

ARAB SPRING AS A BACKGROUND OF CIVIL WAR IN SYRIA

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Abstract: *In the paper the reasons of outbreak of conflict in Syria at the background of social and political situation of the Arab world at the beginning of 21st century were presented. The influence of displeasure explosion against governments in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, known as Arab Spring, on the situation in Syria was described. The attention on escalation of tensions between Bashar al-Assad's government and opposition as a source of civil war in Syria was paid. The foreign players at the arena of Syrian conflict with special concern to United States and Russia activity, as a main contractors in the conflict were shown.*

Keywords: Arab Spring, Arab awakening, Middle East, civil war, democratisation

1. Introduction

The end of 2010, and the beginning of 2011 known as the *Arab Spring* or *Arab awakening* concerns the wave of revolutions in the North Africa and in the Middle East region arranged with the purpose of overthrowing the most powerful, long-lasting, and reactive violent regimes in such countries as Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Libya, and Yemen [1]. The first exact apply of the term “Arab Spring” was initiated by US political academic journal “Foreign Policy” [2].

The events of the *Arab Spring* in Tunisia had huge influence on the situation in other countries of North Africa and in the Middle East. Aftermath of uprisings in each nation proceeded in various ways and effects of them were different.

The protests in the countries where civil resistance occurred had different effects but methods of protests were similar. Citizens expressed their dissatisfaction through strikes, rallies, demonstrations and marches as much as the effective use of social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other) to organise, communicate and create

awareness in the face of the occurring events [3]. The reaction of governments on the protests had three forms: resign of country leaders after pressures of society or army, social, political and economic reforms and using the violence in the mass range (civil war). The ruling elites took various actions in the face of protests: from concessions and reforms in the country to repression and using violence against citizens.

In the paper, the authors analyse the implications for the social and political situation in Syria as a result of the events of the *Arab Spring* in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. They focused on the development of the conflict in Syria under Bashar al-Assad to show the development of the conflict from revolt to civil war.

2. The impact of the *Arab Spring* on the situation in North Africa and Middle East region

At the beginning of 2011 the revolt spread to other Arab countries. The strength of social movements of the Arab Spring was so enormous that it could lead to major

changes in the Arab world, and even the overthrow of leaders who had been in power for decades [4]:

- Tunisia - Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who ruled from 1987, was forced to resign and leave the country.
- Algeria and Morocco - social protests have had less impact than protests in other Arab countries, but they have led to democratic changes.
- Egypt - Hosni Mubarak, who ruled from 1981, similarly to the leader of Tunisia, was forced to resign and leave the country.
- Libya - the result of revolt was civil war, in which NATO forces were engaged. The leader of Libya Muammar Gaddafi - in power from 1969, was captured and killed on 20 October 2011 during the Battle of Sirte, by National Transitional Council (NTC) militants.
- Syria - the result of the outbreak of revolt in March 2011 was the repression against citizens from the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, who ruled from 2000, without proposing political and social changes in Syria.
- Yemen - president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who ruled for 33 years, after ten months of revolt, on November 2, 2011, signed an agreement according to which he handed over power to vice-president Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi, obtaining immunity for himself and his family.
- The riots spread during 2011 to many countries of the Middle East such as Bahrain, Jordan, Oman and Iran, as well as their consequences had different dimensions.

Figure1 presents events of Arab Spring at the timeline [5].

2.1. Tunisia – the beginning of Arab awakening

The genesis of Arab Spring began in Tunisia, on 17 December 2010, when Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old vendor from Sidi Bouzid, set himself the fire to protest

against the confiscation of his cart, which allowed him to keep his family. The incident became the spark which caused changes in Arab countries alight in the near future.

Protests began locally in this same day, in several places, but then spread across the country. Their scale was so massive and surprising that it forced President Zine El Abidin Ben Ali, in office from 1987 to issue a warning on 28 December that dissent would be severely punished [6]. The protests were the first sign of successful popular movement and official denunciation, a pattern that would soon become a familiar throughout the Arab world.

