International Affairs Program
Research Report

Seasons of the Arab Spring

A Panel with the International Affairs Program
22 January 2015

The International Affairs Program is one of the largest majors in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities at Northeastern University, which is located in the heart of Boston, MA, USA.

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Seasons of the Arab Spring examines the diverse trajectories of the mass social protests of 2011 in the Arab countries, the Gezi protests in Turkey and policies of the Erdogan government, and the challenges posed by *jihadism*, democracy reversals, and external intervention.

Please join us for a panel discussion with a Q&A to follow.

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**January 22nd, 2015**  
2:30-4:30pm  
Alumni Center
Seasons of the Arab Spring
Thursday, 22 January 2015, Alumni Center

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Egypt’s ‘Deep State’
The Fall and Rise of a Military Regime

Denis J. Sullivan
Northeastern University
متخافووووش ده أنا صاحبكم! نياهاهاها
Arab Spring, Redefined
Free at last!
Free at last!
DON'T THINK OF IT AS A COUP.

THINK OF IT AS A RECALL...

WITH GUNS.
May 2014 election:
low-voter turnout
November 2014 – Egyptian court overturns Mubarak convictions
Egypt before the revolution...  

Egypt after the revolution...?
Examing Syria’s Divergent Trajectory

Emily Cury

Carnegie Visiting Scholar and Assistant Director

The Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies (BCARS)

Though Syria shares many of the same dynamics present in other Arab Spring countries, it has followed a dramatically different trajectory. The peaceful uprisings, which began in the southern city of Daraa on March 15 of 2011 and quickly spread to the rest of the country, have morphed into a full-blown, grisly civil war; a war in which over 200,000 civilians have been killed and approximately 10 million been displaced. As the conflict enters its fifth year, Bashar al-Assad remains in power, defying predictions of impending regime collapse.

Why has the Syrian case diverged so drastically from other Arab Spring countries? And why did the conflict in Syria so rapidly and violently transform into a regional proxy war? These questions defy neat explanations. I argue that although the capacity and willingness of the regime’s coercive apparatus to crush dissent is perhaps one of the most important factors explaining the militarization of the conflict, and the regime’s consequent survival, other important dynamics specific to the Syrian context must be considered. In particular, I focus on three under-examined local dynamics that help explain the uniqueness of the Syrian case: 1) the instrumentalization of sectarianism, 2) the recent experience of neighboring countries, and 3) the role of historical memory.

Ethnic and religious heterogeneity is largely considered an impediment to peaceful regime transition. This is because conflicts in ethnically diverse societies can quickly lead to “ethnic security dilemmas,” with each group perceiving the dispute as a zero-sum struggle for survival. However, sectarian conflict does not result from ethnic and religious diversity, but from political structures and strategies that make sectarianism a relevant and beneficial identity signifier, particularly in times of crisis. In the absence of robust state institutions, religious identities can be easily instrumentalized to mobilize potential supporters. There are a number of dynamics that help explain why, unlike in other Arab Spring countries, the conflict in Syria descended into a sectarian civil war:

- The existence of a patrimonial regime lacking meaningful, independent political institutions. Al-Assad’s regime operates through numerous patron-client relations, thus ensuring that Alawites and other minorities would come to see their interests and survival as dependent on that of the regime’s. Patrimonialism is particularly important when examining the army’s brutal crackdown on protesters and its zealous support of the regime.

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• The regime’s targeted use of violence against Sunni-majority towns and villages, which led to high numbers of civilian casualties and, in turn, served to inflame Sunni sectarian rhetoric.

• The internationalization of the conflict, with Iran and Hezbollah providing support for the regime, and Saudi Arabia and Qatar arming the opposition.

• The ensuing militarization and increased radicalization of the opposition.

• The regime’s sectarian tactics and rhetoric through which it sought to delegitimize the opposition and dissuade the “ambivalent majority”—citizens of all ethnic and religious backgrounds (including the Sunni merchant class) who view the regime as the only grantor of cohesion and stability.

