



**Shifting Dynamics:  
The International Order  
in a Post-Pandemic World**

— 1<sup>st</sup> - 2<sup>nd</sup> of December | 2020 —

**The Future of the  
Arab World:**

10 Years After the Arab Spring

**EXPERT ROUNDTABLES**

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2020



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**PUBLISHER**

TRT WORLD FORUM  
2021

**EDITED BY**

MUHAMMED LUTFİ TÜRKCAN  
MICHAEL ARNOLD  
ANNA MURPHY  
HATİCE NUR KESKİN

**CONTRIBUTORS**

ABDINOR HASSAN DAHIR  
ANNA MURPHY  
ARUKE URANKYZYN  
EDEBALİ MURAT AKCA  
ELİF ZAİM  
FATİH ŞEMSETTİN IŞIK  
FERHAT POLAT  
HATİCE NUR KESKİN  
LAMIS CHEIKH  
MAMOON ALABBASI  
MICHAEL ARNOLD  
MUHAMMED LUTFİ TÜRKCAN  
MUSTAFA METİN BAŞBAY  
RAVALE MOHYDIN  
SERKAN BİRGEL  
TURAN GAFARLI

**DESIGN BY**

ERHAN AĞIRGÖL

**TRT WORLD İSTANBUL**

AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347  
ULUS, BEŞİKTAŞ  
İSTANBUL / TURKEY

**TRT WORLD LONDON**

200 GRAYS INN ROAD, WC1X 8XZ  
LONDON / UNITED KINGDOM

**TRT WORLD WASHINGTON D.C.**

1275 PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE NW, SUITE 320  
WASHINGTON, DC 20004

[www.trtworld.com](http://www.trtworld.com)

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# The Future of the Arab World:

## 10 Years After the Arab Spring



- The Arab Spring should be considered as an ongoing series of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary movements that will continue to unfold across the region.
- Relevant parties across the Arab world will have to reconcile a central conflict between pluralism and authoritarianism in shaping the future of the region.
- The internationalisation of repression has created a uniquely challenging obstacle for democratisation efforts.
- There are several external 'axes' that have key stakes in the outcomes of revolutionary movements across the Arab world. The Saudi Arabia-UAE axis and Iran-Russia axis both pose a threat to the interests of reformists in the region.
- The election of Joe Biden and diminishing American reliance on oil will impact the future role of the United States in the region.

## Summary of the Session

**T**he expert roundtable discussion “The Future of the Arab World: 10 Years After the Arab Spring” discussed the varying situations in states across the Arab world a decade after wide-spread uprisings that came to be known as the Arab Spring garnered global attention. The session, chaired by Mr. Resul Serdar Ataş, welcomed three notable speakers and ten esteemed discussants.

Ambassador Mokhtar Lamani focused his remarks on the fragile future of the region, drawing particular attention to the threat of religious extremism to the development of democratic institutions. However, Ambassador Lamani, making a comparison to the French Revolution, expressed the need to consider the Arab revolutionary and counter-revolutionary movements in the region from a long-term perspective. The Arab Spring, he argued, will unfold for decades to come.

Shadi Hamid emphasised that the repression enacted by various regimes across the Arab world has proven to have successfully prevented short-term resistance to democratisation efforts but will fail to quell these movements in the long run. He also introduced a key focus of the session’s discussion, which he called the ‘Islamist dilemma’; namely that the revolutionary and democratisation efforts across the Arab world will inevitably include the participation of Islamist parties, and this reality has proved to be a central point of conflict for foreign actors, most notably the United States.

Jamal Elshayyal urged the panel to consider the timeline of the Arab Spring not only in its long-term future trajectory, but also within the history of colonialism, which, he argued, has led to immature political institutions across the Arab world. He also expressed that the present fault lines in the Arab world are between those who believe in pluralism and those who view pluralism as an existential threat to the current systems. This division both explains the revolutionary efforts across the region and sheds light on the alliances between states attempting to resist these movements.

Discussants focused their remarks primarily on whether they foresaw a positive or negative future for democracy-oriented movements in the Arab world. They echoed the call to see the Arab Spring in a multi-decade framework and analysed the conflict between pluralism and authoritarianism witnessed across the region. Key components of the discussion also included predictions of the timing and efficacy of the what some have referred to as the second wave of the Arab Spring as well as the role of outside parties in influencing these outcomes, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Russia, and the United States.