The response of the government was not positive and the police killed and arrested many youths. This news disseminated throughout Tunisia. Many unemployed young people and the majority of Tunisians citizens demonstrated in every place of the country by opposing the government. The government of Tunisia brutally killed and arrested many Tunisians. This events changed the history of Tunisia and became turning points for the whole Arab states and signal to the revolution. Finally the government made many promise to the people to make a reform but the people of Tunisia did not return back to their home. At the conclusion the government of Tunisia fled from the country to Saudi Arabia [7].

After the escape of Ben Ali, his ministers were forced to resign because the society did not want the old discredited political elites caring only for their own interests. An interim government was established which focused on preparing democratic elections. After the elections situation in Tunisia had stabilized.

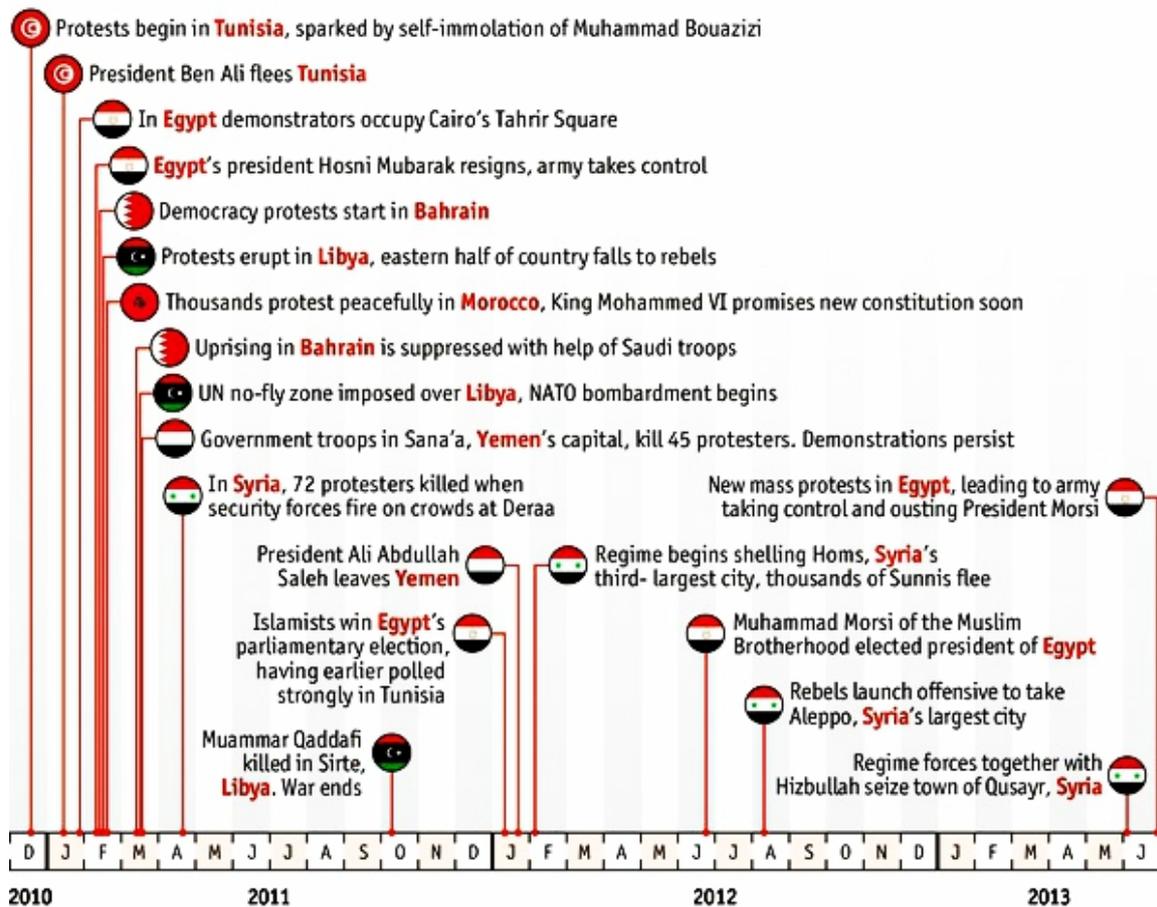


Figure 1. The events of Arab spring [4]

