



## **The Political Reverberations of Gulf: Reading the Insistence of Arab Spring on Gulf Nationalism**

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### **Abstract**

On the outset of any analytical deliberations in the contemporary political and cultural situations of Gulf, it would be the instability that marks the defining features it. Just like a children's 'Building the Block' game in which progress is attained in the expense of stability, in Middle East, Power either political or economic is constantly reconstituting ever since the decolonised era, and the question, "where do I belong to?" reflects the indefinite nationalism and national boundaries shared by the people. Taking Middle East as a cultural discourse where power is in motion in variant forms has to be observed very prudently today. For the last two decades, Arabian nations are in constant political turmoil and have witnessed overthrow of power regime in five more countries. All those movements assumed integrated political stability on land, but all resulted either in unprecedented civil wars or irreversible human exile. Arab spring was a revivalist movement in the early 21st century, calling for paradigm shift in the existing political regimes in Middle East nations. The spring swept away the lands and replaced the systems, but never defined a discourse to take the rule ahead. The revivalist governments replaced the preceding, but failed in promise to keep a stable and legitimised political system ever. Moreover, to take the lead with an ideological ambush for the so called Arabian Spring, none of the indigenous writers of the land attempted. Rather, there were far grievances caught banner headlines in top rated magazines by the so called writers in exile who luxuriously exploit the European life. This paper is an investigation into the cultural factors that signifies the real deep power structures possess the land of gulf.

### **Keywords**

Arab Spring, nationalism, depthlessness, Middle Easternism, Mediterranean option

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Middle East, the Gulf nations or Arab nations; a term coined by an American naval strategist, there are different titles for this frontier land lies between oriental and occidental poles. Geographically gulf is a desertland; economically it is the fuel hub of the earth, but politically and historically a boiling pot that stirs still for its stability. In fact, three of the most powerful global Semitic religions; Christianity, Judaism and Islam, were flourished from the sub-continent of Arabia in different sequences of time. This land has been archeologically identified as the cradle of human civilisation in the pre-historic times (*My History Lab* 2011). It was during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the conscience of Middle East got muddled in the rising ideologies of nationalism, state hood, and Islamism and secularist revolutions. Though there were dreamers like Shimon Peres, and Theodor Herzl who longed for a new middle east, the political and social unrest still persists (Kramer 89). Arab Spring being the most recent political reformation movement in the history of Middle East, invites a number of significant questions on the idea of nationalism and modern concept of state hood. Middle East becomes even more a crucial point of reference when all the super powers of the world extensively put their hands on all concerning the interest of Middle East.

From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; more specifically by the degradation of the Ottoman Empire and its political affiliations, European and American colonies in Arab Sub continent started getting untied from the coloniser, initiating independent political forms. Either Socialism or democracy was two most viable political choices which most of the decolonised countries, like India embraced at that point of time (Ya'ari). But, the political atmosphere of Arab Continent was not so cosy for the choice of a people's government, since heterogenic Arabian religious, racial, cultural and linguistic communities were hardly shared any of the harmonic traits that a heterogeneous nation like India had common in plenty. Moreover, the European benefactors best-laid reformation plans for the grooming nations in middle east were coldly received and it might be because as Martin Kramer suggests, the middle east is also land of people who wishes to implement other plans, which is revealed either in Bible or Quran, or in Khomeini's or Nasser's sermons (91).

The unfathomable conflict of Arab nations, starting from Israel Palestine conflict where a nation for Jews carved out of nowhere leading to a global transfer of Palestinians and Jews population into two geographical boundaries assigned and designed for them, to the convergence of Iranian and Turkish secular states into Islamist nations (Evers 14). Soon after the Second World War, colonisers were thrown into a huge political and

economic dilemma that they were forced to shrink back to restate themselves leaving colonies into individual nations on their will and benefits. For the coloniser, this nation building was a mere geographical bifurcation that left the subjects no space to nurture and peruse a nationalism of their own. This nation building will be read in detail later. In the due course of time, the instability and conflicts afflicted most of the Arab nations and it went on.

