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# External Intervention and the Arab Spring: Implications for the region

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**Abstract:** This paper looks at the effect of external intervention in the Arab Spring. The paper goes over the history of external intervention in the region of Middle East. It then goes on to give a brief overview of the events of the Arab Spring in every country involved. It then looks at case studies involving 6 countries, three in which substantial intervention took place, and another three in which substantial intervention did not take place. It draws certain conclusions, namely that external intervention often worsened the intensity of the conflict, and that while intervention on one side proved decisive, intervention on both sides only dragged on the conflict instead of providing a quick resolution. Next, it predicts why intervention would be a continuing feature of Middle Eastern geopolitics through the prism of Game Theory. Finally, the paper seeks to provide a possible resolution for the problem through an international agreement.

**Keywords:** Middle East, Arab Spring, External Intervention, Geopolitics, Game Theory

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## Introduction

**IT WAS A SINGLE ACT** – self-immolation by a disgruntled and helpless vegetable vendor in Tunisia – which sparked the fire of change and revolution throughout the Islamic world in Middle East and North Africa. This phenomenon, quickly named as the Arab Spring, was caused by the pent-up frustration of millions of common people facing regular oppression at the hands of an uncaring political elite and a repressive and authoritarian state. While the causes for the uprisings in the various countries in the Arab World were quite similar, the effects were quite different. While in some countries, like Tunisia and Egypt, regime change did occur, others descended into a still-ongoing civil war, while in yet others the rulers maintained their position despite domestic opposition.

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What could explain the differing outcomes in the various countries? There could be several possible reasons, including different levels of entrenchment of the present ruling elites and different local situations. This paper, however, would argue that one large reason was that of external intervention following the onset of Arab Spring. Both who intervened and what was the extent of intervention are important factors that could explain how the Arab Spring played out the way it did in the various countries of Middle East and North Africa. Finally, the paper would make a judgement call as to whether external intervention was a helpful or a harmful factor in achieving the originally intended goals of the Middle East.

## External Intervention in the Middle East

External intervention is not a new phenomenon in the Middle East. In fact, the current strain of intervention can be traced back to the end of the First World War, when the Western powers got involved in the Middle East for the first time. With the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the power hitherto controlling the region, it came under the hand of Britain and France under the mandate system. (Barr 2012) While theoretically it was supposed to be a trusteeship, the mandating powers used the mandated countries for their own benefit. Oil was not yet a very important resource, and it was mostly the strategic location of the region, sandwiched between the three continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe, which made it so important.

With the Second World War, two new considerations entered the calculus of foreign powers interested in this region. The first was that of oil, which had now become an important source of energy in the world and was the raw material for many industrially important materials. Oil was plentiful in this region, and thus became a priority for the external powers. However, the second consideration was the spirit of decolonization, which meant that the mandate system had to end, and the powers could no longer control the region directly. Thus, they sought to indirectly control and influence the region by supporting the governments or employing subterfuge to engineer regime change and bring in friendly governments.

The most blatant example of this was the deposition of Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister, Mossadegh, by British and American intelligence. In his place, the Shah of Iran was installed as a government that would be friendly to Western interests. The Shah was very modernist and tried to introduce Western customs in his country. However, he was deeply unpopular among his people since they were largely conservative and traditional. He also most of

the oil revenues on funding arms purchases from the US, at a time when a large section of his population was in dire poverty. The intervention ultimately backfired in 1979 as the Iranian Revolution removed the Shah and the consequent revolutionary government has been vehemently anti-West ever since.

Another early example of intervention was an attempt by UK and France, in conjunction with Israel, to capture the Suez Canal. The Suez was hitherto owned by a British company, and the revenue derived from it was sent to UK, depriving Egypt of the same. Nasser, an Arab nationalist and socialist, nationalized the Suez Canal because the revenues were derived from its strategic location, which lay in Egyptian territory. To prevent this nationalization, UK and France tried to capture the Suez by sending paratroopers. This was unsuccessful as this intervention was not liked either by the US or the USSR, and immense pressure was put on the UK and France to withdraw.

During the Cold War period, it was in the interest of the United States to maintain support to government's friendly to it and prevent the USSR from increasing its influence in the area. It mainly did this through financial aid and arms sales to its client governments. One of these was Iran, but there were others as well like Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, etc. It also engineered coups in other countries, like Iraq in 1961 which ultimately led to the assassination of its leader Karim Qasim in 1963 (whether the assassination can be attributed to US' coup efforts is debatable, but the US did try to plot a coup after Qasim nationalized Iraq's oil reserves).

As the Cold War was ending, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait necessitated a multilateral response, led by the US, to free the country. While this intervention was indeed one that was required to uphold the sovereignty of Kuwait, what followed was a decade long campaign of aerial bombings and crippling sanctions on Iraq by the US, which completely destroyed the country's infrastructure and economy. This was ultimately followed by the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, on the (later found misleading) accusation of Iraq manufacturing Weapons of Mass Destruction, and funding and training the assailants of 9/11.

