'Spring', 'Awakening' or 'Revolution': Frames of Reference for Understanding the 2011 Arab Uprisings

"Bahar", "Uyanış" ya da "Devrim": 2011 Arap Ayaklanmalarını Anlamada Referans Çerçevesi

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Abstract

Among the stunning events of this decade, dictator and regime toppling mass demonstrations in the Middle East can be considered as the most noteworthy. Uprisings starting in Tunisia and spreading to the other countries in the region was a symptom of public discontent. The immediate challenge of naming the momentous events of 2011 in large part reflects this tension. This paper does not offer a history or survey of the 2011 Arab uprisings; rather, it reviews the main terms and narratives that have been put forward to describe them. It examines the conceptual foundations and possible disadvantages of identifying the uprisings as "Spring", "Awakening" and "Revolution".

Keywords: Arab Spring, Revolution, Awakening

Öz

İçinde bulunduğumuz dönemde yaşanan önemli olayların arasında diktatörleri ve rejimleri deviren toplu gösteriler bunların başında gelmektedir. Tunus'ta başlayan ve diğer bölge ülkelerine yayılan ayaklanmalar toplumsal hoşnutsuzluğun bir göstergesiydi. Olayların ardından yaşananların tanımlanma çabası da büyük oranda bu gerilimi yansıtmaktadır. Bu makale, 2011 olaylarının tarihsel bir incelemesinden ziyade bu olayların tanımlanması noktasında ortaya atılan tanımlamaları değerlendirmektedir. Makale "Bahar", "Uyanış" ve "Devrim" gibi tanımlamaların kavramsal temellerini incelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Arap Baharı, Devrim, Uyanış

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On 14 January, 2011, the seventy-four-year-old Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who had ruled Tunisia for twenty-three years, fled the country and took refuge in Saudi Arabia. His departure sparked a transformative process of change that spread from North Africa to Bahrain, and beyond. Street protests and armed uprisings shook the region, toppling the leaders of Egypt, Libya and Yemen, provoking a bloody crackdown in Bahrain and pushing Syria into a destructive civil war. Though the full impact of the uprisings will not be understood for some time, the challenge that was posed to the existing political order was nonetheless clear. The widespread rejection of authoritarian rule will not be easily reversed.

Amidst all the uncertainties and complexities, aspirations and disappointments, Western observers have tried over the last two years to make sense of these momentous events by a process of naming that is worth considering in some detail. On the one hand, terms are employed with the straightforward aim of constructing an informed and explanatory narrative; on the other, the choice of vocabulary can influence the wrong conclusions or even support specific agendas. This paper focuses on three names, 'Arab Spring', 'Arab Awakening', and "Facebook Revolution" with the aim of separating unhelpful generalizations that prompt misunderstandings from the compelling analogies that underline historical connections and comparative experiences. This paper does not offer a history or survey of the 2011 Arab uprisings; rather, it reviews the main terms and narratives that have been put forward to describe them.[1]

1. 'ARAB SPRING'

The term 'Arab Spring' likens the Arab uprisings of 2011 to earlier instances in world history when authoritarian rule was rejected by popular upheavals. Of particular significance are the 1848 'Spring of Nations' (or, 'Springtime of the Peoples') -- which was driven by widespread frustration with traditional political authority -- to the 1968 'Prague Spring' -- an attempt at political liberalization in Czechoslovakia in the midst of its domination by the Soviet Union. This linkage is one of the great advantages of the term: it underlines the historical significance of the Arab uprisings by drawing comparisons to a long line of momentous, global events. Of course, it is too easily forgotten that the Middle East itself has witnessed a long, if chequered, history of popular upheavals: during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Ottoman Empire, Iran, Tunisia and Egypt were all subject to intense constitutional debates. Nonetheless, in the current post-9/11 context, the label 'spring' usefully re-aligns the Arab world with world history. It thus carries with it the welcome ability to discard, once and for all, the canards of a passive population that is exceptionally resistant to the spread

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[1] Some of this material is based on a survey of the 2011 Arab uprisings provided in chapter 26, "The 2011 Arab Uprisings", of the recently updated William Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Colorado, Westview Press: 2013).

of democratic ideals. Throughout the first part of 2011, the world watched as Arab citizens willingly risked their lives in peaceful waves of protest to demand a better future, one framed in terms of universal concerns such as the rule of law and social justice. These images shattered pervasive tropes of an unchanging Arab East that have held sway for far too long.

