Jana Nasser, Author and Researcher, Syria:

“How can it be an ‘Arab Spring’ when Syrians sacrificed so much for this cause?”

Peaceful protests against Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad emerged throughout Syria in March 2011 promoting a patriotic discourse and demanding reforms to allow Syrians to be humans with at least basic human rights. I did an assessment of this stage a while ago and I reviewed all the movements from 2011 until 2013. This enabled me to see, how tyranny, violence, and injustice can turn truth into falsehood.

The initial demands were reforms and that the government provides us with basic support and services. It didn't take long for the authorities, however, to violently crack down on activists and to suppress the demonstrations. Hence, soon the demand for freedom became the highest and most important demand.

The national discourse was quickly positioned against the protest movement, with incitement against the protestors becoming common, which allowed the regime to exploit sectarian fault lines to undermine the civil peace. The peaceful protest movement was met with violence and abuses; which the Syrian regime then promoted to the world as infightings and civil unrest. This worked very well for the regime, for, it provided it with an excuse that appeased the international community: the regime versus terrorists. The Syrians were thus left alone to deal with the ugliest tyranny, driven by a mantra best reflected in the slogan: “Assad, or we burn the country.” The slogan turned out to be a true reflection of the extent the regime is willing to go. Indeed, Syria and its people paid the price, and the regime stayed in power until today.

We know that the humanitarian toll of a revolution can be immeasurable. This is a heavy price people have to pay when saying the phrase “the people want ...”. How can I be happy and stay positive when a regime like this is still present despite all the crimes it has committed against its people; in addition to the presence of dozens of armed terrorist groups with external loyalties; and, of course, we cannot forget the ‘de facto’ powers on the ground ... We were at the mercy of one monster, and now Syria has many monsters. Even 10 years later, the people in Syria still yearn for the absolute basic principles such as humanity and justice.

It is hard to call Syria's revolution an ‘Arab spring’ knowing that people from various other ethnic groups sacrificed so much for this cause. Regardless of naming, the Syrian revolution is a rightful cause.

Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, President of The Middle East Research Institute, Iraq:

“The Arab Spring meant dismantling of the old security order and a protracted transformation that should ultimately yield a new equilibrium in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.”

At the time of the so called ‘Arab Spring’, I was in Erbil, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. We did not experience a typical Arab Spring phenomenon. We had already gone through a transformative period of eight years from Saddam Hussein's dictatorship to a constitutional democracy, however imperfect. Instead, in spring 2011 we experienced a brief, politically motivated, episode of demonstrations that lasted for approximately two months.

The demands across the MENA countries were simple: human rights, good governance and better livelihood. People wanted social justice, equal opportunities, rule-of-law, adequate public services, greater economic prosperity and freedom of expression.

In Kurdistan however, the demands were different. The time was from an economic point of view relatively prosperous and political freedoms existed in general, therefore, livelihood or freedom of

expression were not issues. The demands focused on political reform, rule-of-law and anti-corruption instead.

At the time, I was Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research in the Kurdistan Regional Government. I was one of very few technocrats in the cabinet with no political affiliation. I enjoyed an unusually wide public support. My involvement was limited to keeping the universities safe and functional. I engaged the demonstrating students directly and attended some of their rallies. I found myself welcomed by them. Friends and family had mixed feelings about the motives of the opposition parties, but none of them turned away from me or my colleagues, simply because we were not seen as part of the political establishment.

The past ten years in Iraq proved to be bloody, disruptive and in most cases failed to meet the expectations that existed in 2011. What started as legitimate demands of ordinary people, became a local, regional and international security turmoil. Global and regional powers began to drive and determine the events, and used the power vacuum that had emerged as an opportunity to advance their own national security interests.

In Kurdistan and Iraq, 'normality' returned relatively quickly and the ruling political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), continued their policies and practiced as before.

The Arab Spring turned into a nightmare in many countries. The demands for economic prosperity and rule-of-law has changed and people in many countries now merely demand safety and struggle for their survival.

Fatima Al-Bahadly, Managing Director Al-Firdaws Society, Iraq:

“My country will hopefully benefit from the experience that other countries have made during the Arab Spring.”

My country, Iraq, did not witness the events with the same intensity as other MENA countries did throughout the Arab Spring. As an observer, I was happy that people revolted against the corrupt regimes. However, I did not have an outspoken or firm opinion about it, since these matters are rather internal matters to the people and their governments. To me, the violations of human rights were my biggest concern.

I was hoping that the people would achieve what they were striving for and that the violators of human rights would be brought to justice. I believe that the Arab Spring started as a very good experiment, but what followed severely affected the outcome. Cases of abuse of power, conflicts of interest, lack of leadership [the power vacuum], as well as the foreign interference in these countries' domestic affairs contributed to the eventual breakdown of the movement. I would hope Iraq can benefit from the experience that other countries went through during the Arab Spring.

Dhikra Sarsam, Deputy Director of Burj Babel for Media Development, Iraq:

“We felt that we succeeded in destroying the wall of fear.”

In my opinion, Iraq was strongly affected by the events in Egypt. Therefore, the demonstrators chose the same location like in Cairo and rushed to the Tahreer Square in Baghdad at exactly the same date one month later.

The calls for the gathering started weeks before though, via social media. The government was worried and consequently the security forces attacked a number of NGO offices and confiscated and searched the computers especially of people who engaged in the protests. Relatively early, on February 24, 2011, the Prime Minister sent an invitation to a number of NGO representatives and activists and asked them not to join the protests, while accusing the events of being organized by the Baathists and terrorists. The main demand was to fight corruption. The protests took place every Friday and ever more and also new participants began to join the manifestations, especially the families of the missing people or

relatives' detainees. Often, they carried their photos when they participated in the protests. I used to join and document what was going on. I took photos and interviewed those, who were demanding the release of their sons.

We didn't feel afraid at that time, but when four activists were kidnapped by masked men in an ambulance, that was in June 2011, it was clear to us that the government had decided to stop the protests. We worked hard to look for them and thanks to our connections to some people in the government, we found out that they were arrested and kept in a prison along with Al-Qaeda terrorists. We felt that we succeeded in destroying the wall of fear, built by authoritarian regimes. During the last ten years we could see a change, usually, only those people who believed in the freedom of speech, used to join the protests, but on October 1, 2019 we found out that there is a new generation who wants to send a new message. Those young generations from the poor neighborhoods who had so far never joined the protests unless they received an order from a religious leader (mainly Muqtada Al-Sadr) suddenly decided to join in and to demand their rights. Thus, the protests in 2019 were totally different, those young people are ready to die, more than 560 lost their lives already.

We are not thinking about the demands of 2011 anymore; the protests of 2019 revealed the reality of what the absence of the state means. Further, they revealed the enormous abilities of the militias that control the country's capabilities and resources and manage all the institutes in the government and parliament. In fact, all government institutions are nothing but mere indicators for another state run by militias linked to Iran.

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