# Debunking a Phenomenon: the "Arab Spring" Misconception

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The Middle East cannot be defined as being Arab. For as far back as modern history can recall, US foreign policy and media have centered on the belief that the Middle East is home to an "Arab" people. While this perception may be mostly based upon the events the transpired when the pan-Arab movement gave birth to independent nations, it is ill-informed to assume that the people of the Middle East are culturally and ethnically similar. For "Arab" notion to be true, one would assume that these similar people would all share the same beliefs and habits, speak a similar Arabic language, share similar histories, and identify with common traditions. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Grouping over 278 million people of 22 different nations into a single category is scientifically unsound, mainly because they simply do not speak the same language. For US Foreign Policy to be effective, it must be based on firm grounds of political "science." It is extremely important that policy makers begin to understand that "Arabic" as an independent term is not one that identifies a language or a people. Left standing on its own, the word means nothing linguistically. Unlike other languages, Arabic must be identified by genre, country or ethnicity. Hence, Arabic exists in four distinctive forms: its Pre-Islamic form (used by people in the Arabian Peninsula before the introduction of Islam; an extremely complex and unpopular form of Arabic), its Classical form (the language of the Quran; a type of Arabic so complex that it is hardly used to communicate in everyday life), its Modern Standard form (which can be heard across various media platforms and news outlets, but is not used by the common citizen), and lastly, it exists in its more widespread Ethnic form (Iraqi, Egyptian, Jordanian, etc) – each of which is further divided into dialects and accents. While some may argue that the languages are somewhat etiologically similar, the fact remains they are unalike culturally, ethnically, grammatically, and phonetically; hence each represents an independent identity and nationality.

The so called "Arab Spring" has been a popular notion in American media. US academics, journalists and politicians speak of the most recent Middle Eastern revolutionary movements as a single and similar wave of reform that they deem as one that could be defined along racial lines. Not only is this approach methodically flawed, but it also overrides the sense of remarkable national pride and the notable sovereign identity of the citizens that revolted against different leaders within different countries. Here we have to stop at a critical question: where does the identity of one Middle Easterner end and where does the identity of another begin? The answer is quite simple: at their geographic borders.

More than being a mere ideological revolution by the inhabitants of a region, the recent waves of reform were the result of long-lived and dissimilar national agonies and frustrations. To draw upon an example: the Libyan peoples' political and economical hardships were hardly similar to those experienced by their neighbors in Tunisia. Moreover, the approaches or outcomes of their uprisings were drastically different. Libya continues to experience an armed revolution and a defiant Kaddafi, whereas Bin Ali, the ousted leader of Tunisia, fled his country soon after the non-violent Tunisian revolution. Additionally, the social aspects of life widely differ throughout the region, where the economies of the nations that make up the Middle East are completely autonomous. For instance, as of 2010, the World Bank indicated that the per capita income in Libya was $12,020 USD, while Tunisia's was $4070 USD[1]; almost three folds the purchasing power and three times the standard of living. In spite of all the political and economical disparities, almost as though intentionally turning a blind eye to the apparent differences between the

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two, when asked why the term "Arab Spring" was used, most analysts have shed light upon its similarities to the "Prague Spring". On the one hand, Prague defines a nation, the other identifies a phenomenon. On the other, if they were even remotely similar, then shouldn't this Spring be named after Tunisia? Furthermore, the Prague Spring took place during the one-party Soviet dominance of Europe, and it encouraged similar movements throughout the Balkans, while the so-called "Arab Spring" occurred across several politically independent countries. These rationalizations alone should have served as enough ammunition for any well informed individual to scientifically deduce and linguistically conceptualize a different phrase to use when describing the events that have recently revolutionized the Middle East.