Thus, there is a very long history of intervention in the Middle East in the lead up to the events of the Arab Spring. Historically, most of the intervention has been for the geopolitical priorities of the intervening country, and there has not been much of an attempt to mask it as such. There was a pretence, that of democratization, presented in the case of the invasion of Iraq, but it was pushed much later after no WMD's were found in Iraq. Thus, intervention for (or at least pretending to be for) benevolent causes is a relatively new phenomenon in the Middle East.

While the misdeeds of previous interventions can be blamed on the fact that the interventions were never meant to be doing anything good, and solely

served the ends of the interveners. The Arab Spring was different, and the interventions were supposedly for a good cause – democracy and popular representation. As such, they must be judged keeping this in mind.

## The Arab Spring

The Arab Spring was a radical event in the Middle East, for chiefly two reasons. It was for the first time when people revolted against their authoritarian regimes for misgovernance, and they did it in waves in almost every country. While the intensity varied across the countries, the people in almost every country in the Middle East agitated against their respective governments. Parallels have been made with the revolutions in the Eastern European countries following the dissolution of the Soviet bloc (and later, the Soviet Union itself) in the late 1980's till 1991. Comparison has also been made with the colour revolutions, which happened a few years before the Arab Spring. Some have gone so far and bold as to proclaim the Arab Spring as the Fourth Wave of democratization, but unfortunately such proclamations have been proven to be premature and rather erroneous.

The event which triggered these massive waves of protests happened on 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010. A vegetable vendor, Muhammad Bouazizi, had gone to ply his trade in the provincial town of Sidi Bouzid. An unemployed graduate, he was forced into this profession just to make ends meet, because there were no jobs available matching his qualifications. Unfortunately, he lacked a proper license to sell vegetables, and had his cart and supplies confiscated by the police. Not only this, but the police also mistreated him and verbally and physically abused him. Denied an opportunity to lodge a complaint and feeling humiliated and infuriated, Bouazizi immolated himself in front of the municipal headquarters. (McKay 2011)

This act of immolation got extensive media coverage. While Bouazizi unfortunately succumbed to his wounds, his act started a massive wave of protests throughout the country. Dubbed the Jasmine Revolution by the local media, it was a grassroots movement against the state of economy and general governance by the despotic ruler of Tunisia, Ben Ali. While the Tunisian government attempted to end the unrest by offering political and economic concessions and also by using violence against street demonstrations, protests soon overwhelmed the country's security forces and compelled President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali to resign and flee the country on 14 January 2011.

Shortly, the winds of the movement spread to Egypt. The Egyptian protests began just a few days after the resignation of Tunisian President Ben Ali, on 25<sup>th</sup> of January 2011. The misgovernance and police brutality were major reasons behind the protest, and the Egyptian authorities responded through the

only way they knew: force. After many days of huge popular demonstrations and clashes between protesters and armed forces in Cairo and throughout the country, a turning point came at the end of the month when the Egyptian army announced that it would refuse to use force against protesters. Mubarak knew that his time was up, and he resigned too in February 11.

A major factor in the Egyptian case was the widespread use of social media by the protestors. Effective censorship of social media had not been developed by then, and governments in the Middle East were yet not as tech savvy as the youth. Thus, the popular protests were often organized around such social media sites as Facebook and Twitter, which were also used to disseminate information about the protests. This was one of the first examples of “digital activists” participating in such protests. (Diamond 2010)

Like Egypt, protests in Algeria started shortly after they did in Tunisia. However, the outcome in the Algerian case has been diametrically opposite to that of both Egypt and Tunisia. What has been common is the cause for the protests – widespread misgovernance and corruption, making life difficult for the common citizenry. That being said, the method in which the protests were being held are very different. Protests in Algeria were largely localised, instead of being concentrated in the large cities. Also, they were conducted on the exact point of grievances – council houses and toll booths – rather than more general settings like town squares. What this meant is that they were after specific grievance redressal, rather than regime change.

The Algerian regime was thus able to secure itself from being dislodged and remains in power. The widespread protests soon petered out, and apart from the first few days the number of protestors has remained relatively low. The police and security forces were easily able to control the protests, and the whole thing blew over within a couple of weeks. The government did give some symbolic concessions, such as the lifting of the 19-year state of Emergency, promising to give the opposition greater airtime, and a new job-creation scheme for the youth. These were counterbalanced, however, by the adoption of new antiterrorism laws which granted the security forces extensive freedom of action with regards to any matter that they deemed as a “threat to the nation”. (Volpi 2013)

Jordan is a unique case in that it is the only constitutional monarchy in the region. Interestingly, the protests in Jordan were never against the Monarch, the ruling dynasty, or the Institution of Monarchy. Instead, they were against the misgovernance of the democratically elected rulers. The Parliament was a very weak institution, and power was concentrated in the hands of few powerful politicians. These politicians initiated privatisation in a self-serving manner and got very rich of it. As a result, corruption reached an unprecedented point, and the

people were left with no choice but to resort to the street to express their dissatisfaction and bitterness about the economic and political situations.

