The Fifth Anniversary of the "Arab spring": Results and Evaluation

The beginning of 2011 went down in history as the "Arab Spring", which set in motion not only the "Arab street", but also the entire Middle East region. The act of self-immolation of a Tunisian teenager in late 2010 served as a detonator for the subsequent series of civil unrest, Arab "revolutions" and civil wars in the region.

It is well known that at that time, mass rallies and protest demonstrations unrolled in almost all the Arab countries. In some of them (Morocco, Algeria, Oman, Sudan, Jordan, etc.), the political and social tension has been reduced by taking urgent measures for the redistribution of financial and material resources for the benefit of the most vulnerable segments of society, in others - through violent coup d'état (Tunisia, Egypt), or by military suppressing of protests and civil revolts (Eastern province of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain). However, the most dramatic events unfolded in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, where the weakening of the central governments led to the disintegration of these states into several hostile enclaves and to enduring armed conflicts. The situation in these countries worsened by large-scale foreign intervention and activation of groups of radical Islamists. The number of the injured and dead in these local wars and conflicts amounts to hundreds of thousands, more than ten million people have become refugees and displaced. As a result, there is an ongoing uncontrolled flow of migrants to Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, the Balkans and other European countries.

It is too early to draw even the preliminary results of the "Arab Spring", which, apparently, will only grow in the depth of the processes in each affected country and in its geography (its area). Such events are expected to unfold also outside the Arab world, as there are many features of such "revolutions", for example, in the Persian Gulf, Africa and Central Asia.

One will naturally ask the following questions: Why was it the beginning of 2011 that the "Arab Street" was set in motion? How spontaneous were the events? Why were they accompanied by such large-scale violence and victims?

There are two diametrically opposed views on the root causes of the "Arab Spring" and its consequences.

Some experts believe that the revolutionary situation in many Arab countries had been mature enough by the end of 2010, many of its features and the reasons were common for many Arab States (the idea of Arab socialism and Pan-Arabism has been found exhausted and worn out, long overdue reforms were never carried out, the social Economic situation in the majority of Arab countries against the backdrop of the global financial crisis dramatically worsened, the ongoing demographic boom boosted unemployment and poverty, and tribalism, nepotism, corruption, and authoritarian ruling regimes finally undermined the authority of the central governments). Just one civil riot in one of the Arab countries and the shameful flight of Ben Ali, the president of Tunisia, and the "domino effect" destroyed the entire Arab world. In other words, many experts believe that the root causes of the "Arab Spring" lie within the region and individual Arab countries. It is however recognized that modern media and communications (Internet, mobile communications etc.) also played an important role.
Other political scientists and experts are more inclined to the version of an external factor in the "Arab Spring." These events are thought to be backed by foreign governments and their special services, which finally played a decisive role in changing the ruling regimes and the outbreak of civil wars in the region. Instigators and initiators of the "Arab Spring" are thought to be not only the leading Western countries, but also their regional allies (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey).

Whereas it is noted that certain regional media such as Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, and Al-Hayat are closely linked to the foreign immigrant centers. This thesis can be confirmed by the fact that the plan for a Greater Middle East with relocated state borders and pro-Western regimes has long been nurtured by Washington. No one denies the facts of brainwashing of tens of thousands of Arab political scientists, students and emigrants at various courses, conferences and seminars in the US and EU countries. That is, the idea of the democratization of the Arab East according to western patterns has long been in the air and is an important part of the foreign policy of Western countries. It is well known about the clearly negative attitude of Western politicians to a number of Arab leaders (Saddam Hussein, Gaddafi, Hafez and Bashar al-Assad). Criticism of their actions and calls for the violent coup d’etat have become normal behaviour of western politicians and the media.

