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The Arab Spring: A Decade Later

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Introduction

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring. Suicide of an unemployed young man in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid on 17 December 2010 has enticed the protesters to take to the streets and it has triggered an open rebellion against Tunisian autocrat Zine El Abidine Ben Ali - who on 14 January 2011 boarded on plane and fled to Saudi Arabia, escaping in front of the revolutionary chaos. Successful toppling of Ben Ali has set off a string of uprising in the Arab countries that are today known as the Arab Spring. Nowadays,

a decade later, it can be stated with certainty that the revolutions of the Arab Spring were not successful. These revolutions have not ushered in neither modernization nor democratization of the Arab countries, which was the revolutions declared objective. To the contrary, even Tunisia, a country said to have had a successful revolution, had also replaced one dictatorship with another. Effects of the violent upheavals of the Arab Spring in other Arab countries include strengthening of forces of Islamist extremism, conflicts on ethnic, religious and sectarian divisions, civil wars, total economic destruction of the most of the Arab countries caught by the

revolutionary wave, dissolution of formerly strong Arab states, and triggering the waves of migrations that still flow toward Europe. A decade after the outbreak of the Arab Spring revolutions the question of their real source remains unanswered, as well as the question to which extent these revolutions were stirred by internal forces in the Arab States of the Middle East and North Africa, or influenced by the factors from the outside. The question whether the revolutions of the Arabs Spring were just an acute geopolitical incident or a part of a long-term process, also remains unanswered. The tenth anniversary is an opportunity to reflect upon and analyze the facts and indications that manifest whom these revolutions benefited, and whom they harmed.

Geopolitical process

Judging by the available information and based on estimations of the current political situation in the Arab countries, as well as by geopolitical options of the big powers and regional players in the Middle East, everything points to a conclusion that this is a long-term political process, rather than a series of mutually unlinked and spontaneous revolutionary upheavals. The dynamics of the process is currently silenced due to a catastrophic failure in the most powerful Arab states and the impacts that revolutions have on the MENA region (the Middle East and North Africa) and Europe. It is a

fact that the upheaval of the Arab Spring did not succeed in Egypt, which in spite of the internal conflicts and subsequent economic crisis is one of the key Arab countries. In the first wave of the revolution the longstanding president Hosni Mubarak was toppled, and the Muslim Brotherhood took over the power. The rule of the Muslim Brotherhood has fueled Islamist extremism and stirred internal conflicts that have paralyzed Egypt. Such a development of the situation in Egypt has jeopardized the strategic interests of the United States and of their European allies, due to the role Egypt has in the control of one of the most important maritime lines of communication in the world, connecting the Indian Ocean through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean, but also threatened regional interests of the Saudi Arabia due to the close link between the Muslim Brotherhood and Turkey and its Middle Eastern policy.

The rule of the Muslim Brotherhood has fueled Islamist extremism and stirred internal conflicts that have paralyzed Egypt.

Military coup lead by general Abdel Fattah el-Sisi resolved the problem, leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood were imprisoned and el-Sisi dealt with the forces of the Islamist extremism, thus upending the Arab Spring revolution in Egypt. Notwithstanding, the military governance

cannot go on indefinitely and it is expected that the internal turmoil will continue. Revolutionary events in Libya have introduced a state of complete chaos of rival Islamist factions lasting to present day. Arab revolution in Bahrein was not in accordance with the interests of neither Americans nor of their allies, let alone the interests of Saudi Arabia which had decided to quell the revolution with the use of direct military intervention, and with a tacit compliance with the US and its European allies. It is certain that this process is still simmering at the core of the most powerful Arab states, and that this process, temporarily silenced, will be reactivated to full extent as a continuation of the Arab Spring, when deemed opportune for the geopolitical interests of the EU and its European allies, in a new variant of Arab Spring 2.0.

Revolutions of the Arab Spring are, considering their source and spontaneity, far from what they are often presented. These revolutions are not spontaneous uprisings of the people, but according to their characteristics and methodology of implementation, well organized operations with premeditated diplomatic, media and intelligence preparation and support of the US and some European powers, primarily of the United Kingdom and France. This is evident not only from the statements of leading American and European politicians, but also through the presence of the elements of intelligence system and special operations forces on the ground coming from these countries. Direct military

interventions that followed, especially the one in Libya, were started from the “cold start.” These interventions were prepared in advance and they did not require additional time to be started. They did not react to events – they waited for events. Spontaneity of scenarios that unfolded was susceptible from the start. At the begging of every revolution an existence of some form of common organizational nucleus in the complex of revolutionary movement was evident, except in case of Bahrein. In Bahrein, the rebellious Shiite minority either misunderstood that these revolutions were created for it too, or it acted under the influence of Teheran.

