

History

Arab Spring and Islamic Radicalism (Tunisia, Egypt, Syria)

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In the paper attention is focused on such significant concepts as fundamentalism, radicalism and extremism and comprehensive comparative analysis of the situation in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria. In the beginning, it is necessary to differentiate above mentioned three definitions, as the cases are frequent when they are confused and, consequently, presented with an incorrect interpretation. The main argument of the conclusions drawn in connection with the problem posed in the study, on the basis of the whole paper, as a result of the conducted research, comparative analysis and comparison of materials, is the following – the anti-governmental protests and revolutionary processes, known as Arab Spring, which started in December, 2010, and then spread to almost all Arab countries, were not the “awakening” of the Islamic forces or impetus given to democratic processes, but deals between Islamist and secular forces on the example of Tunisia, the combination of the military in Egypt, and the manipulations of the regime and the consequences of the conflict of interests of the regional actors in Syria. The studied factual materials and the results of research based on them, leads to the conclusion that the views found in a number of relevant factual sources, according to which, after the overthrowing of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, allegedly the local population saw the only way for solution of their problems in Islamist forces, have no solid foundation, and the forces following Political Islam in these countries represented the lifeline for the old regimes to stay on the political arena – voluntarily in Tunisia and involuntarily in Egypt. In the paper the circumstance is also stressed that in the case of Syria the activation of Islamist extremists was a result of the manipulation of the ruling regime, because exactly as a result of the struggle against these forces the regime managed to remain as the ruling power without an alternative in the country, and exactly this was one of the main reasons for bursting out Islamist extremism in this state, rather than the views concerning opposition of the Sunni-Shiite forces, occurring in certain sources and materials. © 2021 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

Arab Spring, Islamists, radicalism, extremism, militaries, regimes

The anti-governmental protests, known as Arab Spring, which started on December 18, 2010, spread to almost all Arab countries except the eastern peripheries of the region. The ruling

regimes were overthrown against the background of the revolutionary processes in Tunisia and Egypt, and in the wake of the civil war in Libya. The protracted civil war of Syria (the rebellion of

2011, the civil strife since 2012 to present), the terrorist activity of the “Islamic State”, the civil war in Yemen (since 2014 to present) – all these processes are intertwined with the developments caused by Arab Spring.

When studying the reasons of temporary strengthening of the positions of the Islamists in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria in the period following the revolutionary processes of the Arab Spring, it is necessary to consider various stages of this phenomenon and to re-interpret it profoundly once again, together with its detailed coverage (as it is possible in terms of one article), because the problem of Islamic extremism cannot be overcome without its study.

In the process of discussing Islamic radicalism it should also be noted separately that the following definitions should be differentiated: fundamentalism, radicalism and extremism, because these terms are often considered in one and the same context. In this case I focus attention on Islamic fundamentalism. The phenomenon of fundamentalism is not characteristic of only the Islamic world. Initially, at the beginning of the 20th c., the term “fundamentalists” was used to refer to the Protestants living in the USA [1,2].

Islamic fundamentalism focuses on the following: it describes a religious attitude or an organized movement towards all or the majority of the characteristics, such as: universal approach to religion, which in its turn considers religion in the context of the full legal and moral code; literal understanding of the Sacred Writings, the belief in the Islamic “Golden Age”, distrust and rejection of followers of other religions and their faith [3: 261-262]. As regards Islamic radicalism – it is also referred to by two definitions. These are: political Islam or Islamists. Radicals, in their turn, are divided into the moderates and the extremists. The “Ennahda” party, which repeatedly won the Tunisian parliamentary elections after Arab Spring, belongs to moderate Islamists. On the basis of the comparison of the relevant sources, it would be

right to stress that as radicals should be regarded the persons adhering to the Takfir principle (accusing a Muslim in infidelity). As regards the religious groups which are prone to extremism, they accuse of infidelity all Muslims who do not share their views regarding the true faith. According to the attitude of the moderate Islamists, a disbeliever is a Muslim who has deviated from the true path, whereas jihad using violence must be declared for the purpose of self-defence [4: 586-587].

