

Article

From *Fitnah* to *Thaura*: The Metamorphosis of the Arab-Muslim Protest Movements

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Abstract: Since 2011, the Arab world has entered a period of political turbulence accompanied by widespread growth of protest activity. The events that were metaphorically called the “Arab Spring” referring to the “Spring of Nations” of 1848, affected virtually all countries of the Middle East and North Africa. In Libya, Syria, and Yemen, antigovernment demonstrations led to almost complete destruction of statehood raising the question of the existence of these political entities in their former borders. Egypt and Tunisia ended up with a change in the ruling regimes that repeated many times. The ruling elites of other Arab countries, having experienced the wrath of the Arab streets to varying degrees, managed to stay in power. The “Arab Spring” events should be more adequately viewed in the framework of “fitnah”, a form of protest traditional in the Arab-Muslim political culture. Indeed, since the emergence of Islam, fitnah was one of the most common forms of protest activity in the Middle East. However, in the last two centuries, it was replaced by “thaura” or the “revolution,” much more common in the European mentality. While the term “fitnah” has mainly negative connotations, “thaura” has been praised in every possible way and even became the basis for commemorative practices. This paper makes an attempt to compare these two forms of protest in the Muslim world.

Keywords: fitnah; Muslim law; Western philosophy; protests; revolution; right to revolt

1. “Protectors” against “Reformers”

First of all, we should consider the question of how the events of the “Arab Spring” were interpreted by Islamic theologians. It should be emphasized that among the experts in the field of Islamic law, there was no consensus on this issue, which led to their split into two camps, and each of them assessed protest actions differently in the light of the Sha’ria. As Syukiyainen points out, the choice among various benchmarks largely depends on the nature of the relationship of individual Muslim figures or centers of legal thought with power (Syukiyainen 2013). It is clear that the official legal structures most often argue against actions aimed at changing power by force. Opposition activists, that is, people who were ready to express their protest in the streets, in contrast to these structures, offered arguments in favor of free implementation of the citizens’ right to protest. Given that Islam does not give a direct and unequivocal answer to the question of how to treat the attempts of the masses to oppose an unwanted ruler, each postulate could be supported by an appropriate set of Sha’ria arguments.

The position of the “protectors,” who generally denied the idea of protest as a form of struggle against authorities and in whose ranks included most Muslim experts, proceeds from the principle of “sadd al-dharai” that dictates “the obstruction of the paths leading to what is forbidden by the Sha’ria” (Syukiyainen 2013; Zelenev 2016). In other words, street demonstrations in themselves may not contain any signs of an offense, but are potentially capable of leading to it. So, during the

events of the beginning of 2011 in Egypt, many people spoke out against protests considering them an encroachment on their rights. These included, for example, those employed in the tourism sector or owners of cafes and shops in Tahrir Square and neighboring streets that suffered material damage due to the implementation of the right to freedom of processions and demonstrations by opposition-minded people. In a concentrated form, their position was formulated by the prominent theologian Saleh al-Fawzan: “No country has anything good from revolutions that only shed blood, destroy houses and property and encroach on dignity; They are unacceptable” (Al-Vatan 2012).

The spiritual leaders of the Sultanate of Oman, in particular, support a less radical position, according to which “mass rallies and processions can have objective reasons for their cause, but they cannot be solved in the street, the Sha’ria does not allow it”. This conclusion is based on the fact that in the Arab world, as a rule, all street protests, even when inspired by the best intentions, lead to victims, and this is unacceptable from the point of view of Islam. In support of their rightfulness, conservative theologians refer to the Prophet Muhammad: “Do not become unfaithful after me, who cut each other’s heads” (Al-Buhari 2003, p. 121). Thus, it can be seen that the murder of the faithful Muslims is seen as an unacceptable act. Another important aspect on which the Muslim “protectors” focus is the need to maintain the unity of the ummah (the Muslim community), which was being questioned during anti-government demonstrations. In this case, the words of the Qur’an are taken as the basis: “And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided. And remember the favor of Allah upon you—when you were enemies and He brought your hearts together and you became, by His favor, brothers. And you were on the edge of a pit of the Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus does Allah make clear to you His verses that you may be guided” (Khalifa 1992).