It is difficult not to notice an active participation of top organized Sunni extremist Islamist groups. These groups in fact lead the revolutions in all countries involved in the Arab Spring. It was evident that these groups would be in charge of the Arab uprisings, and it was witnessed afterwards. Pro-democratic revolutions which were supposed to bring a Western style democratization of the politics in the Middle East and North Africa, in the end turned out to be Islamist revolutions. No doubt these estimations were evident to the political leaderships of the US and European countries which openly supported uprising of the Arab Spring, and to this end used diplomatic, intelligence and military resources of their countries. Considering this, there is a high probability that the powers involved in these events used the discontent in the Arab states and

using the help of extremist Islamist movements and organizations, conducted a massive reconstruction of the geopolitical sphere of the Middle East and North Africa.

This agenda of the transformation of the MENA region had been conceived long before revolutions of the Arab Spring as a part of a broader American and European vision of creation of a “New Middle East”, according to their own geo-economic and geopolitical interests. Obsolete, old dictatorships in power in key Arab states were corrupt and secluded and thus disabling free movement of capital and investments in the region. Uprisings of the Arab Spring were just a new phase of the Western policy of transformation of the Middle East which was initialized on the ground with the military intervention of the Americans and their allies in Iraq in 2003.

Pro-democratic revolutions in the end turned out to be Islamist revolutions.

Initiative of the American strategic vision of democratization and transformation of the Middle East formulated in the agenda of the Greater Middle East (GME), later renamed into “the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative” (BMENA), was successfully included into the conclusions of G7 countries summit in Island in June 2008 by the US. Resolution

of the most powerful countries in the world, including Russia, has established a process called “Partnership for Progress and a Common Future with the Region of the Broader Middle East and North Africa” and initiated the violent process of democratization of the Middle Eastern region.

Devastating effects

Devastating effects of the transformation of the MENA region so far through the revolutions of the Arab Spring are multiple. These effects are primarily directed toward the MENA region, Europe and the EU. The Arab Spring on the territory of the MENA region has so far resulted in fostering of Islamist extremism, rather than in democratization and modernization of Arab countries, and even in moderate Middle Eastern political circles, it fostered the concept of a theocratic Islamic state. Instead of broadening of sphere of freedom and economic development though toppling of dictatorships, this transformation has ignited wars in the Middle East with no end in sight, turning them into interreligious conflicts marked with persecution of Christian communities in the Middle East.

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In the end the events initiated in the Arab Spring revolutions have led, on a geopolitical

level, to escalation of the centuries-old Sunni-Shiite conflict, which is still being conducted through different proxies. However, all these conflicts could certainly blend into one huge Sunni-Shiite conflict. Arab Spring has pushed aside the Palestinian question and thus allowed imposing the unfavorable peace solutions to the Palestinians supported by the American, Israeli and partially even diplomacy of some Arab states. The chaos of launched wars, followed by intelligence and military interventions of global powers and regional players, has brought the dissolution of Arab states and territorial divisions on ethnic, religious and sectarian criteria with a looming opportunity of creation of separate legal entities on these foundations, instead of democratic transition nominally proclaimed and supported by the US and Western allies.

Attempts to change borders and create changes of borders indirectly threaten the European peace order as well. Migration crisis, as a direct consequence of the Arab Spring that flooded Europe, is just one clear and directly visible effect it has on Europe and the EU. But the complexity of causally interconnected events of the Arab Spring threatens Europe with an even great force through processes that simmer under the surface. This seems like a tectonic shift through changes of borders and decomposition of states in revolutions that were ignited during the Arab Spring. The real problem lies in the fact that these borders are in fact borders defined

by peace deals of the winners of the World War I, clearly formulated in notorious Sykes-Picot Agreement between the UK and France, later formally and legally confirmed in the Versailles Peace Conference.

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Border demarcations are in fact a part of the Versailles peace order which, along with Europe, included the former Middle Eastern possessions of the Ottoman Empire. European borders of Central and Eastern Europe, with certain modifications after the World War II, are also founded on Versailles Treaty, and the European peace order in its essence is also founded on the Versailles order, with all its relicts included in a vast portion of European borders to the present day.

Winners and losers

Undoubtedly, the biggest winner of the Arab Spring revolutions is Israel, which got rid without firing a bullet of the militarily most dangerous Arab rivals, Syria and Iraq, two Arab countries which together with Libya have conducted the hardline anti-Israeli policy. Even though these countries are still formally united, in reality they are dissolved to different ethnic,

religious and sectarian entities, they do not act as a single state, their central governments recognized by the United Nations have no real control over the state territory, and they do not have neither a unified state military nor police force. This is a case of annihilated states that will never again be unified state entities and thus cannot act against Israel's interests. Their decomposition is bound to continue gradually in years to come, and this will culminate in the continuation of the process of the Arab Spring, and almost certainly with a new revolutionary impulse which will unfold.