Thus, fundamentalism may sometimes become a precondition of radicalism, and radicalism – an impetus for extremism. However, proceeding from the above-mentioned, it is necessary to differentiate them from one another. The following viewpoint may be considered as the most correct one: radical Islam and its extremist manifestations have their own specificity, which is based on the traditions and preconditions of the Islamic world, disregard of which is an indicator of a superficial attitude towards Islam. The relevant scholarly materials considered in the process of study of the given problem have also demonstrated that two directions of Islamic fundamentalism should be singled out separately: theological and political. In the first case we are dealing with the revival of the ideal Islamic state, established by Prophet Muhammad in the 7th c., and in the second case – with the seizure of political power by radicals originating from the fundamentalists (Egypt), and by extremists (Syria) as a result of the wave of the Arab Spring in the Sunni Arab countries.

Islamic radicalism is not a phenomenon characteristic of the modern Islamic world. Its foundation was laid as early as in the Middle Ages. In particular, in the 9th-10th cc. Hanbalism [3: 334] became widespread in the entire Muslim world, on the basis of which in the 18th c. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703/4-1787) formed a religious-political movement in Sunni Islam – Wahhabism [4: 585].

A great part of researchers equate Wahhabism and Salafiyya, which is an erroneous approach.

Salafiyya is one of the trends of puritanical Islam, it rejects later traditions and ideas developed by the subsequent theological schools. According to Salafists, only the Quran and the Sunna are regarded as the authentic basis of Islam [3: 608-610].

Pan-Islamism, which emerged in the second half of the 19th c., in the 1860-70s, was a response of Muslims to the Western colonial expansion. The main essence of its idea was resisting the European cultural, ideological, military, economic and missionary challenges [5: Pan-Islamism]. In the same period, in Egypt, India and Indonesia there appeared Islamic modernist movements. Unlike the Pan-Islamist ideology, the essence of Islamic modernism, instead of resisting the Western ideology, was in the reforming of the Islamic traditions [6: Modernism].

In the 1920s-1960s the ideologies of nationalism and socialism became popular in the Islamic world. Arab Socialism in its turn was the main component of Baathism (in Syria and Iraq). The weakening of nationalism was followed by appearance of Islamism within it, the main idea of which was consolidation of Islam as the universal religion, which should have solved all problems of the modern society [4:585]. In the 1970s the radicalization of Islam and bursting out extremism in it was caused by the Palestine problems, the intense activity of the "Muslim brotherhood" against Hafez al-Assad in Syria in the same period, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the entry of the Soviet troops in Afghanistan in the same year [4:587, 7]. It is noteworthy that generally in the Near East and in the countries under present study as well, along with the reasons listed above, there existed a number of inner problems, such as unemployment, corruption, the autocratic and dictatorial regimes, etc.

First of all, it is necessary to review briefly the situations existing in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria before Arab Spring. It is obvious that the developments taking place in all the three countries

had many reasons in common. Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali occupied the post of the President of Tunisia for 23 years, Hosni Mubarak ruled Egypt for 30 years, whereas the Assad family has been in power in Syria for almost half a century. Hafez al-Assad as well as Mubarak selected their own children as their successors [8]. The intention of the President of Egypt, however, proved unrealizable. The style of ruling of the leaders of these three countries was also an expression of complete authoritarianism, which was accompanied by social inequality and high rate of corruption. One more similarity is that in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, the law enforcement bodies, security services and the military (in case of Tunisia, only the state security apparatus) fully predominated in the ruling, public and political structures of the country. In addition to the above-mentioned, a special law was in force over many decades in Egypt and Syria which granted infinite rights to the presidents, the ruling party and the law enforcement authorities, which in parallel facilitated deepening of the social inequality and suppressed expression of any free opinion [9,10:8, 11]. Exactly these factors determined the mass protests and demands for the resignation of the government against Ben Ali, Mubarak and Bashar al-Assad. Thus, it is obvious that the reasons causing the revolutionary processes in the three countries are similar and almost identical. But the steps taken by the authorities were absolutely different, which naturally led to diametrically opposite results of the Arab Spring in these countries.