For many in Syria, the fear of sectarian breakdown is a fundamental concern. It is also an important reason why al-Assad has managed to remain in power against great odds. A brief look at Syria’s political history and national narrative can help explain why these fears resonate so loudly. Here, I highlight two important components: the experience of neighboring countries, and historical memory of the post-independence period.

Syrians have only to look across their borders, to Iraq and Lebanon, to see how political violence can rip the fabric of an ethnically diverse society. Further, the recent memory of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq under the banner of freedom and democracy helped engender great skepticism toward the opposition and its demands for regime change. This skepticism was compounded by regime rhetoric, which painted all opposition to its rule as a “foreign conspiracy” bent on destabilizing the country.² Although the international community was quick to denounce such remarks as “a denial of reality,” the reality is that this rhetoric resonates because of the West’s long history of meddling and intervening in the region.

Similarly, the historical memory of Syria’s turbulent political development following independence, which saw three coups in one year, also breeds disdain for activities that could produce instability, thus further dissuading the ambivalent majority from seeking regime change.

In order to understand the divergent trajectory of the Syrian case, including the regime’s survival, the role that perception plays in politics must be brought to the forefront of analysis. Of particular importance is how key actors (including regime elites, opposition groups, and foreign powers) perceive, interpret, and respond to threats, both real and imagined.

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² Bashar al-Assad, June 4, 2012:
What Explains the Tunisian Exception?

Valentine M. Moghdam

Director, International Affairs Program

Professor of Sociology and International Affairs

The one bright spot in the region today is Tunisia. Why is that?

Tunisia was the country that launched the Arab Spring with protests in late December 2010 and into January 2011 calling for the removal of the Ben Ali presidency. Tunisia’s Arab Spring was a nonviolent, peaceful, and cross-class political revolution that was followed by a transitional period. A transitional government – consisting of four “High Commissions” supervised by a set of temporary ministers – governed the country and helped prepare for elections in October 2011 for a constituent assembly charged with drafting a new constitution. Numerous political parties were formed during this time, and many Tunisians living in France returned to join (or rejoin) political parties and run for the National Constituent Assembly charged with drafting a new constitution. What was so impressive about the process was the adoption of systematic and democratic procedures that were put in place.

In the October 2011 elections, a plurality of votes went to the Islamist party, An-Nahda, but it was compelled to form a coalition government with two secular parties that became known as “the troika”. During most of 2012 and 2013, intense debates took place in the Constituent Assembly, largely around whether or not Islamic law and Sharia would be mentioned in the new constitution, and whether or not women’s equality would be enshrined or would be replaced with words such as women’s “complementarity” with men. Consensus did develop among members that Tunisia would adopt a multi-party parliamentary system of proportional representation. Meanwhile, the rise of Salafists and jihadists became a cause for concern, especially when three left-wing political leaders were assassinated; popular dissatisfaction also grew as a result of inattention to economic difficulties. Two left-wing coalition groups, le Front Populaire and l’Union pour la Tunisie formed the Front du Salut National as the main opposition to the troika, and renewed protests took place. With confidence in the troika (and especially An-Nahda) declining in the face of what appeared to be a political crisis, the large and influential trade union, UGTT, stepped in along with other civil society organizations to mediate between the government and the opposition; in the fall of 2013, the government agreed to step down and make way for new elections. These steps and procedures are unprecedented and have not been replicated in the Arab region.

The troika eventually stepped down in January 2014, after the new constitution was adopted to much acclaim domestically and internationally. While Article 2 of the new constitution retains the Arab-Muslim identity inscribed in the original constitution, I would describe the document as a secular and left-social democratic one, enshrining the social rights of citizens (with articles on education, healthcare,
and work as rights of citizens that the state must guarantee; the rights of women, their equality in all domains, and parité in governance; and freedom of worship as well as respect for religion.