However, there is also a Muslim minority that does not share such a categorical view of street protests, while providing no less serious arguments. This minority includes the International Union of Muslim Scholars, led by the prominent theologian Yusuf al-Qaradawi. As a main argument, he puts forward an idea that mass protests should be attributed to the civil sphere rather than religious, which means that the principle of “the presumption of permission” is applied to them: what is not forbidden is allowed. Syukiyainen notes in this connection that “the cult rule is not established except by the injunction of Allah, and secular affairs are not rejected except by the prohibition of Allah” (Syukiyainen 2013). From this it follows that it would be wrong to consider protest actions as a “bida” (an unacceptable innovation), since the term refers only to those innovations that violate the imperative norms of the Sha’ria. Consequently, marches and demonstrations can be put on a par with such new phenomena for the Muslim world as elections, constitutions, the Internet, etc.; that is, with a range of things that relate purely to the worldly life of a person.

Another Sha’ria rule adopted by supporters of protests, is formulated as follows: “Means are valued in the same way as goals.” In other words, if the goal of mass demonstrations is to satisfy legitimate demands, they are completely permissible. Therefore, from a tolerant attitude toward demonstrations, it is enough that they do not develop into riots and do not cause damage to other people. There is, however, the question of whether it is possible to hold a protest rally without touching upon the interests of a third party, because those who are dissatisfied with the inconvenience could always be found in Cairo, Sana’a, etc. However, supporters of demonstrations specify that the main thing in such cases is that the harm does not exceed the scope of the pursued benefit. They find confirmation of their rightness in the Muslim property right, which allows making “harm to the owner if the inviolability of his rights threatens more serious damage” (Syukiyainen 2004). According to the principles that follow from here, “it is necessary to bear the causing of private harm for the sake of preventing the common harm” and “choose the lesser of two evils” (Al-Askani 1934).

Summarizing the discussion on the legitimacy of mass protests from the point of view of Muslim law, al-Karadawi comes to a conclusion that is surprising for the Arab-Muslim region, which reads that “the realization of freedom goes ahead of the implementation of the Shar’ia” (Al-Nisef 2011).

2. Returning to the Concept of Fitnah

The discussion between “protectors” and “reformers” is interesting because it again actualizes the concept of fitnah that has rarely been used by Arab politicians since the end of the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth centuries. Being the most widespread form of political protest in the Islamic tradition from the moment of the birth of Islam until the middle of the nineteenth century, fitnah, unlike thaura, has had a pronounced elitist nature and a predominantly religious shade, which made it possible to speak of it as an undesirable phenomenon that should be resorted to only in the most urgent cases. It is noteworthy that the unambiguously positive attitude to the revolution (thaura) that prevailed throughout the twentieth century as to a “progressive” step has been replaced today with a more cautious assessment of anti-government demonstrations. It is interesting that at the heart of the very discussion of the admissibility of protests there was the question of whether they are a religious innovation or represent secular borrowing. In the Arab political culture, the term “fitnah,” in addition to the traditional religious sense, has now been enriched by previously alien political content. The interpretation of the “Arab Spring” as a typical “fitnah” proposed by Muslim theologians can be considered as a new milestone in the development of the political and legal thought of the Middle East.

The fact is that, for many centuries in the Arab world, fitnah remained the only accessible form of protest and opposition. The very word “fitnah” comes from the verbal form “fa-ta-na,” which has a number of meanings: to seduce, enchant, captivate, and so on. This term is found about 30 times in the Qur’an and it is always used with a negative connotation: thus, fitnah is declared a greater sin than murder (Khalifa 1992). In many respects, this is due to the fact that any fitnah a priori is considered a deviation from the “right way” defined in the Qur’an: “Fight with them until there is no more oppression and confusion¹” (Khalifa 1992).

As Zelenev notes, “fitnah as a term and as a phenomenon existed before Islam. In the Qur’an, it is mentioned as a highly undesirable phenomenon, but generally known and widespread” (Zelenev 2015). The word “temptation” is also used in the Christian tradition with the same negative connotation: “And whoever will seduce one of these little ones who believe in Me, it would be better if they hanged a millstone around his neck and drown him in the depths of the sea” (*The Holy Bible, King James Version* [1999] 2000). “There is woe to the world from temptations, for it is necessary to come to temptations; But there is woe to that man through whom the temptation comes” (*The Holy Bible, King James Version* [1999] 2000). One of the most important forms of temptation, which faced different historical and cultural and religious communities, was the temptation of social unrest.

