

**Social media Usage After a decade
of the Arab Spring.... Restrictions and Challenges**

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Introduction:

Social media played a pivotal role during the Arab revolutions or what is dubbed "Arab Spring". The Arab Spring contributed in developing and establishing channels of communication and interaction between participants in the peaceful political protests. Challengers used social media to organize demonstrations, whether in support or opposition to the government, and convey their aspirations, demands and goals online.

Social media played a crucial role in shaping political debates which lit the fire of the Arab Spring, that started in Tunisia, then Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and the rest of the countries. Through social media, the Arab countries' various political parties deliberately conveyed their ideas and aspirations to change the political and social conditions of their countries. They highlighted their governments' violations and poor performance to end the suffering of citizens. These discussions, ideas, and dialogues had significantly fueled the protests in the Arab Countries in record time.

After 10 years of the Arab Spring revolutions, the impact of social media has continued and greatly expanded. Social media has become an important source for those interested in political affairs and all citizens who use it to know the course of events and news. Social media users and activists disseminated the practices of many Arab governments, but they were deliberately silenced by these governments, which monitored social media, and restricted publishing policy. These governments even promulgated legislations punishing activists, journalists and citizens who publish critical content.

In its report, Skyline seeks to shed light on the prominent role of social media in the Arab Spring Uprising ten years after its onset , and how Arab governments exploited social media to silence any dissent voice calling for change or demanding basic rights.

First: Social Media and Arab Spring

The Arab Spring revolution that took place in six Arab countries in 2011, namely Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain, offered a glimmer of hope and aspirations for a new era of democracy and reform. Hundreds of thousands of demonstrators hoped the so-called Arab Spring would change the political, economic and social situation in their countries.

The influence of social media has significantly affected the political aspect of Arab countries. The so-called Arab Spring term was widely used in social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, blogs...etc. These forms of social media enhanced awareness of hundreds of thousands of individuals who strongly tried to change the Arab regimes that suppressed them for decades in a row. Social media helped them expand thanks to its ability to coordinate and disseminate information rapidly. Through blogs, Facebook, Twitter, or other forms of social media, activists and individuals spread political news and accelerated the revolutionary processes across the Arab world. They used social media to determine the time and places of gathering crowds and directly disseminate facts as they happened in Egypt, Syria and Libya.

In Egypt, activists were sharing information through social media, which led the former Egyptian government to shut down the Internet in order to prevent protesters from being in contact. In Syria, social media played an important role, which was the only means for many activists in a country where gatherings and demonstrations are prohibited. Therefore, Syrian citizens were able to document crimes that were committed by the Syrian regime in real time. In Libya, social media activists were able to report on the field sit-ins and protests' events through several platforms on social media.

The Arab Spring uprisings had shocking results in all countries except Tunisia. Only one Arab country, Tunisia, has had a long road to a more democratic and more stable form of government for the region. Other Arab countries' governments met the protests with opposition and suppression. For example, in Syria, the uprising led to a civil war and a massive humanitarian crisis. In Libya, a government crackdown on protesters sparked a civil war. In Yemen, the protests sparked a cruel and devastating war. Moreover, the authorities in Bahrain suppressed the

protesters. In Egypt, many human rights violations were committed after the military council seized power.

Accordingly, the media in general, and social media in particular, have failed to adapt a democratic approach due to the repercussions of these revolutions. The security crackdown and the absence of an international role led to appalling violations committed by the revolting countries' governments

Following are examples of some countries that witnessed widespread demonstrations, and how the demonstrators used social media to mobilize hundreds of thousands of individuals to demand their rights:

Tunisia:

Tunisia was the first country to witness popular protests after several decades of silence and security operations. These protests played a major role in sparking protests in several Arab capitals. Hundreds of thousands of citizens were mobilized in the streets to demand their usurped rights and improve their living conditions. In December 2010, the young Tunisian, Mohamed Bouaziz, set himself on fire, outside the square of the governorate of Sidi Bouzid (Centre); to denounce the harassment and humiliation he was exposed to by the police. The news spread throughout the country through news websites and social media sites. This incident lit the fire of the Arab Spring's uprising in Tunisia.

Activists expressed solidarity with Bouaziz so that they launched a campaign on social media. Despite the Tunisian government's attempts to limit the impact of such campaigns by blocking the Internet, activists and revolutionaries were able to overcome these obstacles.

A month after Bouazizi's death, the Tunisian regime had fallen, and the president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali had fled. After that, demonstrations erupted throughout Tunisia against the deteriorating living conditions and the repressive security policy.