Meanwhile, political parties prepared themselves for parliamentary elections in late October 2014, with a presidential election to follow in November. In 2014, a large center-left and staunchly secular coalition party called Nida Tunis was formed, whose raison d’être was to prevent another An-Nahda victory. The new party took most of the seats – 85 out of 217. Its victory came as a relief to many, but also annoyed some of the traditional left-wing parties, who felt that Nida Tunis had taken votes away from them with their campaign slogan “vote utile”. An-Nahda won 69 seats. Here are some bullet points regarding the elections from a gender perspective:

- Every party included women in its lists (for a total of 47 percent female share of all parliamentary lists), though not necessarily at the top of lists (just 12%).

- Leftist parties were the most gender-egalitarian: l’Union pour la Tunisie, the coalition party predominated by El Massar (the former communist party) had a relatively high number of women at the top of its lists – 11 out of 31. Le Front Populaire had 6 women topping their lists (out of 33); Jomhouri (Parti Republicain) had three women topping lists, including Maya Jribi.

- Nida Tunis had no woman topping its list; the well-known constitutional lawyer and ATFD activist Bochra Belhaj Hamida was on their Tunis 2 list (led by a man) along with two other women. (An-Nahda had five women leading their lists.)

- Nida Tunis won most votes but also took votes away from the more gender-egalitarian leftist parties. Thus fewer women won parliamentary seats; some outstanding women from the left parties, such as Nadia Chaabane, Salma Mabrouk, and Maya Jribi, did not win seats.

- Still, 32 women from Nida Tunis won seats, including Mme. Hamida from Nida Tunis; 29 from An-Nahda; 3 from Front Populaire (one of whom is Mbarka Aounia, widow of the slain Mohamad Brahmi, representing Sidi Bouzid).

- The female share of parliamentary seats did increase to 31% (from 28% previously), for a total of 68 women.

The question then became: would Nida Tunis form a coalition government with An-Nahda or with the leftist parties?³

³ Addendum, March 2015: Le Front Populaire (FP) won 15 seats but declared that it would not cooperate with any government in which An-Nahda was present; the FP also took objection to the fact that Nida Tunis included figures from the former regime’s political elite. In February 2015, Nida Tunis announced the formation of a coalition government with An-Nahda, Afek Tunis, another center-left party, and the Free Patriotic Union.
What explains the Tunisian exception? Why is it the one bright spot in the region? Here I offer some key factors:

- Tunisia has had a thriving civil society, even under conditions of authoritarianism, with the UGTT, feminist groups, the Tunisian Human Rights League, and many professional associations staffed by secular and civic-minded people.

- It had several historic political parties, including leftist ones, with members of the country’s *intelligentsia* playing prominent roles.

- Over the decades, and in the absence of an overweening military, it developed a peaceful political culture and a political class willing to be inclusive, to negotiate and compromise, and to seek consensus. Its political culture thus has been characterized by compromise, non-violence, and moderation.

- As a small country and non-oil economy that did not play a major role in the region, it did not generate geopolitical interest on the part of the core countries. As such, it kept a low profile internationally and managed to develop internally without undue external interference.

- It was spared external intervention by the cabal of the US, UK, France, and their regional allies (the group that intervened in Libya and Syria), enabling the political revolution and the democratic transition to proceed organically.

As a result of these advantages, Tunisia can become a model of peaceful transition and democratization for its neighbors.

However, Tunisia faces several risks and challenges. One concerns security: spillover effects from the chaos in Libya (refugees, including extremists on the border); the emergence of Salafists and the large number of jihadists willing to fight in Syria or with ISIS and potentially create havoc in Tunisia. Another pertains to the economy; Tunisia suffers from economic difficulties including high unemployment and the loss of income from tourism (and medical tourism from Libya). Given the heterogeneous nature of the new government, what will the economic development strategy look like? What of the social rights demanded during the Arab Spring protests and enshrined in the Constitution? How will they be implemented in new laws and policies? How these risks and challenges will be addressed and resolved by both civil society and political society remains to be seen.