The response of the Monarch has been to dismiss the Prime Ministers and replace them with another. This happened thrice in two years. The main objective was to carry out reforms that would improve the economy and the people's lives. The protests were never very severe or violent, and never called for any kind of regime change. Both the king, as well as his reforms, remain popular with the people. Thus, the Arab Spring again only had a minor impact on Jordan and did not change the political system in any fundamental way. (Barari & Satkowski 2012)

The protests in Oman resemble in certain degrees to those in Jordan. Both began around the same time, and both were largely peaceful (some protests in Oman did turn violent, especially in February 2011). However, they were largely specific grievances being aired, than a more general request for socio-political reforms. Much like in the case of Jordan, there were no calls for the abdication of the Sultan, who remained very popular. The Omani Sultanate was more or less able to manage the situation through a shuffling of the cabinet, piecemeal economic concessions, and empowering the elected legislature. More fundamental changes did not take place, and nor were they demanded. (Worral 2012)

The protests in Saudi Arabia, which also began in January of 2011, were of a far less scale than in the other Middle Eastern countries. This is chiefly due to two reasons – the pact between the House of Saud and the Saudi clergy, granting them religious legitimacy, and the good economic condition of most of the people of Saudi Arabia. Thus, domestic protests in Saudi Arabia have been of relatively lesser concern. Most of the literature of the Saudi role in the Arab Spring has been of its intervention in other countries, which would be discussed in the next section.

The Arab Spring had a much more violent end in Syria and Libya. In Libya, protests began on 15<sup>th</sup> February 2011, a couple weeks after they had in the rest of the Middle East. The Security forces of Libya almost immediately responded to it with violence by firing into the protesting crowds. As violence begets violence, the protests turned violent and soon gained the status of a Revolution. The rebels united under the banner of the National Transitional Council and fought Gaddafi's forces.

It was during this time that Western External intervention began trickling in Libya. On 26<sup>th</sup> of February 2011, the UN Security Council passed a Resolution freezing the assets of Gaddafi and his inner circle and restricting their travel. Another UN Resolution, passed on 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2011, asked member states to enforce a no-fly zone to prevent Gaddafi's forces from harming civilians. This soon turned into a NATO-led bombing of Libya, weakening Gaddafi's forces. The rebels had an upper hand by now, and all major cities were captured by August

2011. Gaddafi himself was only captured by 20<sup>th</sup> October, when he was executed by the rebels. The post-Civil War reconstruction of Libya was very painful, and the country soon plunged into another civil war which still continues.

While the ultimate result in terms of violence was quite similar in case of Syria and Libya, the two countries had quite different backgrounds. While Gaddafi had systematically destroyed any democratic framework in the country in his 40 years of rule, Assad was actually quite progressive by Middle East's authoritarian standards. In his first few years of taking office, he instituted reforms in the economic, societal, and political spheres. The pace of these, however, took him aback and he was forced to retrench on these reforms. Still, he thought he was one of the more liberal rulers of Middle East and was quite surprised when the Arab Spring protests started in Syria in February 2011. (Lesch 2012)

As a result, the regime was unprepared to face the protests, and started a violent crackdown. This was no different than the crackdowns that were quite a routine response to the Arab Spring protests in Middle East. The violence that occurred in Syria cannot fully be explained thus. In later sections, we would see how external intervention, in the form of Western support to the opposition and Russian and Iranian support to the government.

The case of Iraq was a unique one in multiple ways. It was one of the youngest governments in the region, having been established less than a decade ago by the United States post their invasion of the country. One wonders how different things would have gone if Saddam Hussein was still in power when the Arab Spring protests began. It might suffice to say that ISIS would not have been able to use the power vacuum to capture large parts of its territory in the creation of an Islamic Caliphate.

The protests in Iraq were against the ineffective governance of the Iraqi government. They demanded the resignation of then PM Nouri Al-Maliki. He in turn announced that he would not be contesting the next elections after the completion of his term but refused to resign. The citizens organized themselves around online media, and massive protests raged in Iraq. Maliki tried to paint the protesters as anarchists and supporters of Saddam, and managed to give it sectarian colours. It is this sectarianism that ultimately enables the assault of ISIS, which started a new civil war in Iraq.

Sectarianism also played an important role in the Arab Spring protests in Bahrain, and the ruling monarchy was able to successfully play the Sectarian card to ensure their continued rule. While Bahrain has a Shia majority population, the ruling class is Sunni and gives preferences to Sunnis in every sphere of governance. The protests by themselves were non-sectarian; the protesters were mostly Shias but also had several Sunnis in them. Their main demands were better job opportunities and political reforms. The Bahraini monarchy reacted

by violence, and few protestors were killed as a result. This merely stoked the flames of opposition, and the Bahraini monarchy felt an existential threat.

At this point, the Bahraini Monarchy played the Sectarian card. He framed the protests as a Shia conspiracy to topple his throne, aided and funded by Iran. He also asked the GCC for assistance, and the GCC led by Saudi Arabia was glad to. With Saudi help, the Bahraini monarchy was largely able to subdue the protests. The framing of the protests in sectarian lines ensured the withdrawal of non-sectarian demands and enabled greater sectarianism, which played to the hand of the monarchy. (Al-Rawi 2015)

Lastly, we come to Iran. Iran is not part of the Arab world, thus using the term Arab Spring to describe protests in Iran would be misleading. However, there were protests in Iran in 2011, and one cannot deny that these protests were inspired by the larger Arab Spring protests in the region. The government, however, was able to effectively deal with these protests. They never got to the size and scale in other Middle Eastern countries, and never threatened the regime.

