

# Mukhabarat

## Winter

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Two major narratives have emerged to explain the so-called ‘Arab Spring’. The first and most popular narrative sees the removal of Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak as part of the continuing long march of democracy. According to this view, the Arab Spring is a result of westernised youth wired up via social networking media, fired up with visions of the democratic life found in the west. This narrative has a general appeal among western audiences as well as the ‘westoxicated’ in the rest of the world. Its three underlying assumptions inscribe a vision of the continued centrality of the west and its fundamental superiority. Firstly, it is assumed that democracy has only one source and only by imitating that source can democracy be fulfilled. Democracy is a metaphor for pro-western government, with a free market and a society in which social conventions and mores are approximations of western society’s image of themselves. The second assumption is that technology can determine social processes that are external to it. In other words, while technology is an autonomous force that is able to bring about social transformations, it is itself not a part of society. The third assumption is that the Arab Spring means the end of Islamism and its failure. This failure is signalled by the assassination of Osama Bin Laden and the victory of American occupation in Iraq and eventually in Afghanistan. These assumptions replay the insistence that history and the political are the patrimony of the West and societies that are considered to be non-western can import history but cannot make it.

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Before going on to discuss these assumptions, I want to focus on a second narrative that sees in the ‘Arab Spring’ not a flourishing of people power but another chapter in an American-inspired colour-coded revolution. According to this view, part of United States strategy has been to use apparently popular mobilisations to try to weaken regimes that the US considers to be hostile. Those who hold this view focus on popular mobilisations in the former Soviet Union, the rose revolution of Georgia and the orange revolution in the Ukraine which weakened Russian hold over the region, as well as the abortive cedar revolution in Lebanon and the green movement in Iran. They point to the level of material support the US has given to those involved in these mobilisations as an indication of US conspiracy. They also point to the way in which Syria’s Baathist regime is being threatened with a regime change and also to the US silence that has allowed Saudi arms to put down an uprising in Bahrain while supporting those in Syria and Libya.

The hypocrisy of western power should not come as a surprise to anyone except the westoxicated. In such a narrative regime change by popular mobilisation operates as a continuation of a US strategy to remake the world in its shape by removing any potential obstacles from the possibility of another American century. Such a narrative often confuses contingency with conspiracy and, while often coached in anti-imperialist/anti-American terms, is actually compliant with US hegemony by not being able to imagine the exercise of agency without US prompting.

The ‘Arab Spring’ is neither the product of a US-led conspiracy to bring about regime change by popular mobilisation, nor is it the defeat of Islamism and the confirmation of the westernisation of the future. The ‘Arab Spring’ signals the demise of one form of state that emerged in the wake of the Cold War. This was the Mukhabarat state. This is the form of state that emerged following formal decolonisation in the context of a bipolar world order in which the main threat to most states was not external (because inter-state war was disciplined by the two superpowers) but internal. Those states thus developed to focus on internal threats and rely on external alliances to protect them from foreign threats. The Mukhabarat state

used extensive intelligence services and systematic torture to prevent popular mobilisations. Such states were able to discard popular legitimacy because they relied upon support from superpowers to maintain them in power. The 'war on terror' has shifted the axis of threat from internal to external, as US military predominance erodes national sovereignty and the lack of a counterweight to US hegemony lowers the threshold for US intervention. States that are going to exercise their sovereignty can do so only by ensuring that they enjoy popular legitimacy and support. Regimes that rule by torture and intimidation are unlikely to be able to count on the support of their people when they become caught in the crosshairs of the war on terror.

The 'Arab Spring' is a product of a structural change in the international order. It does not signal the defeat of Islamism, since Islamism refers not to a specific set of strategies and policies but to a more general transformation around two things: Muslim identity and autonomy. An Islamist is simply someone who thinks of themselves as a Muslim and thinks that Muslims should be able to write their own history. The regimes that emerge from the 'Arab Spring' are more likely to be comfortable with these two themes than the regimes that preceded them.