Indeed, many observers have since described the 'Arab spring' as the inspiration for successive waves of protest movements across Europe and the Americas in 2011 and 2012 that sought to upend the political and economic status. At protests and occupations across the United States, one could find posters with slogans such as 'Walk like an Egyptian'. After more than a decade of American insistence on viewing the Arab world through the prism of 'the war on terrorism', the peaceful and determined nature of the Arab uprisings both damaged al-Qaeda ideologically and, at the same time, loosened the militant movement's hold on foreign perceptions of the entire Arab world.

However, it has also been argued that use of the term 'Arab spring' should be avoided precisely because it focuses undue attention on the pursuit of Western democratic ideals. The main problem with emphasising political liberalisation as the main goal of the Arab uprisings is that it risks sidelining or ignoring more fundamental aspects of the transformations sought by the protesters, in particular their socio-economic goals. The sharpest criticism of the term has come from observers who argue that its use by American think tanks and policy makers has been part of a larger strategy to ensure that foreign economic interests in the region, and the neo-liberal ideologies on which they rest, not be threatened.[2] Other observers warn against casually replacing one Western generalization with another. Tariq Ramadan, for example, cautions against a binary change in perspective in which Arabs have suddenly "joined the advanced, civilized detachment of the Western-led onward march of history":

Arab peoples, primarily Muslims, were rising up without violence in the name of the very same values "we" hold dear, the Western values of freedom, justice, and democracy… Their resemblance came at the price of deleting their religious beliefs and practices, their culture and even their history… At last they had overcome their backwardness and strode in lockstep with the West in its enlightened march of progress.[3]

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[2] Joseph Massad, "The 'Arab Spring' and other American seasons", *al Jazeera,* 29th August 2012. See also Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprisings: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York, Public Affairs: 2012), and Ramzy Baroud, "Exploited and Misused: The Impossible Discourse of the 'Arab Spring'", 25 January 2013, *al Arabiya News,* http://english.alarabiya.net/views/2013/01/25/262415.html.

[3] See Tariq Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening: Islam and the new Middle East* (New York, Oxford University Press: 2012), 18.

To be sure, many Arab voices have indeed talked about Western models of government when discussing the complex process of framing new constitutional structures. However, it is also clear that the dominant concerns expressed by the 2011 Arab uprisings were for self empowerment and a fairer distribution of national resources – or, 'bread, freedom and social justice' in the words of one prominent slogan. Across the Arab world, demonstrators protested against regimes that had become at best neglectful, at worst predatory. Upon achieving independence from colonial rule, these regimes had come to power on the promise of meeting basic socio-economic demands of the population. But the post-independence social contract unravelled during the years when the regimes pretended to liberalize their state-run economies, reducing government expenditure on social programs while selling off assets to rich friends. The result of these selective liberalizing market reforms has widely been referred to as crony capitalism. Record high food prices compounded the adverse effects of market reforms and led to spiralling economic inequality and social alienation. The concentration of political and economic power in fewer and fewer hands is widely viewed as a large part of the overall malaise that led to the protests. The yawning gap between the privileged few and the disenfranchised many became a dominant source of frustration and despair.

Indeed, the Arab protests were in most cases greatly inspired by the prior sacrifices of labour leaders and they relied heavily on organizational networks built up over years under severe constraints. In Egypt, for example, tough economic conditions in 2006 and 2007 led to a wave of workers' protests and in 2008 textile workers in the Nile delta town of al-Mahalla al-Kubra called for a large strike on April 6. Activists from a number of groups then formed a loose coalition called the April 6th Movement, in support of the textile strike. While there is no doubt that the 2011 uprisings in many ways marked a profound break with the past, it is also true that they were the culmination of a long history of labour protest. Trade union movements in various countries had organised repeated strikes in the years prior to the uprisings. Given the pivotal role played by labour, and their opposition to the problems created by the privatization policies of the old regimes, it is difficult to see just how liberalizing economic reforms can now be made part of a solution that provides jobs and hope for the people. In other words, failure to meet socio-economic demands could risk delegitimizing and thus destabilizing the political transition to a more pluralist and democratic system.