Instability is the curse inflicted the political structure of every Arab nation. An investigation into this ambivalence should begin from concept of 'Nation' itself. Jacques Derrida in his essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", introduces the notion of free play and explains how a structure without a perceivable centre attains its stability and ensures a controlled free play of elements within the frame of structure (17). Taking nation as a structure with heterogeneous elements in active free play, we may find a constituting desire from within of the structure of a nation take the centre position promising the endurance of the same. As the post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha's concept of nation as a narration, a nation's desire for stability might be attained through a narration which synthesises the differences for a common good. In every nation's formation, there is a population as Benedict Anderson suggests, an imagined community, who are believed to be bound by a common factor and this abstract historic consciousness of interconnectedness is what makes a nation possible (Anderson 49). But, in the context of Arab nations, these prerequisites mentioned above have been disproportionately invested. An introduction to the nation formation of Arab continent will explain much of this.

### **An Introduction to the Arab Nationalism**

20<sup>th</sup> century is a significant time span in the cultural and political history of Middle East. By this time, Colonialism gradually came to a stagnant end due to many reasons, like two world wars and regional political awakening which persuaded largely by the new global economic conditions like globalisation. Parallel to the relieving of colonisers, in Middle East, a subsequent current of movements; most of them are calling to the cardinal question of unification of Arab territories, stared materialising and disappearing in frequent intervals. It began with Arab nationalism; a secular movement based on western ideologies experimented in the ground of Turkey and Egypt and later took a revolutionary leap into Islamism as occurred in Sudan in the early half of the century and later in Iran. Other choices like Middle-Easternism calling for a fraternity of

all Arab states under the command of European Union and Mediterranean option, a movement on the bases of regional and geographical feature to cope up with the challenges of the future age (Kramer 20). The Post-colonial world was an odd experience for everyone as if a storm followed by a swift. Colonialism has had deeply modified the structure of the society and their life styles. But when we look deep into the dynamics of post-colonial society in Arab nations, an explicit colonial dialect as a prototype of colonial rule is found in prevalence. The society was mainly dividing into the two prominent dialects as the winners and losers of colonial rule (Renan 19). The winners were the urban elite who possessed the big C; the big Culture, as Foucault states, and assimilated western language and culture (Foucault 80). The losers were the conventional rebels who resisted assimilation and fought for sovereignty. Thereafter, the political tensions of cold war also made both direct and indirect interventions in managing the political affairs of the Middle East during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The formation of Israel after a long run of Zionist movement, as a nation bifurcating the Palestine land into an uncertain political identity was the first instance when nationalism came to be discussed in every walks of Middle East. For Jews, their connection with the land was not only of an ancestral homeland, rather a land that is promised by god as a fundamental choice. Until the Declaration of principle in 1993, Palestine held a very complicated inconsumable idea of nation hood (Kramer 94). In fact the anti-Israelis sentiments had envisaged a kind of Arabian unity and there were slogans and propagandas for that cause throughout this time. This Arab nationalism promised power and for that people willingly give themselves for dictatorship, war and deprivation (170). But, this envisaged unity never materialised, because each and every state had its own preferences and interests covered up within the pseudo schemes. The Arabs continued to exist and move forward to more crucial internal divergences and inequalities which almost ended up in civil wars between Arabs itself. Thereafter fundamentalist political ideologies of Islamism started taking clutches on the same platforms of the degenerating Arab nationalism. Islamism was very blatantly a separatist movement in all attire which classified the population into divisions of Muslims and non-Muslim, secular and believer and men and women. The idea of Islamism was conceived by the Muslim brother hood during the Egyptian civil wars in 1970s (100). Their ideology substituted the linguistic commonality of Arabs with religion on constituting the nation state of Arabia. Ultimately, this regime of ultra-Islamism, swallowed Sudan at first and later extended to post-Saddam Iraq, Afghan and Syria, leaving an irreversible detrimental cultural

amalgamation over the territories within its short regime. Simultaneously, after the Iranian revolution in 1978-79, Iran under Khomeini's rule acquired an Islamic political shape but, the challenging economic and political atmosphere of the times forced them to be liberalists in function.