Iran's role in the Arab Spring was largely that of influencing the protests. Initially, Iran was overjoyed at the news of the protests. Most of the regimes that the protests struck were opposed to Iran, and thus Iran was encouraging the protests to try and engineer regime changes. However, this did not go all to plan, and Iran was left in the end trying to prop up regimes friendly to it. Iran's role as an external intervener would be analysed in the next section.

## External Intervention in the Arab Spring

External intervention in this context refers to intervention by one country in the other affairs of another. This is not a regional concept; we would not be limited to extra-regional intervention. A Middle Eastern country interfering in the internal affairs of another middle eastern country would count as external intervention for our purposes and would be under the purview of this study. We would also not be making a distinction between intervention by a friendly or hostile government, or between solicited and unsolicited intervention. For example, both Western and Russian intervention in Syria would count as external intervention, even though the former was unsolicited while the latter was requested for by the Syrian government.

The intervention in Arab Spring could be divided into roughly three categories – Western (comprising of US and EU countries, often operating under NATO banner), Russian/Irani (both have often found their interests to be aligned), and Saudi/GCC (Saudi Arabia, while being a western ally, has separate



interests and agenda in the Middle East). Often, interventions of different categories are simultaneously operating in a single country and are moreover operating against each other. We would be looking into all this as well.

## Control Group

Firstly, a control group is needed. This would be a group of countries where external intervention was either absent, or negligible. The best case for this is Tunisia. The biggest reason for why external intervention was absent in Tunisia was because of its spontaneity – no one really saw it coming. Things unfolded much faster than anyone could intervene, and Ben Ali's resignation came within a month of the first protests in Tunisia.

Another such country where external intervention was minimum was Jordan. The only instances of activities that can be deemed as foreign intervention was a gentle suggestion by the US to the Jordanian monarchy to consider democratisation, and Saudi economic aid to help the Jordanian regime. There is not much evidence to consider that either affected the result of the Arab Spring in Jordan, and as such do not meet the required threshold for us to consider it as substantial external intervention.

The other case that we would include in the Egyptian example is a strange one – early Egypt. This would mean from the period of initial protests to the military regaining power. Since the military has regained power in Egypt after deposing democratically elected PM Morsi, Egypt has seen substantial external intervention. But till that time, it did not see any substantial intervention from abroad. This was strange because Egypt under Mubarak was a staunch American ally. But perhaps the US was caught between its two priorities of democratisation and supporting its allies, and ultimately decided to do nothing.

From all our three examples, we can discern certain similarities, as well as some differences. In all three examples, the protests were relatively non-violent. While security forces did use violence on certain occasions, by and large the protests stayed non-violent. More importantly, the Arab Spring protests did not devolve into a civil war or civil war-like situation. However, it is also important to take note of the differences. The results in all three cases were quite different – two of these resulted in regime change (Tunisia and Egypt), one of them reverted back to an autocratic regime (Egypt) and one had no regime change (Jordan).

Thus, lack of foreign intervention neither guaranteed nor denied success for the Arab Spring protests. Rather it made sure that the protests remained largely non-violent, even in the face of government violence. Now that we have seen how countries where no substantial external intervention took place, we would examine the countries where intervention did take place.

## Libya

Libya is perhaps the clearest example of external intervention in the Arab Spring protests. Two things made the intervention in Libya stand out. Firstly, it was legal and authorized by UN Security Council Resolutions (1970 and 1973). Secondly, it did result in regime change. As such, at least as far as removing a brutal and despotic dictator is concerned, the Arab Spring protests were successful, and foreign intervention can take credit for it. Unfortunately, the removal of Muammar Al-Gaddafi did not result in democratization of Libya, and instead plunged the country into a state of civil war that continues to this day.

A careful examination of the events chronologically would show that the violence preceded external intervention. The protests in Libya began on 15<sup>th</sup> February 2011 in Benghazi against the arrest of a human rights lawyer, Fethi Tarbel. The protesters called for Gaddafi to step down and for the release of political prisoners. The government responded in the usual fashion of the Middle East: violence. Protests spread across Libya as protestors virtually took control of Benghazi and threatened to take over Tripoli. The embattled Gaddafi regime responded by upping the level of violence.

This was not acceptable to many even within the regime, and as a result numerous defections took place. The most prominent was the Libyan Permanent Representative to the UN, Ibrahim Dabbashi, who called on the international community to take action against the barbarism of the Gaddafi regime. The tides turned for the regime when many in the military defected to the opposition, and the protests had turned into a full-blown rebellion. Libya had descended into a state of Civil War before any concrete foreign intervention had happened.

Seeing the situation in Libya deteriorate, the international community decided that the time to act had come. The UN Security Council passed resolutions imposing sanctions on the Gaddafi regime, froze Gaddafi family's assets, and imposed a travel ban on prominent leaders in the regime. The rebels had by now grouped together under the banner of the Transnational National Council (TNC) and was now governing the areas it controlled. A stalemate had been reached between rebels and pro-Gaddafi forces. But soon, Gaddafi mounted a fresh offensive on rebel-held areas.