James Gelvin provides a final caution against the use of the term 'Arab Spring'. He criticizes both its clichéd overuse as well as it misleading connotation as a transitional moment. He notes, for example, that following the 2003 invasion of Iraq American commentators invoked the label 'spring' to refer to subsequent events in the Arab world (including the downfall of the Saddam Hussein regime), all of

which were framed as part of President George W. Bush's 'freedom agenda.'[4] To this list, one could also add the example of the so-called 'Damascus Spring' which referenced a brief period of intensified political debate that occurred when Bashar al-Asad succeeded his father in 2000. In addition to this record of dashed hopes, Gelvin provides two other reasons to avoid the term 'Arab Spring':

> "First, the term spring implies a positive outcome for the uprisings, which has yet to be achieved. Second, only one of the uprisings – in Syria – actually broke out in that season (if one includes all of March in Spring). The others began in the dead of winter, a season hardly appropriate for an uplifting title."

2. 'ARAB AWAKENING'

So much more than a call for democratic liberalization, the complex aspirations of the Arab uprisings were distinguished above all by the overarching appeal to dignity. The demand for dignity reflected both the individual feeling of being worthy of respect as well as the collective demand to hold state leaders accountable to their citizenship. For many observers, this emergence of a new national self-consciousness is best captured by the term 'awakening'. Not all agree: for some, the term reflects Westernized conceptualizations of an Arab world that needed to be roused from a long period of slumber. Others presumably are more inspired by the classic history written in 1938 by George Antonius about the Arab Revolt that unfolded during World War One. That book generated a profound debate about the origins of Arab nationalism and the European machinations that divided the Arab world into separate colonies in order to facilitate imperial rule over them during the interwar period.[5]

In this sense, 'awakening' underlines the efforts of the people to bring an end to the various mechanisms through which sclerotic regimes have enforced the stagnancy of the country and the docility of its subjects. As noted above, the desire of the people for more democratic, parliamentary, pluralist modes of governance clearly exists. But the driving force of the protesters has been to claim back from aging dictators ownership and citizenship of their own country. At this point, it is useful to briefly recall the specific origins of the protests, triggered as they were by events situated in the marginalised and neglected rural areas of Tunisia. On December 17, 2010, a young Tunisian fruit seller, Mohammed Bouazizi, lit himself on fire to protest official abuse and the misery of trying to make a living: earlier

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[4] James Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York, Oxford University Press: 2012), 32-33.

[5] The actual connection of the term 'awakening' to the title of Antonius' landmark books is unclear. Whereas the Arabic translation of Antonius' book is *Yaqdhat al-'Arab*, contemporary translations of 'awakening' refer to 'sahwa' and 'nahda'. I thank Ahmed Mahdi for bringing this to my attention.

that day he had lacked the funds to pay a bribe to corrupt police officers who beat him and confiscated his goods. This desperate one-man protest unleashed a collective challenge to the prevailing mood, crystallising Tunisians' feelings of humiliation and resentment at the widespread nepotism. As expected, the government ordered the police and security agencies to forcefully put down the demonstrations, but this now only fuelled further protests. Within weeks the regime unravelled, President Ben Ali took refuge in Saudi Arabia, and shock waves were sent across the Middle East.

The significance of the appeal to 'dignity' and self-empowerment has been described by Hamid Dabashi in the following terms:

> "Dignity is not political matter. Dignity is a moral virtue that had now become a political force… This appeal to dignity posits an agency, maps an unfolding morality, and reclaims the term 'Arab' from years and generations of abuse. As a non-political term entering the political domain, 'dignity' has a catalytic power, an inaugural audacity announcing the self-conscious start of a world-historic event that was about to discover a world of its own making.[6]"