2.2. Libya – the death of dictator

First protests in Libya started on 13 January 2011 but mass uprisings began in the city of Benghazi on 15 February 2011. Public discontents in the all country were as a result of rebellion in the north-east of the country and in the Nafusa Mountains in the north-west, as well as smaller local protest in Benghazi over the detention of a lawyer Fathi Terbil. Within some days the unrest also spread to the Tripoli and other cities in the north-west. The actors of the uprising's first days were unorganised young men acting spontaneously [8]. From Benghazi, the revolt spread quickly and Gaddafi ordered troops loyal to him to quell the rebellion. The rebels set up the National Transitional Council (on 27 February), claiming to be the legitimate government of Libya.

When the Libyan government escalated its response with the use of force to regional riots in Benghazi and other Libyan cities, which caused the deaths of dozens of rioters, popular rebellion spread throughout northern Libya. The conflict developed into civil war. The Libyan conflict has evolved from a peaceful protest to a bloody civil war. The main reasons for this scenario were: the repressive regime of Gaddafi, the division of Libya's territory between the NTC and the supporters of the regime, the supply of weapon to NTC and coalition rebel forces, the influence of the Arab League and NATO intervention.

On 20 October 2011, war officially ended with Gaddafi's death and the NTC's declaration of victory [9].

In the Libyan uprising four distinct stages could be distinguished: peaceful protests,

rebellion, organized belligerency, and international intervention.

Due to the war in Libya, thousands of people lost their lives and hundreds of thousands were forced to migrate to neighboring countries. Losses in the economy have reached billions of dollars [10]. After the war, the process of creating the new government and developing the new constitution began.

2.3. Egypt – protests in the shadow of pyramids

Revolution in Egypt, which started on 25 January 2011, was triggered soon after the uprising in Tunisia. The protests, which took place on Cairo's Tahrir Square, was the result of the tradition of protests in Egypt, which lasted over a decade, and which included pro-democratic activity, workers' movements and Internet campaigns against the brutality of the Mubarak regime [11].

The revolution started by calls from online youth groups for protests against regime. Violent clashes between security forces and protesters resulted in at least 846 people killed and over 6000 injured. Protesters retaliated by burning over 90 police stations across the country. The protests took place in Cairo, which was described as “a war zone” during the uprising [12], Alexandria, and in all major cities across the nation. On Friday, January 28, about 50,000 protesters appeared on Tahrir Square, who joined the demonstration. Protests also increased after January 28. More than 500,000 protesters filled the square on 1, 8 and 11 February. In the evening of February 11, Vice President Omar Suleiman publicly announced the demise of the Mubarak government and the transfer of power to the army [13]. In the following weeks, the country was destabilized. Plundering and acts of violence began, and the police almost disappeared from the streets. With time, the order was restored.

2.4. Syria – the longest and the bloodiest conflict of Arab Spring

The explosion of protests and social unrest in Tunisia, and then in such countries like

Libya and Egypt had also essential influence on other countries of North Africa and the Middle East, by political, economic and social factors, and brought a serious challenges on, for the security of the Middle East. One of these countries was Syria.

The conflict in Syria began with protests on January 26, 2011 and turned into a general uprising on March 15, 2011. It has become the bloodiest conflict in the Middle East as the consequence of the Arab Spring [14].

The scenario at the beginning of the conflict was similar to other countries. The serious pro-democracy protests against Syrian regime erupted in Deraa, the city of southern Syria, after the arrest and torture of some teenagers who painted revolutionary slogans on a wall on 6 March 2011. The escalation of the conflict followed after the security forces opened fire on demonstrators, killing several of them. Protesters demanded President Assad's resignation. The use of force by the government to disperse the demonstrations only sharpened the determination of the protesters.

Violence was escalating and the civil war broke out. The rebel brigades were formed to fight government forces and take control of large cities, towns and villages. In 2012, the battles took over the capital - Damascus and the second largest city of Syria - Aleppo [15].