Sanctions were not working, and bloodshed had only worsened. The US and EU wanted to undertake military action against the Gaddafi regime, but countries like Russia, China and India were more sceptical. Finally, on 17<sup>th</sup> March a UN Resolution was passed which authorised the creation of a No-Fly zone over Libya. NATO took the lead in enforcing the No-Fly zone, and to this effect attacked Libya's Air Force and Air Defence installations. This soon turned into a

general air campaign on the Gaddafi forces, and under its cover the rebels were quickly able to advance into Gaddafi-held areas. (Zeidan 2021)

It was a matter of huge debate as to whether NATO had the mandate to conduct a general campaign against Gaddafi. The original resolution had only specified a No-Fly zone, and it was clear that NATO was going above and beyond that. NATO was actively helping the rebels oust Gaddafi. Progress from rebels' side was slow though, and it took many months before Gaddafi was ousted and killed. Western intervention was finally successful, and they had managed to achieve regime change in Libya.

Unlike in Iraq, the Western powers did not participate in the post-conflict nation-building process. While the democratisation process was underway, armed groups remained fragmented and active. Elections for the General National Congress (GNC) were held in 2012, with the National Forces Alliance winning the contest and Mahmoud Jibril becoming the Prime Minister. However, the GNC government were widely criticised for being unable to return peace and security to Libya, and for violating the democratic principles by unilaterally extended their mandate.

In 2014, elections were held to the Libyan House of Representatives, a body rival to the GNC. Libya now had two competing Parliaments, each with armed groups backing them. Libya was sliding back into Civil War. To prevent this, UN-mediated negotiations were held between the two rival bodies to agree on a power-sharing arrangement, resulting in the Skhirat Agreement. The GNC now became the Government of National Accord (GNA), and the House of Representatives would continue as a separate advisory body. Gen. Khalifa Haftar, then leader of the Libyan National Army, sided with the House of Representatives. The GNA thus expelled him from the post as Chief of Army Staff, and the Libyan Army was effectively split.

Thus, the second Libyan Civil War had begun. (Fraam 2019) For the second time in Libya, foreign intervention had happened. This time, it was from a rather unlikely source – Turkey. Turkey supported the GNA faction, arming it with modern weapons to withstand the onslaught of Haftar's forces. Haftar faction, on the other hand, was supported by Russia. One cannot say that it was this intervention which brought violence back to Libya; it was already there. But one cannot also deny that it was foreign import of advanced weaponry which vastly increased the scale of violence in Libya.

## Syria

The case of Syria is not very different from that of Libya. In both cases, the demands initially made were for democratisation, i.e., direct regime change,

unlike in other countries where demands were mostly socio-economic and issue-specific. The regime's response was also typical – ordering security forces to fire into the protesting crowd. However, it was not until 15<sup>th</sup> March that the protests turned into a general uprising. The opposition groups were now determined to remove Assad from power, and to use violence if necessary. By July 2011, they had united under the banner of Free Syrian Army (FSA). The Arab Spring protests in Syria had now turned into a Civil War. By 2012, the rebels were launching attacks to take over Aleppo and Damascus, two of the biggest cities in Syria.

The Syrian conflict was not just about democracy, but also about sectarianism. Most Syrians are Sunni Muslims, but Syria's ruling establishment has been dominated by members of the Alawi sect, of which Assad is a member. However, Assad has so far ruled a mostly secular government and has not tried to oppress the majority Sunni population. But in a region where majoritarian opposition is the norm, even secularism by minority ruling class would feel like oppression to the Sunni majority. Thus, the Sunnis want Assad out of power, and want themselves to form the ruling class.

The conflict in Syria is more complicated than any other in the Middle East arising as an aftermath of the Arab Spring. It has more internal and external actors compared to any other party. In some ways, it is a quadrilateral conflict, with the 4 different parties being the Syrian government headed by Assad, the non-Islamist opposition (initially operating under the banner of the FSA), the Islamist opposition (initially under the Nusrah Front, but after the fall of ISIS it became the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham or HTS), and the Kurds. It also has 4 major external participants – the US, Iran, Russia, and Turkey.

External intervention in the Syrian conflict has been of varying degrees. Unlike in the Libyan case, American intervention in Syria has been of a mostly indirect nature. The US has been training and supplying the non-Islamist opposition, as well as the Kurdish fighters. While the initial goal of the US was regime change in Syria and bringing a transition to democracy, the rise of ISIS meant that US was forced to change its priorities. Currently, it no longer sees regime change as feasible and is only trying to protect the Kurdish sovereign territories.

The main ally of the Syrian regime under Assad has been Iran. There is certainly a sectarian angle to it, Iran being a Shia country and Assad being an Alawite (a sub-sect of Shia Islam) and his opposition being mainly Sunni. But Iranian support for Assad goes beyond sectarianism – Iranian goal ensuring the survival of the Assad regime is to provide strategic depth for its proxy fighters fighting in Lebanon and keeping a check on Israel. Iranian support is not merely providing arms and resources, but manpower as well. It has mostly done this by diverting its various proxy actors in other states (such as the Hezbollah in Lebanon) and by using the Quds (external wing of the IRGC).

