

Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region

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Leonid Issaev · Andrey Korotayev
Editors


New Wave of Revolutions in the MENA Region

A Comparative Perspective

 Springer

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Foreword

Revolutions always bring surprises, turmoil, and disappointments. Surprises, because not only do revolutions usually occur where they are least expected, their origins and unfolding often involve new patterns of events. Turmoil, because revolutions rarely follow a smooth and direct path, instead they generally unleash violence, have international spillovers, and produce protracted struggles for power. And disappointments, because revolutions usually begin with grand ambitions to bring freedom, or democracy, or greater economic equality or other benefits, only to have those benefits prove illusory, or be monopolized by a few leaders or a particular group, while the costs of regime change and upheaval are widely distributed.

Yet new revolutions also bring new insights, precisely because even if they fit older patterns, they have novel elements. New revolutions also create new configurations in the relationships among nations and peoples, thus having potential world-historical impacts. Explaining those novel elements, and elucidating those new configurations, is the task that every new wave of revolutions sets before scholars. In this volume, an outstanding set of scholars addresses these questions for the new wave of revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa that swept across the region in the late 2010s and early 2020s. While not as dramatic as the 2010–2012 wave of revolutions that became known as the “Arab Spring”, these later events are equally interesting, for they show how the earlier wave did not resolve the problems that brought instability to the region. Indeed, the Arab Spring not only failed in its hopes to bring democracy and better economic conditions to the people of the MENA region, but also it unleashed new tensions and spread the seeds of instability that sprouted in the region a decade later, in places such as Algeria, Sudan, and Lebanon.

The revolutions in this new wave, like those of the 2010–2012 wave, were varied in their aims and their results. They generally began with nonviolent protests centered in the cities (e.g., Tunis, Algiers, Beirut, Khartoum). In Sudan and Algeria, the protests sought, and successfully overturned, longstanding autocratic leaders; but they were unable to create new democracies as the military seized power to maintain order. By contrast, in Tunisia, the protests were demanding better governance from the existing democratic regime; but the growing disorder provided an excuse for a new autocratic leader to dissolve the Parliament and seize power. In Jordan, Morocco,

Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt and Iran, the protests did not overturn the regimes. In the first four, they were met with varying degrees of concessions and reforms, while in the latter two they were met with harsh repression and a stronger security state. The new wave of unrest spread even more deeply into the Sahel than the first wave, with major regional uprisings leading to a revolutionary coup in Mali in 2020. At the same time, just as there were nations that in 2010–2012 seemed to escape the wave of revolutionary unrest sweeping across the region, so too there were exceptions in 2019–2022, such as Kuwait and Bahrain.

In sum, as is so often the case, once the MENA region experienced a wave of revolutions, it did not then quickly settle into a stable new order. Quite the reverse: some leaders who had survived the first wave were toppled in the subsequent wave; protests continued and sometimes provoked new state violence or regime change in the post-revolutionary regimes; and across the region people continued to advocate for themselves and challenge the existing order.

This brief summary notes the breadth and importance of these events, but cannot begin to offer explanations. For these, one must delve into the strength and composition of regimes and state elites, the issues and coalitions that produced the protests, and the mechanisms of protest diffusion and state repression both within and across states. It is these tasks that are skillfully executed by the authors in this volume.

It is unusual to have analysis of this depth and sweep regarding events that have only happened recently. This is possible here because the authors bring extraordinary expertise in the politics and history of the MENA region to this task. This volume will provide a treasure-trove of information and insights to students and scholars seeking to understand the course of politics in the MENA region in the decade following the Arab Spring. At the same time, the analysis presented here of this new wave of revolutions is essential for understanding how the very nature of revolution is evolving, and how the latest wave of revolutions (those in the MENA region being just part of the global wave of revolutions in 2018–2022) reflects the continued transformation of the current world-system.

In fact, the World System is being shaken by the conflict between Russia and Ukraine even as I write, bringing another major spike in food prices and global inflation. If prior patterns hold, that means still more protest and turmoil is likely to arise across MENA and other developing regions. The revolutionary wave of the late 2010s and early 2020s may therefore be just beginning. Understanding what has happened in the MENA region in the last few years is essential for understanding what may now unfold. That makes this volume critical reading for anyone seeking to understand the challenges to stability and security across the region and around the world.

July 2022

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Putting together a volume with the scope and diversity of this one requires the help of many able collaborators. We are all grateful to Springer and to our editors—Almas Heshmati and Johannes Glaeser—for patience and support in pulling together this diverse volume.

This monograph is the result of the authors' study of the revolutionary processes in the Middle East and North Africa region over the last ten years. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to HSE University in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, the Lomonosov Moscow State University, the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, the Institute for African Studies and the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, which the editors and some authors of this volume belong to. Through our academic and educational work at these institutions, we have had the opportunity to deepen our understanding of the new wave of revolutions in the MENA region. A great contribution to the preparation of the publication was made by the materials of field research undertaken by Leonid Issaev, Andrey Korotayev, Anna Kashina, Alina Khokhlova, Sergey Kostelyanets, Nikolay Kozhanov, and Anton Mardasov in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Sudan, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and other MENA and Sahel countries in the 2010s and early 2020s.

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About This Book

The late 2010s have seen a new wave of revolutions in the MENA region comparable in some respect to the Arab Spring events. The scale of these revolutionary protests approached the one of the Arab Spring; they led to the fall of regimes in Sudan, Algeria, and Mali, became permanent in Lebanon and Iraq, and were suppressed in Egypt and Iran at the cost of heavy civilian casualties. This book offers a comparative perspective on the new wave of revolutions in MENA region. Presenting case studies on the protests in ten MENA countries, it offers a better understanding of the varied forms, features, and historical backgrounds of revolutionary and quasi-revolutionary episodes, as well as their causes. Accordingly, it highlights recent revolutions in their historical and world-system contexts.

The new revolutionary wave in the MENA region coincided with the downswing phase of the fifth Kondratiev wave, which manifested itself especially clearly in the form of a slowdown in economic growth and the aggravation of economic problems. Thus, it was dissatisfaction with the ongoing economic policy that became the root cause of the protest moods of the late 2010s. However, the economic agenda quickly gave way to the political one and actualized long-standing unresolved problems in each of the countries, which, as a rule, were of a systemic nature. The events of the new revolutionary wave were distinguished by their pronounced orientation “against everyone”, the political class as a whole, and “All Must Go” (with variations) became the main slogan. Given its scope, the book will appeal to scholars from various disciplines interested in MENA politics, conflict resolution, sociopolitical change, and revolutionary processes involving both nonviolent campaigns and political violence.

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