The demand for dignity is most easily understood in terms of the nature of the old authoritarian autocracies. By 2011, Ben Ali had ruled Tunisia for 23 years; President Mubarak had ruled Egypt for 30 years; Colonel Muammar Qaddafi had ruled Libya for 42 years; President Ali Abdullah Saleh had ruled Yemen for 33 years; while Hafiz al-Asad and his son Bashar had ruled Syria for 41 years. All sectors of society were harassed and subdued to ensure their submissiveness: university student elections were rigged while sports clubs were hijacked by members of the regime to inculcate new layers of loyalty.[7] The contempt in which the rulers of each country held the people is probably best shown by the attempts of the aging Arab leaders on the one hand to eliminate all possible competition while, on the other, to arrange for their children to succeed them. The efforts of these rulers to perpetuate their families' rule turned the countries into their own personal fiefdoms. In Egypt, Mubarak's efforts to forge a regime that was half republic (*gumhuriya*, in Egyptian dialect) and half monarchy (*malakiya*) had become so prevalent that it warranted its own label: *gumlukiya* (coined by Saad Eddine Ibrahim).[8]

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[6] Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*, (New York, Zed Books: 2012), 127.

[7] See Marwan Bishara, *The Invisible Arab: The Promise and Peril of the Arab Revolutions* (New York, Nation Books: 2012).

[8] See Roger Owen *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press: 2012).

Scholarly descriptions of governance in the Arab world in the 1990s and 2000s frequently used such words as stalemate and stagnation. These characterizations reflected the growing dissatisfaction with the ruling elite. As the personalized regimes grew older and more avaricious, their populations became younger, poorer, and more aware. Across the Arab world, median age (the age that separates a population into two equal parts) than the reigns of their authoritarian rulers: in Egypt, median age is 24; in Syria it is 22; in Libya it is 24; in Yemen it is 18. That is to say, young populations knew only one ruling regime and suffered under its failure to meet their demands for affordable bread, sufficient housing, good education, and fulfilling employment. The frustration felt by the disillusioned youth across the Arab world is well captured by the term *waithood*: a phrase that describes the multifaceted ways in which educated youth are denied the next steps towards adulthood.[9]

The winter and spring of 2011 can thus be seen as a moment of great enthusiasm in which the populations of all Arab countries could imagine a new socio-economic and political order. After decades of being subjected to ossified political structures and corrupted economic reforms, Arab publics were more empowered and less fearful. As Rashid Khalidi sums up:

> "The energy, dynamism and intelligence of the younger generation in the Arab world has been unleashed, after being dammed up by a system which treated them with contempt, and which concentrated power in the hands of a much older generation. Seemingly out of nowhere, young people in the Arab world have gained a confidence, an assurance, and courage that have made fearsome police state regimes that once looked invincible tremble.[10]"

In this sense, Arab nations have visibly 'awakened' to a new consciousness of their empowerment and self-confidence. People's eyes were opened to new possibilities (greater openness, inclusiveness, and opportunity) but also new solidarities. However, the term 'Arab Awakening' is also in many ways a deceptively enigmatic phrase: where and what exactly is 'Arab' about the 2011 uprisings? To be sure, the term 'Arab Awakening' is useful in that it locates the historical significance of the uprisings in their regional interconnectedness and in the responsiveness of the populace of each Arab country to what they see happening in other Arab countries. The cultural affinity that comes from Arabs speaking the same language and sharing a sense of history clearly played an important role in

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[9] See Samar Khalaf and Roseanne Saad Khalaf, eds., *Arab Youth: Social Mobilisation in Times of Risk* (London, Saqi Books: 2011).

[10] Rashid Khalidi, "Preliminary Observations on the Arab Revolutions", in *The Dawn of the Arab Uprisings: End of an Old Order?*, edited by Bassam Haddad, Rosie Bsheer, and Ziad Abu-Rish (Pluto Press, 2012), p10.

pushing the revolutionary momentum eastward from Tunisia. Indeed, protesters across the Arab world copied specific techniques used in the Tunisian revolt, such as the peaceful chanting of the slogan "the people want the fall of the regime". But who are the people? All Arab populations shared the widespread resentment for the nepotism, corruption and inequality confronting them. But the youthful protesters did not mobilize around the pan-Arabist paradigms of their predecessors, and they self-identified more as Tunisians or Egyptians or Syrians than around an entity such as "the Arab nation". Moreover, the navigation of successful political and economic transitions in individual countries required the unique and complex balancing of varied state interests: in this sense, Egypt was not Tunisia, Syria was not Egypt, Saudi Arabia was not Syria, and so on. Two of the most significant variables have been the strength and organisation of a state's unions and the structure and composition of a state's army. For example, the transition tended to be less bloody in a country where demonstrators faced a relatively 'national' conscript army, as in Tunisia and Egypt, than a more sectarian force, such as in Syria and Libya. Related issues are the significance of regional or sectarian cleavages, the role of outside actors, the memory of recent civil war and ethno-sectarian carnage, and the presence of oil rent. The oil-rich Gulf monarchies were, at least in the short-term, in a particularly unique position to confront the calls for reform.