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The US is another winner, regardless of the fact that the revolutions it supported had come to a disaster. However, looking from the position of American strategic interest, Washington is a winner. The US military intervention in Iraq, with subsequent breaking and occupation of the country, has secured the US presence in the region on a long-term basis, and the revolutions of the Arab Spring has boosted the Islamist extremism, thus creating the need for the American and Western presence in order to control the terrorist threat with military actions. The failure of the questionable, but publicly proclaimed objective of the Arab

Spring as a democratic transformation of the Middle East, and creation of the "New Middle East", is overshadowed by the real American geopolitical gains. The US armed forces, in spite of occasional announcements of a large-scale shift of focus to the Indo-Pacific region, will maintain their presence in the Middle East as there are no rational reason why the US foreign policy should abandon the achieved geopolitical positions in the Middle East.

EU and the European states have faced the problem of uncontrolled migration from the MENA region toward Europe after the Arab revolutions. On the other hand, after toppling of the regime in Libya, Europe has been given a space for stronger projection of its geoeconomic and geopolitical interest in Africa. German diplomacy and economy is building new positions in the Middle East and in Sub-Saharan Africa, and France is in full sway of reaffirmation on the ground of its old geopolitical doctrine "Françafrique" pointed at maintenance of the French influence on the African continent. In parallel to this, Europe will in the future rely more on energy resource of the MENA region, presently on oil and gas, and on wind and solar energy as sources of electricity and "green hydrogen". Relentless historical, economic and geopolitical logic in the territory that used to belong to the Roman Empire has led to the connection of European

and the MENA parts of the Mediterranean in one united geopolitical and geo-economic entity.

Thanks to the events related to the Arab Spring, Russia was also able to solidify its Middle Eastern position through stronger military presence in Syria. Russian politics on the other hand still has big limitations and narrow maneuvering space on the Middle Eastern scene. China has also tried to use the chaos of the Arab Spring in order to promote its own economic and geopolitical interest. To a certain extent China has had some success in it through a proactive diplomatic approach in the Middle East and through deploying its military forces in Djibouti in the Gulf of Aden.

Undoubtedly, Turkey is also one of the winners because Western military interventions and revolutions of the Arab Spring have quashed a century old geopolitical construct created by the UK and France after the WWI in the Middle East on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. Dissolution of Iraq and Syria as unified states entities has enabled Turkey to act politically and militarily in these territories in line with its doctrine of “strategic depth” aiming to rebuild Turkish influence in the territory that used to pertain to the Ottoman Empire. Thanks to the weakness of the central authorities in both Baghdad and Damascus, Turkish troops have entered and acted in Iraq and Syria undisturbed,

and recently Turkey has also deployed its troops in Libya to defend the internationally recognized government in Tripoli. Turkey has, in accordance with its interests since the beginning, granted financial, intelligence and military support to different factions of the revolutionary movement of the Arab Spring, and it will continue to do so in the future.

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The process intimated by the forceful transpiration of the Middle East through direct military interventions of the outside powers, and uprisings of the Arab Spring have resulted in the shift of the center of power of the Arab world from powerful countries like Egypt, Iraq and Syria to the Petro-monarchies of the Persian Gulf, gathered in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and led by now strengthened Saudi Arabia.

Riyadh has immensely strengthened its influence in the Arab World during the past two decades and it became the de facto center of power and decision-making of the Arab World. Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrein, Kuwait and Oman have also raised to the status of having a decisive influence on regional politics,

even though these countries are small and used to have insignificant military power. The GCC has during the Western military interventions in the Arab World and the upheavals of the Arab Spring, thanks to connections with the US and European countries and partner relations with NATO within the “Istanbul Initiative” project, reached the potential of geopolitical influence on the regional level. The Gulf monarchies led by Saudi Arabia are undoubtedly winners of the Arab Spring. The power of projection of their geopolitical interests in the Middle East has been brought in balance with their economic power that has no match in the Arab World.

Conclusion

Revolutions of the Arab Spring have destructed the biggest part of the Arab World and embroiled it in bloody military conflicts, but in parallel they have strengthened its wealthiest part, Saudi Arabia and other countries gathered in the GCC.

Undoubtedly, all outside powers involved in the events of the Arab Spring have profited, first of all the US and some European countries, but also Turkey as a regional power. Arab Spring as a set of revolutionary movements aimed to transform the Middle East and North Africa was not a short-term geopolitical campaign. Arab Spring revolutions represent a long term process which will continue in the future, driven by the geoeconomic and geopolitical interest of global and regional powers.

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