The armed conflict showed real divisions in the Syrian society. Most Syrians are Sunni Muslims, but Syria's security establishment has been dominated by members of the Alawi sect, of which Assad is a member. Sectarianism is special feature which occurred during the civil war. Regional governments of Iran and Iraq with the Shia majority and Lebanese Hezbollah supported Assad, while countries with the Sunni majority, including Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, supported the rebels against Assad [16].

Foreign intervention played a large role in Syria's civil war but paradoxically it escalated conflict and prolonged the

ongoing civil war. Some states supported Syria in the war against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS) but encouragement for Assad's regime was not clear.

Russia joined the conflict in 2015 and became the main ally of the Assad regime in the fight against the opposition and the Islamic State. The US has supported the opposition to the Assad government backed by Russia and has participated in offensive against ISIL [17].

3. Conclusions

The *Arab Spring* is a revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests that have embraced almost the entire Arab world. A main slogan of the demonstrators in this uprising has been a sentence *Ash-sha'b yurid*

isqat an-nizam (The people want to bring down the regime) [18].

The reasons of the protests had different bases in individual countries, but most often resulted from internal problems such as: economic problems, rising unemployment, extreme poverty, restriction of democracy, human rights violations, widespread corruption, rising food prices and various demographic factors such as high percentage of young educated people who were left without work, as well as the existence of centralized systems leading to the marginalization of people outside large cities.

In some countries the protests were aimed at overthrowing the regime, while in others improving the living conditions of society, while maintaining an independent state.

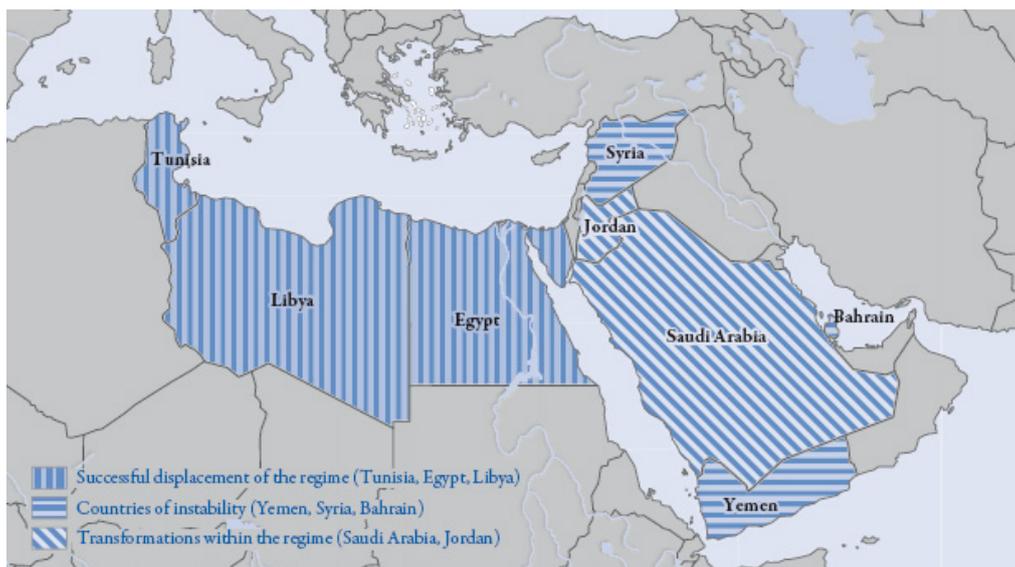


Figure 2. Changes in the Middle East after Arab Spring [20]

The ruling elite responded to the protesters differently: from introducing top-down reforms and making efforts to 'buy' social peace to repression and armed violence [19]. Figure 2. presents countries in the Middle East where changes have succeeded after *Arab Spring*.

The Arab Spring emerged Islamists as newly serious actors in MENA region politics. While Islamists in the past have always been an influential voice in Arab politics, the Arab Spring allowed them to

move from the sidelines to the main stage. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and al-Nahda in Tunisia, were both elected to power in post-revolutionary governments.

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