Egypt:

The Arab Spring uprising in Egypt showed how social media was a driving factor on political transformation and change. Individuals and activists shared their opinions and ideas on social media. They shed light on the violations committed by the Egyptian regime during the uprising and the terrible violations that were committed before. Revolutionaries used Social media to call for freedom and social justice.

These efforts were fruitful that masses spontaneously mobilized in streets and shocked the Egyptian regime and the Arab world, which were well aware of their security grip on their citizens. In this regard, the "We Are All Khaled Said" Facebook page, created by the well-known activist Wael Ghoneim, who was arrested on January 2011, had the greatest influence in moving people into the streets to call for freedom and ending the security services' power. Ghoneim was the first advocate to demonstrate against police practices on Police Day, January 25, which later turned into Revolution Day. These demonstrations compelled the Egyptian President at that time, "Mohamed Hosni Mubarak" to leave his position, ceding power to a council of senior military officers.

Syria:

Social media platforms had a vital role in the Syrian revolution, as President Bashar al-Assad's regime deliberately blocked other media forms to hide its violations from the world. Practically, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube were the means by which Syrians conveyed the crimes of the Syrian regime to the world. Social networking sites had the largest role during the beginning of the demonstrations in Syria, where activists relied on to organize their crowds, and convey demands, and spread the Syrian army's direct violations. Ten years on, Syrian activists still rely on social networking sites mainly to report the course of events on the ground after many international powers have intervened in the Syrian issue and many violations were committed against civilians.

Figures and Data

Social media had prominently shaped up the Arab Spring revolutions among society's various classes to the extent that it had become one of the most important basics of millions of individuals' daily life. Arab Center for Research and Studies' annual survey for 2019-2020 indicated that 28,000 people from 13 Arab countries used social media in the Arab Spring uprisings, which reflects the growing role of social media. The survey showed that Arab public opinion towards highly intersecting political, economic and social views witnessed a great change and shift. Also, social media significantly affected the way that Arabs used the media.

The 2019-2020 survey shows many important results related to various news and information sources in the Arab region. People sharply and greatly have relayed on the internet usage. 73% of the participants relayed on the Internet when they want to know news and information. The internet widespread increased statically and significantly in the Arab region over the past 10 years.

Upon this, social media' usage and spread in the Arab world has notably increased, where 86% of these individuals have accounts on "Facebook", 84% on "WhatsApp", 43% on "Twitter", 56% on "Instagram" and 44% on "Snapchat" . This reflects that despite using social media for political purposes during and after the Arab Spring uprisings, the main driving factor behind its popularity remains building social relationships and communication.

The survey also shows that social media news sources had fundamentally competing TV channels over the past 10 years. It indicates that 35% of the participants relayed on the Internet for getting political news, an increase of 7 times of their usage in 2011. Also, there dependence on TV news had significantly decreased during the same period. Moreover, 80% of the participants reported using social media to get political news and information, while 61% used it to express their opinions and interact with political issues in their communities.

Second: After the Arab Spring ... Repression and prosecutions

Arab governments and regimes have tended to target social media due to its role in collective action; it helped move individuals and mobilize them for demonstrations during the past years. These authoritarian regimes increasingly politicized and sponsored online networks, using them

as mediums to mobilizes public and influence their opinion. They also undermined public confidence in the mainstream. Moreover, they tightened their control over the media and online activists in the Arab world by purchasing and sponsoring many online pages.

Nevertheless, the most dangerous practice made by these regimes is the enforcement and legislation of cybercrime laws that prohibit any content, which is not previously approved or licensed by their authorities. Therefore, social media and its users have become the main target of these regimes; these regimes stifled activists' voice and demand calling for better living conditions and exercising fundamental rights.

It is noteworthy here that the 2019 Freedom House report indicates that some African and Arab countries' governments stepped up violations against social media activists. The report recorded many violations committed against them during the last ten years.

Skyline confirms that it has monitored many repressive practices and documented dozens of arrests by some Arab governments against social media activists. These practices indicate that these governments violate the basic rules, constitutions of their countries, and international covenants such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other agreements that guarantee freedoms and full protection of all individuals, journalists and activists without prosecution, threat or restriction. Skyline has monitored some behaviors that were repeated in most of those countries, **including:**

Cybercrime Law:

The revolting Arab countries approved laws for the freedom to demonstrate and share opinions and ideas on social media platforms after pressure from human rights institutions. Most Arab countries promulgated laws that regulate the use of the Internet, news websites and social media. However, these laws were exploited and used as an instrument to legitimize the security services' suppressive practices in some Arab countries, including arresting individuals and social media activists on overboard and fabricated charges.