# Mokhtar Lamani's Highlights



## Former Ambassador of OIC to UN

Mr. Mokhtar Lamani is a member of the Immigration and Refugees Board, a Senior Fellow at the Bill Graham Center, and a distinguished fellow of the Canadian International Council. He was the Head of the Office of the UN League of Arab States and Joint Special Representative for Syria in Damascus from 2012 to 2014. Prior to that, Mr. Lamani worked as a senior visiting fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation in Canada and as Ambassador Special Representative of the Arab League in Iraq. He also served as Ambassador of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to the UN from 1998 to 2004. Mr. Lamani has held a number of positions within the General Secretariat of the Arab League, including Deputy Permanent Observer to the UN, Officer in Charge of the Iraq-Kuwait dispute, Coordinator of Secretariat Reform, and Coordinator of the Euro-Arab Dialogue and Afro-Arab Cooperation.

” “Ten years after the Arab Spring and despite the current chaos in a region known for its political stagnation, generalised corruption, and repression[...] some unprecedented transformations took or are taking place.”

” “The current situation looks worse: Civil wars; sectarianism; the emergence of brutal and unprecedented extremism; politically bankrupt states; a new notion in international law — which is not just a failed state, but a failed region. The whole region is considered [to be] in crisis.”

” “The dangers that are threatening the future of the region have never been so pressing. Of course, the most dangerous of which is religious extremism. This religious extremism, by definition, evolves very well in troubled waters and risks tipping the whole region into a project contrary to the democratic ideals of the young people who launched the Arab Spring ten years ago.”

” “The Arab Spring must be included in long term analysis, not notwithstanding the attempts by the forces of Islamist conservatism or the counter-revolutionary attempts by the dominant elites since independence to block any serious commitment to real democratisation. Of course, revolutions and their success are not measured in months or years, it is a slow and very deep social movement that requires continuous corrections.”

” “A lot of people seem to forget that after the French Revolution in 1789, it was total chaos for almost half a century before things took the path that we know. We also witnessed some corrections with the second wave of the Arab Spring that took place, especially in Sudan, Lebanon, and Algeria. These corrections were very well organised, much more so than the first wave, until, unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic stopped everything.”

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***Civil wars; sectarianism; the emergence of brutal and unprecedented extremism; politically bankrupt states; a new notion in international law — which is not just a failed state, but a failed region. The whole region is considered [to be] in crisis***

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# Shadi Hamid's Highlights



## Senior Fellow, Brookings Institute

Dr. Shadi Hamid is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, contributing writer at The Atlantic, and co-host of the Wisdom of Crowds podcast. He is the author of *Islamic Exceptionalism: How the Struggle Over Islam is Reshaping the World*, which was shortlisted for the 2017 Lionel Gelber Prize for best book on foreign affairs, and co-editor of Rethinking Political Islam. His first book, *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* was named a Foreign Affairs Best Book of 2014. Hamid was named one of the world's top 50 thinkers by Prospect magazine in 2019. He received his B.S. and M.A. from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and his Ph.D. in political science from Oxford University.

” “I think one of the major lessons of the Arab Spring, unfortunately, is that repression works. It does not necessarily work in the long run [...] but in the short to medium term, repression can be very effective.”

” “And you might recall that during the start of the Arab Spring, we heard a lot of rhetoric about how the wall of fear has been destroyed and that the Arab world will never be the same again, that Arabs will never be submissive. They will be insistent on their rights and dictatorships won't be able to put them down. What we have found out, however, is that the wall of fear can be rebuilt, and it can be rebuilt perhaps even more strongly than it was before.”

” “I think the broader premise here is that authoritarian regimes do not last forever. They are, by definition, temporary. Now, the question is, how long is the long run? And this is where it becomes very difficult from an outside perspective. If you are a US policymaker, you are concerned, usually, with the next four to eight years, or even less. So, how do you prioritise the long run over the short term?”

” “But I think the thing that is worth remembering is that there is an illusion of stability. Let us take the Sisi regime, for example. It seems stable and it will be stable until it is not, and then it is too late and you do not know exactly when that moment will happen.”