In the historical literature, the term “fitnah” is widely used to describe the events that took place during the time of the righteous caliphs, as well as the dynasties of the Umayyads and Abbasids. Thus, one of the most authoritative historians of the first centuries of Islam, Muhammad al-Tabari, designated the events of the Apostasy of 632–633, the protests of Arab tribes against the first righteous Caliph Abu Bakr, as “fitnah” (Al-Tabari 1997). The events of 656–661, when in the course of the conflict between the fourth righteous Caliph Ali and his deputy in Damascus, Muawiya ibn Abu Sufyan, a conflict occurred that led to the emergence of the movement of Kharijites (“schismatics”) and subsequently to an internal split into Sunnis and Shiites, are as a rule considered as a second fitnah (Bol’shakov 2000). Fitnah was spoken of for a third time in 680, when, after the death of Mu’awiyah, four Omeyad Caliphs were replaced in five years, three of whom fell victims to conspiracies (Fil’shtinskiy 2005). Finally, in Arab historiography, it was customary to name the events of the so-called “Abbasid revolution” of 750 as fitnah, as a result of which the Abbasid dynasty was established in power. The struggle for power that broke out between the sons of the great Harun al-Rashid al-Amin and al-Mamun in the 809–827 is also considered to be fitnah. Similar events took place repeatedly in the Arab-Muslim world in modern history; in particular, in the Ottoman Egypt of

¹ That is, fitnah.

the seventeenth century, when disliked governors were sometimes threatened with the declaration of *fitnah* (Marsot 2007; Lusignan 1783). However, while in the first centuries of Islam, the concept of “*fitnah*” was characterized by mixed religious and political content, a later tendency eroded its religious meaning until it completely disappeared.

At the same time, the concept of “*thaura*” began to enter into use, which was devoid of religious sense and was of a purely secular nature. Interestingly, a significant role was played by European influence in the formation of this concept. The term was likely first used in the beginning of the nineteenth century in the times of foreign educational missions to the Egyptian ruler Muhammad Ali. It should be noted that one of the most outstanding reformers in the history of the “country of the pyramids,” who could not read or write until he was 47 years old, had a maniacal passion for education, and the needs of reforming the army pushed him to rely on the achievements of Western civilization to make the Egyptians an educated nation. In practice, this was expressed in the sending of Egyptian citizens at the expense of the state to Europe for the sake of gaining knowledge. As a result, during the reign of Muhammad Ali, by the year 1848, 339 people had studied abroad, most of them in France and England (Chernovskaya 1979). Actually, the customs of post-revolutionary France introduced the guests to what a revolution was, and as a result, a new term appeared in the Arab political lexicon.

However, the word “*thaura*” acquired true fame after the emergence of Arab nationalism as an independent ideological trend in the early twentieth century. This process was strongly influenced by the Arab enlighteners of the second half of the nineteenth century, such as Rifa’a al-Tahtawi, who was a participant in the first educational mission of Muhammad Ali and even translated the *Marseillaise* into Arabic. In turn, the Arab enlightenment in its ideological origins went back to the European enlightenment, which explains in many respects the fact that even at the peak of anti-Western sentiments, for example, after Lev Trotsky published secret articles of the Sykes-Picot-Sazonov Treaty² in 1918, Arab nationalism never reached the rejection of all Western. On the contrary, as Truevtsev notes, “certain provisions of the Arab national idea developed in the mainstream of the heritage of the Arab enlightenment with strong emphasis on the English and French liberal-legal tradition” (Truevtsev 2003).

3. The Right to Revolt in Western Tradition

It is worth noting that during the periods of Antiquity and the Middle Ages, Western and Middle Eastern thought developed in a similar trajectory, and their main ideas were quite close. In many respects this was due to the fact that Aristotle’s ideas had spread far beyond Greece and were accepted by Arab thinkers, whose philosophy was strongly influenced by those ideas.

Aristotle was one of the first philosophers who began to study protests, uprisings and coups d’états. He believed that coups can be implemented in two ways: either through violence or by deception (Kozlovskaya 2012). In the case of the latter, according to Aristotle, the organizers of the coup deceive people into making a change of power allegedly with their consent, and then forcibly seize and usurp power. Aristotle notes that the most common reason for the riots is a sense of injustice that arises among the population as a result of restricting the access to power. But, despite everything, the philosopher recognizes that any mass rebellion is a uniquely negative event and carries a danger to the state, since as a result of such a mass riot, the so-called “rule of the people,” *ochlocracy*, which Aristotle equates to state of chaos (Aristotle 2016), is established. So, we see that his ideas are pretty close to the ideas of Arab-Muslim thinkers.

Later, Machiavelli proposed similar ideas. Referring to the theme of mass uprisings, like Aristotle he characterized them as dangerous phenomena that do not bear any positive consequences. One of the worst dangers is the possibility of the tyranny coming to power as a result of the turmoil (Machiavelli 1961).

² The secret agreements of 1916 between the governments of France, Britain, and Russia on the division of the spheres of influence in the Middle East.