Russian intervention in the Syrian conflict has been in support of the Assad regime. Their support, while secondary to that of the Iranians, have nonetheless been very important in the survival of the regime. Russian support has been mostly in the form of financial help, arms, and air support. The air support has been vital in securing cover for regime ground forces to operate and was indispensable in Syria's fight against ISIS. Russia's interest in the conflict is to secure a withdrawal of the Western interference from the country. It legitimizes its own involvement by pointing to the fact that its presence is solicited by the sovereign of the country, while Western presence is not. More broadly, Russia rejects foreign states intervening against autocratic governments on behalf of domestic opposition movements.

Turkish interest initially was to see the Assad regime go, but it quickly realised that it was not possible. Since then, its primary interest in the country has been to prevent the establishment of a Syrian Kurdish entity in northern Syria. Turkey has a significant Kurdish minority, one which demands autonomy and even separatism. Particularly problematic for Turkey is the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), a group Turkey labels as a terror outfit. PKK has contacts with the YPG operating in Syria, and Turkey worries that a Syrian sovereign Kurdish entity might support the PKK and make Turkey's domestic situation more unstable. Turkey has launched a limited incursion into Northern Syria along its border to flush the region of Kurdish insurgents, a move many have termed genocidal of Kurds. (Ford 2019)

Thus, foreign intervention in Syria has been from myriad powers with differing interests. But would it be correct to say that foreign intervention has led to the destabilization of Syria? The role of the Syrian government under Assad cannot be underestimated in causing destabilization in Syria. After all, Assad's extremely brutal and heavy-handed response to the Arab Spring protests is what caused the militarization of the conflict in the first place. Also, it was Assad who invited foreign powers to interfere in support of his government, by enlisting the support of Russia and Iran.

One can say that, while foreign intervention is not the primary cause of the Syrian conflict, it has certainly made matters much worse. By introducing advanced weaponry, increased conflict funding and foreign fighters, external intervention has increased the scale of the conflict. This has had an unfortunate collateral effect on the civilians, and that has contributed to the tragedy of the refugee crisis.

## Bahrain

Bahrain has been a different case altogether from Libya and Syria. Unlike in those countries, foreign intervention has been restricted to a single power –

Saudi Arabia – which acted on the behest of and in support of the government. However, like Syria, Bahrain is also one of the few countries where the minority community (in this case, Sunni Muslims) form the ruling class.

Historically, the Shia majority has felt oppressed by the rule of the Sunni minority. Many protests have been held by the Shias in Bahrain, and they form an active dissident group. It is also true that many Shia groups in Bahrain have taken assistance from Iran, the leading Shia power in the Middle East. However, it would also be wrong to say that the Arab Spring protests in Bahrain were only sectarian in nature. While most protestors were Shia (which is natural since the Shias form a majority of the population), Sunni protestors were also present.

However, it was the Bahraini monarch who attempted to use the brush of sectarianism to tarnish the reputation of the protestors. Not only did he say that the protests were a Shia conspiracy to topple the Sunni monarchy, but also that the protestors were funded and supported by Iran. By blaming Iran, the Bahraini monarch sorted to portray this as an external intervention into Bahraini internal affairs, rather than legitimate demands by an aggrieved population.

There is no evidence to suggest that the Bahraini protests were indeed the handiwork of Iran. In fact, Bahrain was not even on top of the priority list of Iran, who were more concerned with the situation in countries like Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. However, the lies and the falsehoods of the monarch did work in his favour, as he succeeded in turning them into self-fulfilling prophecies. It led to a withdrawal of Sunnis from the protests since they were afraid of being seen as collaborating with foreign powers. Shias were the only ones left protesting, and the non-sectarian nature of the protests had broken down. The demands of the protestors got increasingly sectarian, and it seemed as if the monarch's hold over the country was weakening.

The Bahraini government made an appeal to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC, a six-member body of countries in the peninsula), and Saudi Arabia was happy to oblige. Saudi Arabia sent 1200 troops to Bahrain, while UAE helped with another 800 troops. It was not just soldiers though, but advanced weaponry like APC's and helicopters, and together they put down the protests. Saudi Arabia had succeeded in preserving the rule of the Khalifa family in Bahrain. ([Bronner & Slackman 2011](#))

It must be asked as to why Saudi Arabia acted swiftly in the case of Bahrain, while it did not do so in other examples. One big and obvious reason is that Bahrain is a neighbouring country to Saudi Arabia. However, the situation also needs to be understood within the context of the new Cold War in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in a conflict for domination within the Middle East. And this is where it leads us back to sectarianism. While Shias are in a minority in Saudi Arabia they are concentrated in the eastern region. It is

not a stretch suggest that Shia victory in Bahrain might lead to support for the Shias in Saudi Arabia as well. (Nuruzzaman 2013)

While it is true that the Arab Spring protests in Bahrain were not funded by Iran, it is also true that the success of the protests in removing the regime of Khalifa family would greatly benefit Iran. Iran phobia is not limited to Bahrain but is present in Saudi Arabia as well. If Iran can get a foothold in Bahrain, it could lead to Iranian entry in the Gulf region, which is presently dominated by Saudi Arabia. This is unacceptable to Saudi Arabia, and hence the Saudi eagerness in their intervention in Bahrain. As further evidence of this, Saudi's (along with the other GCC countries) blockaded Qatar when they felt that Qatar was getting too close to Iran.

