

Is the New Middle East Stuck in Its Sectarian Past? The Unspoken Dimension of the "Arab Spring"

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Abstract: *This article focuses on the impact of the Arab Spring on pre-existing societal cleavages, specifically analyzing its impact on Sunni-Shiite relations. How have Sunni-Shiite relationships been reshaped by the ongoing social protests? Is there a rise in the inter-religious tensions among Sunni and Shiite communities across the region? And, if that is the case, what are the implications of this trend on both the region's potential for democratization, as well as on its overall stability and security?*

The sudden eruption of social and political protests across the Middle East took the world by surprise. While there had been clear warnings—for example in the 2009 UNDP Arab Human Development Report—that the mix of economic stagnation, sky-rocketing unemployment, demographic pressure, corrupt and inefficient government, and social and political repression represented a serious threat to the stability of the Middle East,[1] still nobody had anticipated the magnitude and latitude of the so-called "Arab Spring."

After the initial shock, scholars and decision-makers alike are still trying to fully understand the complexities of the ongoing turmoil, and they are in profound

[1] See for example: "Arab Human Development Report 2009: Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries," UN Development Programme (UNDP), 2009. http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/regional/arabstates/name,3442,en.html

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