Of course, both points of view deserve closest attention and study, but, as it often happens in such cases, the truth is somewhere in the middle. It seems that there were really enough reasons in the Arab world for the acts of civil unrest to start, and the civil protests are thus understandable. Moreover, the first months of the “Arab spring” apparently caught by surprise not only the local authorities, but also most of the leaders of foreign countries, who had long been making a lot of efforts in previous years for this to happen. However, very soon Washington, Brussels, London, Paris, Rome, Ankara, Riyadh, Doha and other interested administrations assessed the opportunities and began to speculate on how to benefit from these events to the maximum of their national and selfish interests.

In Tunisia, they managed to maintain the status quo between the main political forces in the country and reduce it only to a change in the ruling elite. In Egypt, the West, Turkey and the Gulf monarchies tacitly supported the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak and the empowerment of the Islamists, led by Mohammed Morsi. Subsequently, it was them who negatively reacted to the overthrow of the ruling Muslim Brotherhood by the majority of the Egyptian people and the military. Washington even opted for a temporary freeze of military and military-technical cooperation with the secular Egyptian regime of President Al-Sisi.

The Western intervention in the Libyan conflict was unprecedented. Having lobbied the adoption of UN Security Council resolution to establish a no-fly zone in the country, the USA, Britain, France and other NATO countries have started systematic air strikes on civilian and military targets in Libya, which subsequently contributed to the massacre of the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi by local Islamists.

Direct military intervention of the West in the events in Yemen has been avoided, but Washington supported the actions of a hastily knocked Coalition of Air Forces of Persian Gulf monarchies under the auspices of Saudi Arabia, which began to bomb positions of rioting Houthis and towns of the country. Not to forget also that earlier the Saudis conducted punitive operations against the Shia in its Eastern Province and Bahrain. Which, in its turn, increased the tensions between Iran and the Gulf monarchies.

The most tragic events are taking place in Syria and Iraq. Having the goal to shift the disliked (by the West) regime of Bashar Assad in Syria and weaken the pro-Iranian government in Baghdad, Washington and its regional allies supported protest movements in these countries, which rely on radical Islamist groups of Sunni (Wahhabi) division. As a result of these provocative actions of the West, Isis/Daish, "Jhabgu en-Nusra" and dozens of other radical Islamist groups were able to take control of many Syrian and Iraqi province and become a powerful terrorist monster that threatens not only the regional security, but also tries to spread its influence around the world. By mid-2014 the largest of these radical groups, "Islamic State" (Daish), managed to create a new Sunni Institution with medieval Sharia law - the Islamic caliphate. Today we can state that it was formed as the center and stronghold of the forces of the international terrorism. Militants of various radical Islamic groups around the world (Nigeria, Somalia, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, Northern Caucasus, Central Asia etc.) have sworn allegiance to the new caliph al-Baghdadi. As of mid-December 2015, 34 terrorist groups around the world have already sworn allegiance to Isis/Daish. This UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon informed of that in his report to the UN Security Council. According to him, the number of the caliphate supporters will continue to grow in 2016. Tens of thousands of new jihadists continue to arrive in the caliphate from the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe and the CIS. There is a real threat of further escalation and intensification of Daish militants around the world as refugees and migrants join in, and new members are recruited. Militants of this group take responsibility for many attacks in Turkey, Lebanon, Tunisia, France, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, Indonesia, and other countries.
And if in early 2011, the "Arab Spring" appeared rather spontaneous, later it became actively supported and used by external forces, and then turned into an instrument to overthrow the regimes disliked by Washington and its allies. But Western strategists and politicians have underestimated the situation. They hoped that the "dictatorial" regimes would be replaced with pro-Western, democratic governments, which did not happen. Today, the Arab East is increasingly immersed in the atmosphere of total chaos and violence, the Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism is being replaced with the radical Islam and pan-Islamism in its most aggressive and medieval form. The large-scale Sunni-Shiite war is fueled in the region, with Syria, Iraq, and Yemen being the main battlefield now. There is a real threat of escalation of these military attacks and new sallies by radical Islamists around the world.

_Stanislav Ivanov, leading research fellow at the Institute of Oriental Studies RAS, PhD in History, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook"_