

Drop the Orientalist term 'Arab Spring'

By Rami G. Khouri

A fascinating aspect of the current wave of citizen revolts that is toppling, challenging or reforming regimes across the Arab world is that people around the world use different terms to describe the phenomenon. The term that seems to have gained much currency across the Western world is "the Arab Spring." I find this totally inappropriate, and have banished it from my own writing and speaking. I urge my fellow journalists to consider doing the same.

The most important reason for this is that this term is not used at all by those brave men and women who have been on the streets demonstrating and dying for seven months now. Every time I run into a Tunisian, Egyptian, Libyan, Syrian, Bahraini or Yemeni, I ask them how they refer to their own political actions. Their answer is an almost universal, "Revolution" (or thawra, in Arabic). And when they refer to the collective activities of Arabs across the region, they often use the plural "revolutions" (or thawrat).

They also use descriptor collective-nouns such as the Arab "uprising" (intifada), the Arab "awakening" (sahwa), or the Arab renaissance (nahda), the latter mirroring the initial Arab Awakening against Ottoman and European domination in the early years of the 20th century. I personally like the term "Arab citizen revolt," which captures the common demand among all Arab demonstrators to enjoy full citizenship rights with appropriate constitutional guarantees.

The terms Arabs use to describe themselves are far stronger and more substantive than "Arab Spring." Inherent in the term "spring," for sure, is the idea of an awakening after the winter slumber. However, it also denotes a brief or limited transitional moment that soon gives way to the next season of summer. It mirrors Czechoslovakia's brief "Prague Spring" liberalism of 1968, which the Russians quickly halted, and also the European revolutions of 1848 a century earlier.

Tellingly, the "spring" metaphor was not applied to the revolutions that swept the Soviet Empire in the 1980s and early 1990s. When real change happens, the world tends to describe this as a revolution, not a spring – except, it seems, in the Arab world.

Perhaps I exaggerate, but I am troubled by the unspoken connotations that accompany calling this phenomenon a "spring," which downplays the severity of the challenge to existing regimes and downgrades the intensity and depth of the courage that ordinary men and women summon when they dare to take on their often brutal, well armed national security services. "Spring" is a passive term – it just happens to people – helpless people who have no power and no say in the process. The terms that Arabs use to describe themselves epitomize activism, will, empowerment, determination and agency, denoting citizens who have the power to change their world and are going about that business with diligence and perseverance.

I suspect that the popularity of the "Arab Spring" term across the Western world quietly mirrors

some subtle Orientalism at work, lumping all Arabs as a single mass of people who all think and behave the same way. It might also hide another troubling factor: Many quarters of many Western lands remain hesitant in fully acknowledging – let alone embracing or supporting – the implications of free Arabs pursuing self-determination who have the power to define their countries and shape their national policies.

Western powers for the past century and a half or so have assumed that they can shape and control most aspects of power and policy across the Arab world, whether due to imperial self-interest, energy requirements, economic needs, or pro-Israeli biases. As Arab citizens shed docility and threaten to take control of their own societies, many in the West are unsure how to deal with this possibility.

Perhaps some in the West also do not want to acknowledge the full reality of Arabs reconfiguring their power structures, because Western powers (including Russia) supported those old, failed authoritarian systems that are now being challenged and changed. An “Arab Spring” conveniently removes the element of culpability and foreign complicity in the dark, bitter and endless “winter” that we endured for three generations of incompetent Arab police and family-mafia states.

Revolutionary, self-assertive Arabs frighten many people abroad. Softer Arabs who sway with the seasons and the winds may be more comforting. However, if in their greatest moment of modern historical self-assertion and nationalist struggle Arab citizenries find that major politicians and media in the West refer to them in the vocabulary of the wind and tides, we are certain to continue feeling the century-long impact of the great battle of colonialism versus nationalist resistance that seems still to define the Arab region’s relations with many Western powers.

Language may be the easiest place to start reversing this troubling legacy. Dropping the term “Arab Spring” for something more accurate is my suggested starting point.

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