The crude turning up of Islamism forced thinkers for a better choice of political ideology in the Middle East and it almost ended up in a concept called Middle Easternism. When this political choice got momentum in diplomatic discussion as a proposal generously accommodating the non-Islamic Israel as a part of the territory at large, there were allegations stating this strategy as in long term would give way for an economic hegemony of Israel over the other Arab nations. Following this, a modified form of Middle Easternism came in diplomatic decisions especially focusing on economic welfare of the states. In the Barcelona Conference of November 1995, this idea was formed as "Mediterranean option" (Jerichow 158). Mediterranean option was more of western oriented mode of development foreseeing the future economic needs of the Arab states. One of the chief obstacles of this progressive movement was the leaders-for-life long phenomenon, and somehow it was uprooted by the Islamic movements in many states. By the time of gulf war, the strategic proceedings of gulf almost went topsy-turvy and the real political identity of the land got explicitly visible. This disguised face of Arabian insecurity started materialising when economic problems reached at its heights. At that point of disarray, the third colonial dialect; the conglomerated form of losers and winners materialized in the form of Mass movements, which is otherwise called as Arab Spring (Parchami 36). According to Martin Kramer the Arab people are Muslims in majority and they uphold loyalty to state than society and the choice is almost by default (Kramer 103). Thus the consequent failure of political experiments becomes a nature of the region and it goes on at present. As Martin Cranmer states, "Middle East has always been a zone of unsettled identities, of constant quests that once produced new religions and that now produce new resurgences (110)".

### **Arab Spring, Nationalism and Terrorism**

When the UN and other world nations actively involved in the issues of Middle East by offering them a better nation state through military interventions, I would like to take a look at the Arabian subjects' psyche to see how do they comprehend the notion of Nationhood. What is a nation or what constitutes a nation has to be informed to the people before forcefully attributing nationhood to a particular geographical territory.

According to post-colonial critic Renan, the unifying essence of a nation is "a spiritual principle, the outcome of the profound implications of history (19). This is a way of referring to the bond of experience and national memory, which largely forms national identity." In *Nation and Narration* Homi. K. Bhabha observes nation as a narrative discourse in which the subjects shares a collective memory or loss, glorious heritage and regrets of the past and most of all the fact of having suffered, enjoyed and hoped together (Renan 19). When we analyse the so called Arab nationalism and Nationhood, none of these trait could be identified in any of the common grounds for them.

Middle East has been a melting pot of war crimes and atrocities for the last two centuries, but they failed to compose their struggles for a common cause like, democracy in India and abolition of slavery in Europe and America (Evers 14). Indian democratic movement and apartheid movements shared a common ground, that of a secular humanistic perspective in which religious, linguistic and cultural preferences of people were willingly silenced and held in reserve. But, Arab people and their delegates of democracy and nationhood had their mind strangled in religious and racial preference which they kept default and silenced in the initial phase of nation building and later gave expressions in the form of constitutional laws (Kramer 98).

As it is clearly stated, nationalism is beyond the influence of cultural constructs (gender, sex, religion and race) Arab nations failed in conceptualising this truth, or it may be because the godfathers of those territories, the colonisers were in hurry to run off the responsibilities and they left the land into fragmented geographical entities which had unfortunately many ironic spirits to be composed into a reality called nation (Yaari). Considering this, it would be menial to respond to the United Nations recent proclamation for the world to join hands for building up a safe, stable and legitimised nation in the terror inflicted Syria. It specifically explains the anxiety of European and American politician on dealing with the current outbreak of refugees into their safe houses. In the meantime, socialism had also attempted a political experiment in the Arabian territory. Russian intellects and communist exponents tried to experiment a prototype of their revolutionary tactics in Arab world and they faced a massive blow in short time.

Why socialism was a half-baked meal for Arabs needs further explanation. Under the shade of the socialist master USSR, Arab nations vigorously embraced socialist ideologies at once. But socialism as the past years have shown to us, was a temporary politics in Middle East and most of the nations are yet to find its ideal political status.

American Critic, Frederic Jameson discusses the notion of 'Depthlessness' referring to the existence of Art form as commoditised by the postmodern narratives in the present social discourse (Foucault 80). 'Depthlessness' is an existential condition in which the postmodern culture substitutes deep structures with its menial replica of surface structures. Jameson names this cultural phenomenon as culture of signifiers than signified. In the culture of signifiers, the signifier enjoys unlimited power and privilege of signified and often disguises themselves as real. Socialism in Arab nations was in fact a Depthless surface structure deceptively taken the place of a deep structure. In the context of Middle East, the socialism attributed to their political structure, was not the real but a surface replica of the real socialism which was proved and nurtured on a real ground in Russia and other communist nations. Thus, Arab nations put up a fragmented depthless, surface structure of socialism or democracy persisted and experimented in entirely different social contexts of Asian and European countries. In Foucault's work, "The Treachery of images" he explains the same notion of 'Depthlessness' in the context of power structures (Foucault 80). He puts forward the notion of "This is not a pipe" and explains that an image is ornamented as the real and the viewer assumes the ontological superiority of the latter (Foucault 80). Thus the Middle East has been a trail ground for many an ideologies and the most recent one among them is a movement named Arab Spring.