” “The U.S. has been hampered for several decades now by something that I would call the 'Islamists dilemma': we, as Americans, say we want democracy in theory, but we are afraid of democracy's outcomes in practice.”

” “Ultimately, democracy, in part, is about the right to make the wrong choice. Democracy is about making “bad choices”; bad in quotation marks because obviously citizens disagree on what a “good choice” and what a “bad choice” is. This is where the U.S. has to be comfortable with supporting a process rather than supporting certain outcomes. So, we should not be supporting Islamists; we should not be supporting secularists or liberals; we should be supporting a democratic process.”

***I think one of the major lessons of the Arab Spring, unfortunately, is that repression works. It does not necessarily work in the long run [...] but in the short to medium term, repression can be very effective.***

# Jamal Elshayyal's Highlights



## Senior correspondent, Al Jazeera

Jamal Elshayyal is an international award-winning senior correspondent for Al Jazeera English, he joined the channel in 2006 as part of its launch team and served as its first Middle East Editor. He covered a number of major stories including the 2011 uprisings in Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen. Some of his exclusive reports include uncovering secret documents from inside Gaddafi's intelligence HQ and uncovering torture and human rights abuses inside Egyptian prisons. Jamal was Al Jazeera's main reporter during the 2013 coup in Egypt, the 2014 coup in Yemen and the 2016 failed coup attempt in Turkey. He has interviewed several world leaders including Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Mahathir Muhamad, Fayeze al-Sarraj, Anwar Ibrahim, Khaled Meshaal, Joyce Banda, Salva Kir, Jeremy Corbyn and many others. Jamal has extensive access to major power players in the GCC and the MENA region.

- ” I think one of the questions that we need to look at when we are assessing what has happened over the past ten years, when we are assessing the Arab Spring and trying to take heed from it, is why it happened.”
- ” To look at the Arab world detached from the fact that it has essentially been under some sort of foreign rule or influence and has never really experienced any real freedom for the best part of one hundred years would be essentially getting rid of the main cause for a lot of the movements that have been occurring.”
- ” To look at the Arab world detached from the ongoing illegal occupation of Palestine, and all that comes with it, would be to be blind to the real cause of a lot of the instability in the Arab world. I can say that as a journalist who covered protests in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, in every main square where anti-government protests took place during the Arab Spring, [you could see] the flags of that country alongside Palestinian flags.”
- ” Once people decided that there was no hope after living those 30, 40 years under the Assads and the Mubaraks and the Gadhafis of the region, and decided to take things into their own hands, both the danger and the fault lines changed.”
- ” Very simply, the fault lines in the Arab world right now are between those who believe in pluralism and those who view pluralism as an existential threat to the current system. It is not about Islamist versus secularist. It is not even about the Arab Spring versus others. It is just this concept of pluralism because we cannot dream of democracy if we cannot even accept and implement the most basic tenets of it, which is to 'agree to disagree', to have some sort of pluralism.”
- ” On the one hand, you have countries like the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and the military in Egypt who do not have any room or scope to accept an alternative opinion. For them, pluralism will ultimately lead to a change in power. If you accept that everybody has a right to a different point of view, you eventually reach the argument that everyone has a right to choose how they are governed or what policies to pursue.”
- ” However, I think where 2011 failed and where the next wave of protests will succeed is that 2011 was very clear with what it was against, but it had no idea of what it was for. That is why, for example, the revolutionary forces in Egypt were only united for a few weeks before they splintered because there was no clear or unifying vision. I think this is where you see the kind of political immaturity and inexperience that results from decades of living under colonialism.”
- ” Tunisia became a success story because the focus was on first trying to establish that process of creating a political environment that was welcoming to pluralism. In Egypt, the issue was about trying to flex muscles or enforce a certain agenda before dismantling the system that was functioning for the past 30 or 40 years, let alone replacing it.”
- ” I argue that we need to stop acting as if there is one lesson that we learned from 2011. We need to stop seeing flash protests or specific events as if they are definitive. A system that has existed for decades is not going to be dismantled in 18 days, and it definitely will not be rebuilt in 18 days. So, my view is that we are seeing the murmurings, we are seeing these things bubble up. There will be a second, third, and fourth round, and ultimately will result in a transformation of the political system in the Arab world.”





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