Political philosophy is formed under the influence of historical events, and it is the differences in the trajectories of historical development that have caused further divergence of Middle Eastern and Western philosophy. In the Arab countries, there were no processes similar to the European Reformation, but this movement played an extremely important role in the formation of Western political philosophy, initiated a qualitatively new perception of politics and established previously non-existent views on the place and role of the people in the political life of the state. Thus, the ideas of Martin Luther, who, being a religious person, adhered to Christian ideas about the need to subordinate the supreme power and could not in any way consider social protest as a means of improving the system. But in the end, it was his ideas that became one of the reasons for the rise of popular movements and the outbreak of violence in England in the sixteenth century, at the apex of which was the movement led by Thomas Münzer and the publication in 1521 of the Prague Manifesto that contained revolutionary ideas about the need to reorganize society. Therefore, one can see that it was in the era of the Reformation that the idea of admissibility of the expression of dissatisfaction with the policy of supreme power through the mass protest was formed (Berman 2003). Yet there was neither a perception of the people as an independent political subject, nor the giving of any sacred meaning to its actions.

With the onset of the Renaissance, a radical turn in Western European philosophy came to an end. The place and role of a person in the world, society, and state had been rethought, a new view of politics and mass protest as a form of political activity had been formed. Sharp changes occurred in the perception of the masses and their role in political processes. "People" as a political subject were endowed with a certain degree of exalted characteristics and were regarded as a source of power and the basis of the sovereignty of the state. In the works of many philosophers, the people appeared as the "fighter for a just rule," and mass protest turned from an illegal and illegitimate action, as described by medieval thinkers, into a permitted one, and in some cases even into a desirable tool for regulating public policy.

It is believed that for the first time, the idea of the people's right to dissent was expressed by Jean Barbeyrac, a famous lawyer known in Geneva. He wrote that by transferring power to the sovereign, the people retain the right to return it back, especially if "the sovereign uses his power for purposes contrary to those for which it was established" (Galimova 2009). Among the first philosophers who recognized the right of the people to revolt were Spinoza and Hobbes (Spinoza 2007; Hobbes 2013). In the opinion of the former, insurrection was allowed only if the state violates the previously concluded social contract. Hobbes believed that everyone had the right to resist the state if it sought to deprive an individual of life or cause him harm. Rousseau was one of the philosophers who raised popular uprising to a higher level. Unlike his predecessors, who considered the uprising to be an extremely undesirable measure, Rousseau regarded it as the legitimate and even noble expression of the people's own will.

The right to revolt received its concentrated expression in the concepts of inspirers and ideologists of the Great French Revolution. The new Jacobin constitution approved by the Convention, which came to replace the constitution of 1791, solemnly recognized the will of the people as the source of supreme power, and proclaimed the right of the people to revolt against oppression. Thus, Jean Paul Marat associates the transition to the new state-legal order with the uprising of the masses (Neely 2008). However, unorganized rebellious actions of the masses could degenerate into a riot, always unsuccessful and easily suppressed. Therefore, there must be a brave person who will lead the disgruntled people.

As per the Western tradition, one can note the shift in the focus of understanding the nature of power from the "divine" (power is granted by God) to "public" (power appears either as a result of a social contract, or one of the functions of individuals exercising their natural rights). Thus, the argumentation of the right to dissent was transformed from a pronounced religiosity to sufficiently secular postulates. Beginning with the Enlightenment, this vividly manifested itself in the humanistic ideas of the period of the French Revolution and was firmly established as a basis for the

political rights of the people afterwards. However, in this case it is important to note that Western thought developed in the direction of strengthening individualism, and gradually shifted the focus of recognition of the right to insurrection from the masses to the rights of a particular individual, while the Arab-Muslim tradition largely focused on the collective basis of rights.

4. From Elite to Masses

Due to the reorientation from *fitnah* to *thaura*, another shift has emerged in the Muslim political and legal culture: at the beginning of the twentieth century, its representatives first started talking about the role of “masses” in the political life of a society. Despite the Qur’anic principle, according to which all people are equal before Allah, and the difference between them is only in the fear of God (Khalifa 1992), in the first centuries of Islam, a view that *umma* is divided into two categories was dominant: *hassa* (elite) and *amma* (masses). Accordingly, as expected, each of these groups needs a special kind of knowledge, which was embodied in the idea of “dual truth” borrowed from antiquity: knowledge for the masses and knowledge for the elite (Frolova 2006; Stapanyants 2001). Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, al-Razi and other Arab Peripatetics resolutely isolated their views and their way of life from the habits of “ordinary” people. In the foreword to the book “Eastern Philosophy,” Ibn Sina wrote the following: “We compiled this book not only for ourselves, but for those who are on the same level with us. As for the masses who are fond of this business (*philosophy*), we gave them much that is necessary, and even beyond their needs, in “The Book of Healing”” (Ibn Sina 2003). In articulating such views, the Arab Peripatetics relied on the well-known hadith: “The one who offers knowledge for unprepared is like one who lays a necklace of precious stones and pearls on a pig” (Frolova 2006). Frolova commented on this as follows: “*Amma* should be limited to general knowledge relating to God, creation, ideas about the earthly and other-worldly life. This knowledge should be given in the form of symbols, allegories. Divine wisdom is the quality of the elite, but this knowledge should not be divulged to everyone” (Frolova 2006).