On the one hand, ruling monarchies tend to enjoy greater legitimacy and even loyalty from their citizens, and rely heavily on foreign labourers who are understandably wary of how political mobilization could easily lead to deportation. On the other hand, flush with cash thanks to years of high oil prices, they announced the distribution of billions of dollars in social welfare spending. While such measures may have lessened the intensity of some grievances, the resentment with the lack of employment opportunities, curtailment of civil liberties, and closed political systems clearly remains. On the island nation of Bahrain, where a Sunni dynasty rules over a Shi'a majority, the ruling family launched a brutal crackdown on the protesters (with the encouragement of Saudi forces, and with a blind eye turned by the United States which bases its Fifth Fleet there). A second issue is the significance of regional or ethno-sectarian cleavages and the memory of recent civil war and chaos. In Syria, for example, where the minority Alawite sect has through the al-Asad family ruled the country for more than four decades – the regime derived some continued support from minority groups who fear a bloody sectarian fragmentation, or an overarching regional struggle with Islam between the region's Sunnis and Shi'as.

"Febrile and fragmented", observed David Gardner "the ultimate test of the Arab awakening will be how sensitively and equitably the emerging order handles minorities."[11] Closely related to this, of course, is the need to find a balance be-

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[11] David Gardner, "Middle East: Febrile and Fragmented", *Financial Times,* 14 May 2012.

tween religious pluralism and individual rights. But this only raises yet another question about the nature of the 'Arab awakening' taking place: under what conditions do those protesting authoritarianism and dictatorship realize the importance of the struggle for gender equality and yield empowering outcomes for women?[12] Just as the term 'Arab spring' risks limiting the time frame available for our understanding of the Arab uprisings, so does 'Arab awakening' constrain our understanding of the spectrum of space. Although the term 'Arab awakening' usefully draws our attention to the prevailing interconnectedness of the Arab world, one cannot view the whole Arab world as a homogenous region whose transition from the old autocracies will be the same. Those who study specific countries will be more impressed by their distinct circumstances and trajectories than by comparisons with neighbouring states. It is perhaps obvious that no single phrase will capture such a vast and variegated phenomenon as the uprisings of 2011. At some point, one must narrow the subject to specific national contexts: the 'people' who want the fall of the regime are Tunisians and Egyptians, Syrians and Libyans. At the same time, it is useful to consider widening the aperture to recognize the influence of non-Arab factors. For example, Dabashi draws a direct link between the Arab uprising of 2011 and the Green Movement that had galvanized Iranian political discourse and social action two years earlier, in 2009: "there can be no doubt that Tunisian and Egyptian youth were influenced by their witnessing the actions of Iranian youth in the Islamic republic in 2009."[13]

3. 'FACEBOOK/TWITTER REVOLUTION'

Both the 2009 Green Movement in Iran and the 2011 Arab uprisings were shaped in important ways by the social media technology (Facebook, Twitter, You Tube and the Internet), and any discussion of the labeling of these events needs to consider its impact. Not only did these new information technologies empower societies with new ways of coordinating their opposition to the ruling regimes, they undermined the regime's monopoly on information. Somewhat ironically, the initial spread of cell phones was facilitated by state-controlled companies or, where the sector was privatized, by regime-friendly operators. It was in this way, for example, that Bashar al-Asad's first cousin, Rami Makhlouf, came to own shares in so many companies that he became known as 'Mr. Ten Percent', and his control over a giant mobile phone company was a particularly potent symbol of government corruption. During the 2011 uprisings, Arab regimes did their best to curtail the movement of journalists and their film crews, but they could not stop individuals from uploading their own rough, shaky mobile images to You Tube or Facebook. These images, however rough and shaky, were then immediately

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[12] Deniz Kandiyoti, "Disquiet and Despair: the Gender Subtext of the "Arab Spring" in *opendemocracy* 26 June 2012, http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/deniz-kandiyoti/disquiet-and-despair-gender-sub-texts-of-arab-spring

[13] Dabashi, *The Arab Spring*, 14.

streamed by Arab satellite stations such as al-Jazeera and sent to homes across the entire region.

