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The failed revolution

Ten years after the Arab Spring, the Middle East and North Africa are the largest conflict zone in the world. What happened?

Read this article in German.

The Arab Spring began ten years ago with the self-immolation of the young greengrocer Mohamed Bouazizi in the central Tunisian provincial town of Sidi Bouzid. This suicide sparked demonstrations and mass protests, first throughout Tunisia, then Egypt and it ultimately rocked the entire Arab world. Tens of thousands took to the streets, protested against dictators and autocratic rulers, and called for social justice, freedom and dignity. The process represented a historic turning point: in Tunisia and Egypt, long-time rulers Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak were overthrown.

In Europe, the events were celebrated as the struggle of Arab youth for freedom, democracy and self-determination, and their protagonists were showered with prizes and honours. But the hope for a political turning point has remained unfulfilled. Only in Tunisia has there been a regime change and an ongoing process of democratisation. In most countries, people have not been able to make real progress. In some places, conditions are even worse today than they were before.

The Middle East and North Africa now comprise the largest conflict region in the world. Everywhere, instability and uncertainty prevail. The population is growing rapidly, unemployment is high, especially among the young, and economic prospects are poor. Year after year, the income and prosperity gap between the EU and North Africa is widening. State indebtedness is increasing and along with it, the dependence on international donors, the IMF, and the World Bank. Politically, authoritarian states and repressive systems dominate – above all the military regime in Egypt and the monarchies in the Gulf, which have led the counter-revolution everywhere else.

Great power struggles

In Syria and Yemen, the Arab Spring ended in fiasco. The devastating wars are costing countless lives, destroying cities and infrastructure and forcing millions of people to flee. By now, seven million Syrians – one third of the population – have left their homeland. Most of them are living in huge refugee camps in Turkey or in Jordan and Lebanon, two countries that are themselves struggling to survive.

The further development of the region is uncertain. However, we can be sure that global crises such as climate change and the corona pandemic promise to create more problems.

The military intervention of foreign powers has only prolonged the suffering. Like Yemen and Libya, Syria has long since become a scene of proxy wars between states struggling for regional supremacy.

Turkey under Erdogan and his ruling party AKP is increasingly presenting itself as the protective force for its muslim brothers as it develops neo-Ottoman great power fantasies. Russia is expanding its influence in Egypt, sending mercenaries to Libya while it has secured power for Syrian President Assad for the time being. Iran is in the process of drawing a Shiite arc from Tehran across Iraq to the powerful Hezbollah in Lebanon. And Saudi Arabia sees itself as regional hegemon with strong support from the Trump administration.

What the future holds for the Arab world

The further development of the region is uncertain. However, we can be sure that global crises such as climate change and the corona pandemic promise to create more problems. Climate change, with its rise in temperature, increases the danger of droughts and floods and threatens the future of agriculture. The pandemic poses a serious threat because in most countries it impacts ailing and chronically underfunded health systems, while in countries racked by civil war it strikes a weakened population that lives in poor hygienic conditions or in cities that have been destroyed.

The economic consequences will be even more serious than the health risks. There are no financial resources for rescue packages or economic stimulus packages. Targeted aid from the industrialised countries has so far been lacking. Because of weeks of lockdowns and curfews, the collapse of tourism and the disruption of supply chains, the economic downturn

has inevitably led to an increase in unemployment and poverty. Reduced hours compensation and support from unemployment insurance for the families affected simply do not exist. Most of the nations have now applied for emergency loans from the IMF.

Tunisia was the starting point of the Arab Spring. There it celebrated its first and greatest success: the fall of the autocrat Ben Ali and his flight into exile. A constitution was introduced that is comparable to that of any other democracy in the world. In addition, a vigilant and secular civil society fought off the attempt by the re-admitted Muslim Brotherhood Party (Ennahda) to push the country more towards an Islamic-conservative orientation. The so-called national dialogue quartet made up of trade unions, employers' associations, the bar association and the Tunisian human rights league was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015. This stood as proof that in an Islamic country, a functioning democracy of the kind that the late President Essebsi had called for is possible.

The Arab Spring hardly lived up to any of the expectations associated with it.

The fact that Tunisia was the only country where the Arab Spring succeeded certainly also has to do with the fact that it is a small country with few natural resources. It lies apart from the arenas in which the regional great powers are struggling for supremacy and/or access to resources. But other factors were decisive: state founder Habib Bourguiba had prescribed a secular course for the country right from the start. He banned polygamy and prohibited headscarves in schools, government offices and the courts. As early as 1956, the year of independence, he codified the equality of men and women in a civil status law, which was unprecedented for the Arab world. His laws on divorce and pregnancy are comparable to those of Germany today. The participation of women in social life was welcomed, and consequently many women occupied management positions in universities and courts, in health care and in politics. For decades, statutory health and pension insurance have also existed, giving people at least a minimum of social security. And with the UGTT, the Tunisian General Labour Union, a free and powerful trade union movement is in place.

An Arab Spring 2.0?

It is just these prerequisites that were not present in the other countries of the Arab Spring. This shows that there must be not only free elections at the beginning of a transformation process; it is at least as important to promote civic engagement instead of obstructing it. Free trade unions, independent media with competent and courageous journalists, the founding of secular parties and, above all, committed women are the actual prerequisites for democratic transformation. Without a fundamental change in gender relations and without a clearer separation of state and religion, it will not be possible for the Arab world to win a brighter future.

The Arab Spring hardly lived up to any of the expectations associated with it. In this respect, it can be described as a failed revolution. Nevertheless, it does mark a historic turning point. It showed that people in the Arab world are ready to take to the streets for their rights and they are capable of overthrowing despots. Today, ten years later, the negative consequences of bad governance, corruption and cronyism are becoming more and more visible throughout the region. For most people, the political legitimacy of the rulers has long been shattered. Their resentment over grievances will remain and it will only continue to grow when the economic situation – as is to be feared – worsens. One side effect of the corona crisis is that the curfews and contact bans imposed have temporarily curtailed a number of protests.

Democratic transformations are lengthy and difficult processes that can neither be decreed nor activated overnight. We must also note that, contrary to what one might hope, liberal democracy with European characteristics is not viewed everywhere as the desired model and preferred form of government. If Europe wants to play a role in the countries of the Arab world in the future, the EU must finally design and pursue a common Mediterranean policy, instead of regularly appearing as a club of rival economies from individual member states.

At the time, Europe slept through the opportunities of the Arab Spring. But when the time is ripe, the discontented, the brave, the young, those who do not want their future to be stolen, will again demand work and bread, freedom and dignity, and realistic prospects for their lives. They will then be able to fall back on past experiences and build on them. The Arab Spring had a huge impact. Further tremors, an Arab Spring 2.0, will follow.



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