## Effects of External intervention

Now that we have looked at three countries where external intervention did take place in the context of the Arab Spring protests, we can look at some things in common regarding the results. In all these countries, the protests got violent. However, in only two of the countries (Syria and Libya) did it go to the extent of Civil War. Violence in Bahrain was mostly one sided, by the regime (and Saudi and Emirati troops) against the protestors. This was no worse than in Egypt, where Mubarak used similar force against the protestors.

One important observation regarding intervention is that intervention often decides as to who prevails. In the Libyan case, NATO intervention in favour of the opposition was crucial in the downfall of Gaddafi. In the Bahraini case, Saudi intervention ensured the survival of the Al Khalifa monarchy. In the curious case of Syria, where intervention was multilateral, Iranian and Russian support of the regime seemed to trump the American and initial Turkish support of anti-regime opposition, ensuring its survival. Foreign intervention thus can play a decisive role in ensuring the end result of a conflict, and it is proof that intervention works in getting the (short-term) objective of the intervening power.

However, this is no proof that the long-term objectives of the intervening powers would be met as well. One only needs to look at the present situation in Libya to see that things are not what NATO had in mind when the first bombs were dropped from their aircrafts. One reason for this is of course the lack of foresight: foreign powers often do not have any idea about what their long-term objectives in the region are and lack a long-term strategy. They have a very myopic vision and think that if they are able to fulfil their short-term objectives, then their long-term plans would fall into place. The second reason is that, often, the best-laid plans can go to waste. As the saying goes, Man proposes, and God

disposes. Hence, an unanticipated event might lead to carefully thought of plans to be rendered useless.

Another important effect is increasing the intensity of violence. In all the three cases of intervention we looked at, the intensity of violence increased sharply right after foreign intervention began. This is easily explained: foreign powers often bring advanced weaponry and, in many cases, foreign manpower. In fact, this is not unique to the period of the Arab Spring, nor to the Middle East region. Substantial previous research has been conducted on the effects of intervention on civil conflicts, and the consensus seems to be that external intervention increases the intensity (in terms of casualties) as well as the duration of conflicts. (Sousa 2014)

There are also some conclusions that should not be taken. These are those misleading statements that partisan groups often put out, but on a closer examination have no actual basis. One such take is that external intervention from outside the region leads to greater instability than from within the region. Even a cursory look at the various conflicts post-Arab Spring would show that this is not true. While NATO intervention in Libya did cause a civil war in the aftermath of the downfall of Gaddafi, the same is true for Iranian intervention in the Syrian conflict. The fact that Saudi intervention in Bahrain did not cause instability and civil war can be easily explained on account of the fact that protests never got very violent in the first place, and it was a simple case of government repression than civil war. Blaming extra-regional groups for instability in the Middle East is a blatant attempt to mislead and spread propaganda by those with vested interests in not allowing extra-regional actors into the region, while their own destabilising activities go on unhindered.

## Implications for the region

We have looked at how external intervention has affected the region after the Arab Spring protests. Using the takeaways from our analysis on this, we could create a model to predict how future intervention would look in the region, and what consequences it would have for the region.

The most important takeaway for a would-be external intervener from this series of events is that, while external intervention in support of one side can decisively shift the conflict in favour of that side, if two interveners support opposite sides of a conflict, it only drags out the conflict and makes it worse without any quick resolution. This can be framed through the model of a prisoners' dilemma.



In this case, the two external powers (each supporting a side in the conflict) are equivalent to the two prisoners. Cooperating would involve not intervening in support of your side in the conflict, while defecting would involve intervening in support of your side. If both cooperate, it will mean neither power intervenes, and the scale of conflict stays low and there is a chance for peaceful resolution of the conflict. If one power cooperates while the other defects, it means one power intervenes in support of their side, and the scale of conflict stays low while there is a quick but violent resolution of the conflict. However, if both powers defect, it means both intervene in support of their side, and the scale of conflict goes up while the chances of a quick resolution (peaceful or violent) evaporate.

Now that we know what the possible decisions and payoffs are for each power, it is quite easy to know what they would actually do, since prisoners' dilemma has been modelled repeatedly (e.g., [Wagner 1983](#)). It is in the collective interest of each power to not intervene with their respective side, since not only would this allow the conflict to be peacefully and quickly resolved but also save resources which could be employed elsewhere. However, the fact that it is in the individual interest of each power to intervene would mean that both would end up intervening in support of their respective sides, worsening the situation for both. Both could not cooperate because of a fear of defection; anarchy in the international arena forbids cooperation.

As we have previously mentioned, American unipolarity is slowly eroding and we're going towards an age of multipolarity. What this means for the region is that more and more powers are going to be assertive in the region, supporting countries and even proxy actors. This includes both extra-region powers (like Russia, China, or maybe EU and India in the future) as well as intra-regional (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel). With all these powers having their own interests in the region, we could see a prisoners' dilemma like situation, except with multiple prisoners instead of just two. This would only increase the incentive to intervene, since you have to fear from intervention not just from one other power, but many.