Consider the case of Egypt. Reflecting on the role played by social media during the Egyptian uprisings, the activist and Google executive, Wael Ghonim labelled the new methods of organisation and awareness 'Revolution 2.0'.[14] When activists first expanded their online presence, they found new ways to avoid censors and raise sensitive issues. In June 2010, for example, Ghonim created a Facebook page called 'We are all Khaled Said' to protest the brutal killing of a young man dragged by security forces from a cybercafé. By featuring photos, shot in the morgue by a cell phone, of Said's beaten face, the website successfully undermined the government's official story. The website went viral focussing attention on police abuse, and a protest was planned for January 25, National Police Day. Hundreds of thousands converged, from all parts of Cairo, onto the centrally located public space, Tahrir Square. They chanted "the people want the fall of the regime" right in from of the Mugamma, the hated administrative building that best represented Egypt's controlling state.

Important as it was, one must take care not to over exaggerate the role played by new communication technologies. For one thing, excessive focus on the catalytic role played by technology leads us back to the problematic image of a region lying dormant until awakened by the kiss of modern Western technology. As discussed above, the uprisings did not emerge from a vacuum: traditional organisational frameworks, in particular labour strikes and mosque institutions, played a crucial role. It is overly simplistic to suggest that every protester had a Facebook or Twitter account. Moreover, the discipline demonstrated by the millions of protesters who, in defiance of security forces, marched to and then occupied a public place reflected a more complex civil society. The 2011 Arab uprisings relied on personal bonds of trust and solidarity much more resilient than can suddenly emerge with the tools of a virtual environment.

4. CONCLUSION: '*REVOLUTIONS*'

But to what extent is this examination of English terminology really just an exercise in beating around the bush. Surely the obvious place to look for the most pertinent name is on the streets of the Arab capitals themselves. The term most commonly used by the demonstrators themselves is just 'revolution' (or *thawra* in Arabic). As Rami Khoury explains, revolution -- or 'revolutions' (*thawrat*) when describing the collective protests of the whole region – epitomizes the "activism, will, empowerment, determination and agency, denoting citizens who have the power to change their world and are going about that business with diligence and perseverance."[15]

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[14] Wael Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0: the Power of the People is Greater than the People in Power* (New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: 2012).

[15] Rami Khoury, "Drop the Orientalist Term 'Arab Spring'", *Daily Star*, August 17, 2011. http://

Khoury concludes by wondering whether Western audiences might be discomforted by acknowledging the full reality of "revolutionary, self-assertive Arabs". To many, the Arab uprisings was clearly a moral victory to be celebrated, but to a few it was evidently a threat to be feared. Most writing on the 2011 Arab uprisings still reflects the tension between its promise and peril: the initial and widespread excitement with Arabs finally achieving their self-determination and the growing worry that all may not turn out well. The immediate challenge of naming the momentous events of 2011 in large part reflects this tension. But it also reflects our proximity to complex developments that are likely to unfold over years, perhaps decades. But this is of course always the case with revolutions. Revolutions do not happen in one season, a 'spring' or a 'winter'. They may take year or, as A.J.P. Taylor said of the case of Germany during the 1848 spring of nations, they may reach there turning point and not turn at all. Counter revolutionary forces with their own vested interests can ensure that nothing in fact changes.

Nonetheless, it is impossible to ignore how deeply runs the general feeling among the Arab public that so much has already changed as a result of the stunning events of 2011.Within the region, Arab publics are empowered; outside the region, pervasive tropes of an unchanging Arab east have been shattered.

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www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Columnist/2011/Aug-17/Drop-the-Orientalist-term-Arab-Spring.ashx#axzz2KdD0ijfv

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