President of Tunisia, Ben Ali, in a short period after the beginning of the protests, addressed the population and promised that he would not stand for the next presidential elections in 2014. As a guarantee of his words, he also gave a promise to leave unchanged the Constitution, to offer freedom of the press and to lift restrictions on the Internet. At the same time, he called upon the law enforcement bodies not to use firearms against the protesters, which, however, ultimately did not

prove effective for Ben Ali. The low-budget armed forces of Tunisia, in the period of ruling of the first President of Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba (1956-87) and Ben Ali (1987-2011), never have wielded economic and political power, hence, the military never wished to have a close contact of any kind with the regime, that is why the armed forces of the country did not defend the government [12, 13].

In order to play their combination, the Egyptian military did not hamper the people in the streets in organizing protest demonstrations, as they were not interested in coming to power of President Hosni Mubarak's son, Gamal Mubarak, and his inner circle. If Gamal took office as President, his neoliberal economic course, which was known already, would directly threaten the business interests of the Egyptian military elite. Therefore it was a profitable move for them in the transitional post-revolutionary period to cede the power temporarily to the Islamists and then to remove them as a radical religious power from the political arena [14:15, 15, 16].

In Syria, like Egypt, the Alawite clan of the military totally dominated in the party apparatus and other political departments. In addition, Alawite officers enjoyed special benefits and material comforts. That is why the absolute majority of the Alawite officers represented an unwavering force supporting the regime [17,18]. In case of the victory of the opposition, they were not only in danger of losing the material and official privileges, but were also under the threat of personal destruction. The fierce confrontation between the Alawites and the Sunnite majority was caused exactly by this factor, rather than the Sunni-Shiite opposition deriving from a confessional point of view.

In Syria, as early as Spring 2011, after the beginning of the mass protests, the special services of the country released from prison a quite numerous jihadist contingent, who in their turn already in 2012 favored the rise of the radical Islamist groups, which opposed the Free Army

fighting against the government. And from 2012, after the "Islamic State" began to gain a foothold on the territories of Syria not controlled by the government, there has not occurred any confrontation between the government forces and the IS. There was a special reason for this. Similar to Ben Ali and Mubarak, President Bashar al-Assad also addressed the population as soon as the protests began. Unlike the above-mentioned leaders, it sounded in Assad's rhetoric that the opposition wished to drag the country in the terrorist fire. Fighting against terrorism would be advantageous for Assad's regime in the eyes of the international community, which in its turn would allow the authorities to use excessive force. Along with this, against the activity of the extremist opposition, the regime would remain as a power without an alternative, whereas the above-mentioned forces would prove to be completely unacceptable for the world community [19-22]. The presence of such an intention of the regime, which in its time was an assumption of only a part of researchers, has been fully confirmed at present by the subsequent developments and the current result in Syria.

Of the differentiating factors, special attention should be paid to the activity of the Islamists in all the three countries. The "Ennahda", the moderate Islamist party of Tunisia, since 2011 has been constantly bargaining and maneuvering with the secular parties, which although failed to rescue the country from economic challenges and corruption, but, Tunisia has averted the return to power of the dictatorial regime, unlike Egypt, and the civil confrontation, unlike Syria. It has become possible to draw this conclusion on the basis of certain studies conducted around this problem, some of the most significant works are cited as a source [23:107-127]. The comparative analysis of the materials has also demonstrated clearly that in Egypt after Arab Spring the "Muslim Brotherhood" and the Salafis on the whole did not go beyond the political arena and did not resort to violent methods

in the struggle for power. And during the short period of their rule, neither the Parliament made up of Islamists nor the President representing the “Brotherhood” posed any threat to the elite of the military council, participating in the ruling of the country. Research of materials has also demonstrated clearly that the unsuccessful plan of usurpation of power by the Egyptian Islamist President was the result of the irreconcilable protests of the secular forces of the country and the timely retreat of Muhammad Mursi. In addition, in Egypt as well as in Tunisia the activity of Islamists has not become the reason of protracted civil strife due to the fact that the relationship between the secular and political forces from the beginning was

only an inner problem of the country and neither side engaged actively the external forces in the political processes going on inside the above-mentioned countries. As a result, the research has demonstrated that one more different reason for escalation of the civil war in Syria. Namely, it is reality that the Baathist-Alawite regime of Syria, with the motive of the physical survival (as well as the rebellious opposition) internationalized the conflict, engaged foreign forces, Iran and Russia, who, along with the rebellious Sunni opposition, also opposed the regional interests of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, USA and Israel, which ultimately pulled the country into a 9-year-old bloody civil war.