In Egypt, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi ratified “Combating Information Technology Crimes” Law in 2018, to “regulate” social media activities. However, it was reported by local and international human rights organizations that the Egyptian authorities used this law monitor individuals, activists, journalists and opponents, who were in turn exposed to arrest and harassment.

In Sudan, ousted Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir promulgated a “Cybercrime law” in 2007. He also made amendments to the media law to target online activities.

Regarding to Saudi Arabia, it was the first country to create a law against social media activists in 2007.

Blocking the Internet:

Through their attempts to confront social media' activities, some Arab governments blocked the Internet completely or partially despite the financial loses this step may cause. Other governments reduced the speed of the Internet, such as Syria, Iraq, Egypt and Sudan. Other countries like Iraq cut off Internet service in the capital and most Iraqi cities during the 2019 protests. Moreover, the Transitional Military Council in Sudan shut down the internet for a month in June, 2020, under the pretext of "ceasing the dissemination of rumors and fake news."

Restrict access to online accounts and delete Tweets:

Social media has become a new medium of repression to counter-revolutionary and dictatorial regimes. The establishment of regional offices for social media online networks like Facebook and Twitter in Arab countries helped their governments commit systematic violations against their opponents, activists, journalists, human rights defenders, and others.

According to online activists, the joint cooperation between those networks and the repressive countries' governments led to deleting dozens of activists' accounts, restricting access to them, and deleting their tweets that had a great interaction in issues raised.

Skyline indicates that social media activists launched pressure and demand campaigns on several occasions. They called on social media' companies, that have established regional offices in Arab countries, to review their decisions as these countries combat digital content and restrict freedom

of opinion and expression. Therefore, activists launched a campaign on Twitter in 2019 demanding Twitter to relocate its regional office from the oppressive "UAE" to other countries respecting freedoms.

Skyline stresses that the joint cooperation between the social media corporations and governments give the latter the absolute power to monitor their opponents' accounts and even arrest them due to posts that do not violate the right to freedom of opinion. It further confirms that the "Twitter" company closes dozens of individuals' accounts without violating its publication polices. The company loses its credibility worldwide as it encourages repressive governments to continue their violations of activists' rights. Finally, Skyline emphasizes the need to empower individuals to express their opinions without restrictions.

Legal background

The right to freedom of opinion and expression includes two inseparable freedoms, and it is impossible to separate them or to exercise one without the other. The first is freedom of opinion, and the second is freedom of expression. Accordingly, ensuring the exercise of this right is the cornerstone of building, developing and sustaining a democratic society.

Skyline affirms that a set of international rules have legally protected freedom of opinion and expression. Most Arab countries have joined these conventions, which means that restrictions and prosecutions violate their legal obligations and hold them responsible for their violations against individuals and activists.

Follows are some legal texts that guarantee freedom of opinion and expression, including:

First: International Conventions

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights stipulates that "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice".

- Article 2 of the 1978 UNESCO declaration provides that "the exercise of freedom of opinion, expression and information, recognized as an integral part of human rights and fundamental freedoms, is a vital factor in the strengthening of peace and international understanding."

- **Regional Charters:** Most regional agreements affirm the right freedom of expression and the need to protect it. Many articles of these agreements confirm this right, including, Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and Article 9 of the African Charter on Human Rights. Also, Article 13 of the American Convention for the Protection of Human Rights, states that "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice".

Second: International Standards

International practice determines a set of basic criteria associated with the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including:

- The right of opponents to express their opinions and publish them on state-owned means of communication, including social media, on an equal basis with others.
- The right to obtain information from government sources.
- Protecting academic, scientific and educational freedoms, and artistic and literary expression.

- all classes of society should obtain governmental support on the right of expression on non-political basis to promote and ensure pluralism.
- Protection of the right of distribution and publication.

Recommendations

Skyline confirms that its report content indicates deliberate and unjustified violations committed by some Arab governments that witnessed the Arab Spring revolution. These violations had undermined individuals' basic rights. Therefore, Skyline calls for:

- The immediate and unconditional release of prisoners of conscience and activists in the Arab countries, and to drop all false charges against them.
- Enabling individuals to exercise the right to freedom of expression and opinion on social media without censorship, restriction or prosecution.
- conforming national legislation and social networking sites' laws with international legislation and the fundamental rights of those countries' constitutions.
- the need of the international community to follow up cases of arbitrary detention and restrictions on basic rights.

Sending fact-finding teams to find out about the violations committed by some Arab governments and pressure them to implement their obligations under international conventions.