Essentially, this would mean that interventions in the region would only increase. That is not to say that external powers are not aware of the damage they are doing, or the futility of their efforts in intervention. They are aware that any intervention on their part would be answered by intervention by the opposing power in the support of their respective side, which would drag out the conflict and prevent either power from achieving their originally intended objective. However, they also know that the price of not intervening would be letting the other power achieve their objective, and thus their position would be relatively worse off. This is the exact same logic that caused several interventions in the Third World from both US and the USSR, despite causing tremendous destruction to the countries as well as huge expenditures on interventions.

The increasing intervention in the region would mean that conflicts which would have stayed as local, small-scale ones would through external intervention turn into large-scale protracted conflicts. Not only would conflicts become longer and involve more and more people, but the amount of large, high-tech weapons would also increase. Conflicts which were earlier restricted to small arms (due to the restriction of resources of local participants) would now involve heavy weaponry like artillery, armour, and manned and unmanned air power.

The last point was in full display in the Second Libyan Civil war. While the first Libyan Civil war was a mostly one-sided intervention (by NATO, in favour of anti-Gaddafi rebels), the Second civil war was a multi-sided intervention with two broad fronts. The first is the GNA government, based in Tripoli, which is supported by Turkey and has the recognition of the major international bodies such as the UN and EU. The other is the LNA government, led by Gen Haftar, which is supported mainly by Russia but also Qatar and France. The GNA government has deployed Turkish drones to great effect, destroying LNA air defences. Russia on the other hand, has mostly stuck to using conventional fighters, but not too much effect. The Second Libyan civil war is a precursor to the future conflicts in the region, which would see increased use of drones. The Yemen Civil War is another example, where Iranian made Houthi drones has been a source of headache for the Saudis, who cannot figure out a way to counter them.

## Possible Solutions: A proposition

In the last section, we looked at how external intervention in the Middle East can be modelled using Prisoner's Dilemma. Thus, defection becomes the norm and cooperation becomes impossible. However, since the same game would be played repeatedly, we can also say that it is an instance of repeated Prisoners' Dilemma. Repeated prisoners' dilemma has some crucial differences compared to prisoners' dilemma, due to which cooperation may be possible.

In prisoners' dilemma, the fact that neither side has any repercussions for defecting or any incentive for cooperating makes defection the rational choice. However, in repeated prisoners' dilemma, since the game is played multiple times there is a repercussion for defecting. If a player chooses to defect, it knows that in the next game the other player would defect as well. Also, there is an incentive to cooperate, since if it chooses to cooperate, there is a high chance that its opponent would cooperate in the next game as well.

What does it mean for the external powers in the Middle East? If they could agree to not intervene in the conflicts of the region, then any state which breaks this agreement and intervenes would know that in the next conflict every

other power would intervene as well. However, if they all stay true to the agreement, then they can benefit in the long run as they would save their resources, benefitting the region as well.

This agreement between states can take the form of an International Treaty of non-intervention. If big powers see that it is in their own interest to not intervene and are assured that other powers would not break this agreement, then they would be amenable to sign such a treaty. Gradually, this treaty would be elevated to the status of international law and become one of the norms of an international order. However, the problem would be getting states to trust each other, and look at long-term benefits over short-term objectives. States often become very myopic in international affairs, and as such they may think that such a treaty would not be in their immediate interests. Thus, maybe such a treaty is very improbable.

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## Final Remarks

The Arab Spring were a series of protests that first started in Tunisia, but then spread to all over the Arab world. The effect of the Arab Spring varied across countries, while some such as Tunisia and Egypt saw regime change, others such as Syria and Libya fell into civil war, while yet others like Jordan and Bahrain saw no discernible change. This paper tried to look into external intervention as a potential cause for the different results in different countries.

Firstly, the paper considered three countries where no external intervention took place, as a control group. Next, it looked at three countries where external intervention did take place. Next, it compared the two groups to see how intervention affected the conflicts. It found that, in cases where external intervention is only in support for one side, it is decisive and turns the scale of the conflict in that side's favour. But if intervention by multiple powers is in support of both sides, then the conflict gets protracted. Another thing this paper observed is that external intervention increases the scale of the conflict, in terms of both manpower and armaments. This often translates into higher casualties.

The paper also looked at the role of UN as an external mediator and inter-venor. It described how increasing assertiveness by the emerging powers like Russia and China would mean that the UN Security Council's effectiveness is decreasing by the day. As the world shifts towards a multipolarity, we would see increasing use of veto in the Security Council, as a result of which UN-sanctioned actions would be a rarity.

The paper goes on to model how external powers would behave in the future using Game Theory. The decisions and payoffs in this scenario resemble that of game theory, thus it can be expected that states would rather defect and intervene in support of their respective sides, than cooperate and keep external intervention away. Thus, instances of external intervention in the Middle East would only grow in the future, with some new powers also stretching their might to secure their own interests.

Lastly, the paper looked at a possible solution for this problem, which would model it on Repeated Prisoner's Dilemma. Since the same situation would be played over and over game, external powers may have an incentive to cooperate and not intervene, if they can be assured that other powers would do the same. This can be done through an international treaty, where states would vow not to intervene in internal conflicts of other states in the Middle East. However, since states are myopic and only interested in their short-term objectives, it is unlikely that such a treaty would be adopted or followed.

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