ისტორია

არაბული გაზაფხული და ისლამური რადიკალიზმი (თუნისი, ეგვიპტე, სირია)

ს. გურეშიძე

ილიას სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი, გ. წერეთლის აღმოსავლეთმცოდნეობის ინსტიტუტი, თბილისი, საქართველო

(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის ე. ჯაველიძის მიერ)

სტატიაში ძირითადი საკითხის განხილვამდე ყურადღება არის გამახვილებული ისეთ მნიშვნელოვან ცნებებზე, როგორებიცაა: ფუნდამენტალიზმი, რადიკალიზმი და ექსტრემიზმი, რადგანაც აუცილებლად მიმაჩნია ამ სამი განსაზღვრების ერთმანეთისგან გამოიჯვანა იქიდან გამომდინარე, რომ ხშირია მათი ერთმანეთში აღრევა და, შესაბამისად, მათი არასწორი ინტერპრეტაციით წარმოჩენა. ჩემ მიერ წარმოდგენილ კვლევაში დასმულ პრობლემასთან დაკავშირებული დასკვნების მთავარი არგუმენტი, მთლიან ნაშრომზე დაყრდნობით, ჩატარებული კვლევის, შედარებითი ანალიზისა და მასალების შეჯერების შედეგად არის ის, რომ 2010 წლის დეკემბერში თუნისში დაწყებული და შემდგომ თითქმის ყველა არაბულ ქვეყანაში გავრცელებული „არაბული გაზაფხულის“ სახელით ცნობილი საპროტესტო აქციები და რევოლუციური პროცესები იყო არა ისლამისტური ძალების „გამოღვიძება“ ან დემოკრატიული პროცესებისაკენ მიმართული ბიძგი, არამედ გარიგებები ისლამისტურ და სეკულარულ პოლიტიკურ ძალებს შორის თუნისის მაგალითზე, სამხედროების კომბინაცია ეგვიპტეში, რეჟიმის მანიპულაციები და რეგიონალური აქტორების ინტერესთა კონფლიქტის შედეგები სირიაში. დამუშავებული ფაქტოლოგიური მასალები და მათ საფუძველზე ჩატარებული კვლევის შედეგები იძლევა იმ დასკვნის საშუალებას, რომ რიგ შესაბამის ფაქტოლოგიურ წყაროებში გავრცელებულ მოსაზრებებს, რომ თუნისსა და ეგვიპტეში რეჟიმების დამხობის შემდეგ თითქოს ადგილობრივი მოსახლეობა საკუთარი პრობლემების გადაჭრის ერთადერთ გზას ისლამისტურ ძალებში ხედავდა, არ გააჩნია მყარი საფუძველი და პოლიტიკური ისლამის მიმდევარი ძალები ამ ქვეყნებში ძველი რეჟიმებისთვის პოლიტიკურ სარბიელზე დარჩენის მაშველ რგოლს წარმოადგენდნენ – თუნისში ნებით და ეგვიპტეში კი უნებლიედ. სტატიაში ასევე ხაზგასმულია ის გარემოებაც, რომ სირიის შემთხვევაში ისლამისტი ექსტრემისტების გააქტიურება მმართველი რეჟიმის მანიპულაციის შედეგი იყო, ვინაიდან სწორედ ამ ძალებთან ბრძოლის შედეგად მოახერხა რეჟიმმა ქვეყნის მმართველ უალტერნატივო ძალად დარჩენა და სწორედ ეს იყო აღნიშნულ სახელმწიფოში ისლამისტური ექსტრემიზმის გაღვივების ერთ-ერთი უმთავრესი მიზეზი და არა გარკვეულ წყაროებსა და მასალებში გავრცელებული გარკვეული მოსაზრებები სუნიტურ-შიიტური ძალების დაპირისპირების შესახებ.

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