The guiding logic must be framed as follows. Since the inhabitants of this historically rich and culturally diverse region speak different ethnic forms of Arabic, how accurate can it be to collectively identify them by one ethnic group? More importantly, is it fair to label sovereign popular movements by a supra-national term that attempts to override their intra-national civil sacrifices? The Middle East is one of the most ethnically diverse regions on the planet, not only do its inhabitants hail from Arabic and Indo-European roots but they are also of various religious and ethnic sects, each of which is linguistically independent of the other. Hence where one's common everyday language is different, it is safe to assume that one's sense of social interaction and political expression is categorically different as well. Nasser's pan-Arab[2] lens does not do justice by the heterogeneous ethnic and sectarian makeup of the region. For example, Iraq is comprised of approximately twenty five different sects dominated by Shiite Muslims, Sunni Muslims, and Kurds (Christian, Shiite and Sunni). Libya, however, is primarily made up of Sunni Muslims but is also home to Berbers, Greeks, Maltese, Italians and Turks[3] and other non-Arab groups which have endured equal pains and rose against the same dictatorship. This is true of most Middle Eastern countries where the populations are comprised of Arabs and non-Arabs, each of whom speak a different language (ex Berbers and Kurds) or dialect (differing between cities and regions within the same country – sometimes drastically). Whatever term would be used to define the recent events in the Middle East it must clearly reflect and honor the stakes of all those who took part, Arabs and non-Arabs alike.

Why should we care what this "Spring" would eventually be called? For one, it has long been argued that along with the lack of human rights, the absence of political representation, and extraordinary despotism, the disenfranchisement of identity equally contributes to the manifestation of modern day terrorism. Here the term "identity" refers to a complex theoretical construct involving elements originating at three levels: (a) cultural identity, (b) social identity, and (c) personal identity.[4] Indeed citizens in the Middle East may identify with a supra-social identity, but their most immediate one is both embedded in proud national culture and shaped by unique local personalities. Defining individuals with various cultures and personalities as one people pursuing similar aspirations, simply because they speak one form of Modern Standard Arabic, risks disenfranchising a group. Ultimately this process of "social labeling" plants the seed of future regional instability and threatens the marginalization of particular minority sects of society that have equally contributed to the ousting of unpopular tyrants and have always been and still are extremely underrepresented politically. Second, to generalize and call it the "Arab Spring" is to assume the movement had been geographically all encompassing, where every state of the Arab League had experienced a revolution that saw a government overthrown. That is simply false. The majority of the countries in the region had no major demonstrations or popular uprisings (Lebanon, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Mauritania, Djibouti, Iraq, Oman and Morocco). Some never materialized (Algeria, Bahrain and Jordan) while others such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen, where armed revolutions had indeed begun, have yet to arrive at a decisive outcome.

As far as US foreign policy is concerned, it is extremely vital to realize that while the nations that comprise the Middle East seem extremely interconnected when it comes to the Palestinian cause, this is merely a product of Nasser's pan-Arab quest to find a mutual cause to build his "Union" around. Beyond this however, the wide differences in dialects and forms of Arabic used in these countries shows how they take great pride in national identity before they do with being "Arab". This demonstrates the independence and distinctiveness of nationality and language in a region that shares tremendous similarities in religious history and faith. Simply put, while they may share some common historical and religious values, Middle Eastern people and countries are geographically, linguistically, culturally, and modernly sovereign. Hence, we could safely deduce that collectivity contradicts identity, and where identity is negated and disenfranchised, terrorism and instability manifest themselves. Understanding and appreciating the variations in regional identity through a lens of linguistics is vital to understanding the intriguing political and social

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complexities that shape the Middle East

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[1] World Bank. (2011) **World Development Indicators database**, 1 July 2011. http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/GNIPC.pdf

[2]President Nasser of Egypt (1956-70) and his "Arab" Socialist movement championed the idea of Arabism and attempted to bring together the "Arab World" (as he referred to it) under the leadership of Egypt. Hence the similar flags of Syria, Yemen, Egypt and Iraq, who were signatories' of proposed Arab Socialist Union – a pact that eventually was not carried out.

[3]P R Kumaraswamy. "**Problems of Studying Minorities in the Middle East**". Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations, Vol.2, No.2, Summer 2003 http://www.alternativesjournal.net/volume2/number2/kumar.pdf

[4] S. J. Schwartz, C.S Dunkel and Alan S. Waterman. "**Terrorism: An Identity Theory Perspective**". Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 32:537–559, 2009. P. 540 http://sethschwartz.info/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Identity-and-Terrorism1.pdf