

TEN YEARS ON THE ARAB SPRING FAILURES AND THE FUTURE AHEAD



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Participants:

- Bahey Eldin Hassan (moderator, director of the CIHRS)
- Yadh Ben Achour (Tunisian university teacher)
- Marwan Muasher (former Jordanian politician, Vice President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace)
- Marina Ottaway (researcher at the Woodrow Wilson Center)
- Yassin al-Haj Saleh (Syrian writer and activist, he spent 15 years in jail and his wife disappeared 10 years ago)

After having introduced the speakers, Mr Bahey Eldin Hassan explained that this conference had been organised to discuss the Arab Spring and whether it was a “success story” or rather whether it was a failure. He noted that we were currently witnessing the second wave of the Arab Spring. The first wave occurred 10 years ago, but since 1 or 2 years, a second wave seems to be sweeping the Arab World as protests erupted in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon.

As a general introduction, Mr Yadh Ben Achour reminded the audience that the Arab Spring had started in Tunisia but that it had quickly spread to the whole region. Mr Yassin al-Haj Saleh noted that the population of 6 countries took the streets to overthrow their government in only 3 months. The movement therefore moved to Libya and Gadhafi, to Egypt and Mubarak, to Syria and Al-Assad, to Yemen and Saleh, and other countries.

All speakers seem to agree that it was too early to assess the revolutions’ successes. Mrs Marina Ottaway explained that, to better understand the timescale of grassroots movements, she analysed the civil rights movement in the United States of America. She noted that it took 20 years for the movement to achieve its goal, for the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to be adopted. It is therefore too early to say that the Arab Spring has failed. For Mr Marwan Muasher, the situation might have not changed yet, but it will, thanks to the second, third or fourth wave. He notes that “there are no shortcuts to democracy”, it is important to change the culture and make people believe in democracy, which takes time.

Furthermore, all speakers considered that the Arab Spring was not a total failure. It did have an impact, although, as Mrs Marina Ottaway pointed out, the people who protested probably did not see all the changes they wanted. However, today regimes are not as comfortable as they were before the Arab Spring: their populations have shown they are not docile and could erupt at all time. Furthermore, some countries, like Tunisia and Sudan, did manage to overthrow their regime without starting an endless civil war like in Libya, Syria and Yemen.

Of course, the speakers do not consider that the Arab Spring has been a success either. To illustrate this, Mr Yadh Ben Achour gave the examples of: Egypt which is now a military dictatorship after Al-Sisi’s coup; Syria which is still under the same regime as when the revolution started; Libya and Yemen which are in turmoil even if the protests did manage to overthrow the regime; and Algeria whose *Hirak* movement failed as the army “went back to its old habits”. Even Tunisia, who had been seen as one of the only successes in the region, is

erupting as violent protests shake Tunisian streets. For Mr Yadh Ben Achour, Tunisia is not the successful exception anymore. Mr Marwan Muasher, on the other hand, was more positive about Tunisia and expressed his fascination at the Tunisian process, and at how civil forces managed to agree on a new social contract. He considered that this was a good first step that should be followed by other countries in the region.

According to Mr Marwan Muasher and Mrs Marina Ottaway, a reason the Arab Spring did not succeed is the lack of organisation within the countries. Mrs Marina Ottaway explained that the two most successful countries, Tunisia and Sudan, were successful because they had an organisational framework which allowed for alternative political forces to have an impact. Those forces need to have a number of constituents, but do not need to necessarily be democratic, as they will still create pluralism. In most Arab countries, this pluralism does not exist, therefore the revolutions were not successful.

Later on, during the questions, Mr Yadh Ben Achour and Mr Marwan Muasher addressed political Islam. The latter questioned Islamic political groups' ability to still attract the young. He considered that religion in itself was not enough because the youth is tired of the economic and unemployment situation. Until those political groups can bring more jobs and better life conditions, they will struggle to get the youth's support. Taking the example of Tunisia, Mr Yadh Ben Achour explained that he had noticed Islamic political groups were slowly accepting other views, including the seculars' views. For example, they agree to fight for gender equality, which they considered was against Islam at the beginning of their campaign. According to Mr Yadh Ben Achour, those political groups are slowly adopting democratic principles.

The conference ended with Mrs Marian Ottaway analysing the new American presidency. She explained that M. Joe Biden's first concern in the Middle East will be to save the Iranian nuclear deal and calm the situation with Iran. Mrs Marian Ottaway however expressed that she did not believe Biden would be pushing for democratisation in the Arab World. She explained that after the total failure of trying to instore democracy in Iraq, the USA were cautious when it came to "democratising" a country, especially in the Middle East. She therefore did not expect much support on this aspect from the United States.