It was in the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century, the first wave of Arab Spring affected the land of Middle East. As a protest of the common people it appeared in Tunisia and rapidly developed into an anti-governmental mass movement which gathered an unexpected public voice and led to a political shift in Tunisia in a short span of time (Echague 330). The Tunisian revolution and subsequent demonstrations sparked a wave of protest throughout the Arab world. Within three years of this event, four of the Arabian nations were forcefully underwent leadership changes. Protest and demonstrations were erupted in all Arab nations in the following years (Echague 330). Arab spring as a mass movement gathered ad hoc groups in heavy numbers and their demands on hype was a change in the existing political system. They might have presumed a social change will be supplemented with apolitical change which will be a solution for their problems. But in reality, when the political system was overthrown and power discourse left vacant, there was great dilemma in the choice of a substitutive political mechanism they have to implement. Considering the other mass movements or demonstrations accompanied by the democratic movements in different parts of the world, Arab spring as a mere ad hoc

demonstration severely lacked an ideological structure or a literary support to develop into a stable political discourse. Thus, Arab spring is better explained as an unprepared wake up call for the Arab World that The Spring never laid a deep structure to stabilise the real power structure followed. The deep structure is something that involves an ideological base- in the case of USSR the Marxian ideologies- literature and a strong intellectual source – in India, the Gandhian principles – that is what they lacked – a legitimised ideological movement and immense patriotic spirit.

Quoting the words of Adonis, one of most influential Arab poets and essayists' of modern era, "what is to be served for the Arab world is not a political democracy, rather a cultural, educational and moral democracy that helps one to realise one another as human beings" (Ahammed 13). Adonis realises that his home, Syria is not that what he belonged to in the past. Foucault defines discourse as a reflection of power structures which determine the truth and knowledge in every system (Foucault 80). Arab nations are in the formation of such a different power discourse which is highly organised by crime and bound in the fear of maliciously expounded religious tenants that challenges the persisting moral values coordinating the Sin Salvation dichotomy. The current political structure of Arab world, specifically the Syrian and Lebanon is of extremist militant's utopian ideologies. The recently popped up terrorist groups and the most organised among them; the ISIS, all together run the political discourse of half of the Arab world today (Lynch). As it is evident, the current political discourse of Arab world is the reflection of the existing power structure, The Islamic State. Thus, it is that power structure only determines the truth and knowledge of the time. As we consume this fact, we will never be uncertain about the political agenda of Islamic State and their proposed Caliphate. It was at the background of Arab Spring, the fanatic or radical powers laid their foundation (Echague 330).

After the great Protest, Mass demonstrations carried out by the Arab Spring people were left with a highly ambiguous mind that had a number of questions to be answered; what to replace? Which political agenda? What constitution to be adopted? Which government to take the power and what to be replaced? These recurring questions shattered the unorganised people and the Middle East again fell back to the religious, racial and ethnic bondages.

Arab Springs, as historically understanding, is not more than the many of the previous political movements in the Middle East as it also resulted in another insurgency. Social media has played a vital role in developing uncertainty and confutation among the



people, by selling the fear of Arab world in great intensity. As Martin Kramer suggests, politics in Middle East is not the competition of ideologies, but that of identities and it makes to predict and conceptualise the whole scenario so difficult (91). Moreover, Kramer suggests a concept of Middle Eastern archipelago which is constituted as a vast geography of conferring, debating, disagreeing, exchanging information, communicating and cooperating sentiments and loyalties towards places, ideas and ideologies (110). This archipelago has historically existed and it takes different forms in different times. That is why the territory of Middle East cannot blatantly be settled on a single idea of nationalism and gulf in many ways contradictorily coherent for permanent political ideology.

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