The concept of “dual truth” was reflected in the works of the prominent Muslim thinker al-Mawardi, who laid the foundations for understanding the caliphate that remain relevant today. In view of the fact that there are very few specific regulations on the structure of power in the Qur’an and the Sunnah, the determination of the relevant legal norms and procedures for the functioning of state institutions has become the lot of Muslim jurists. Based on the few interpretations of the caliphate in Islamic legal sources, and comparing them with the political practices of the times of the Prophet Muhammad and the four righteous caliphs, al-Mawardi in his book “Norms of Power and Religious Authorities” (Al-Mawardi 2000) tried to fill this gap in Islamic political and legal thought.

In this case, we are interested in the issue of the ownership of caliphate supreme authority. The most common view among Sunnis is the idea of Allah as the supreme bearer of sovereignty. On his behalf and on the basis of his mandate, power on earth is realized by the Ummah, which was expressed in Islamic philosophy by the concept of “reflecting the sovereignty of Allah.” This sovereignty is inalienable. The sovereign rights of the Ummah are primarily expressed in its ability to elect a ruler to whom the Muslim community only entrusts the right to govern itself. In view of the fact that the procedure for the replacement of the post of the Head of State was not strictly defined either by the Qur’an or by the Prophet Muhammad, Muslim theologians mostly agreed that the post of the Caliph is due to the “*baya*” (contract) concluded between the Ummah and the applicant for the Caliph. In accordance with this contract, the ruler is personally responsible to the community for the exercising of power and has the right to demand unconditional submission, which is conditioned on his strict adherence to the Sha’ria regulations.

Here, the Sunni political and legal doctrine admits the very idea of the possibility of opposing the authorities, making two important reservations. First, only the elite (*amma*) is entitled to conclude *baya* with the ruler and to demand fulfillment of all obligations from him and control his actions, as well as the right to displace the caliph who has departed from the Sha’ria norms. Ordinary Muslims have no right to interfere in state affairs or give their assessment of the actions of the ruler. Ibn Sina proposed

the following argument of such a view: “The truth is too great for the path to it to be accessible to anyone entering it . . . It is necessary to protect the knowledge of truth from ignorant and vulgar people and those who are not endowed with fiery reason, do not possess experience and skill in philosophy, those who are prone to noisiness or beg and prophesy false philosophers and the rest of the rabble” (Ibn Sina 1980). Thus, the very opportunity to oppose the unrighteous ruler is an elitist attribute. “If the Sha’ria was considered a ‘law’ for the elite, then the opinion of the latter is ‘law’ for ordinary Muslims” (Syukiyainen 2016), Syukiyainen notes in this connection.

Second, in view of the fact that the agreement between the Ummah and the Caliph is not limited in duration and lasts so long as the latter is guided by Sha’ria, the ruler’s dismissal is possible only for religious reasons, because of accusations of apostasy and disbelief. This predetermined the religious and political nature of fitnah. Being the only form of oppositional self-expression, fitnah initially could not have a purely political content since the only legitimate option that allows overthrowing the current power lies in the religious field. Thus, during the first centuries of Islam, fitnah was not only the unique possible form of protest, but it affected only the elite. In other words, right until the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, there was complete unanimity in the Arab-Muslim world regarding the inadmissibility of overthrowing power by the masses or for purely political reasons.

The situation changed with the emergence of Arab education and the rise of the Arab national idea. Having adopted the postulates of European enlighteners, and also being inspired by the ideas of French revolutionaries, the Arab political thought left the medieval notions of a “dual truth,” thereby consolidating the right of the Arab masses to revolt against undesirable rulers. The influence of the Great French Revolution ideas and the practice of the National Convention³ in this case is particularly important, since that time has become a watershed, marking the transition from an elitist understanding of the revolution to the notion that the masses (even with some reservations) can also change the power.

In addition, the idea of Arab nationalism, at least in the Syrian-Lebanese region, was developed mainly in a non-Muslim environment, which predetermined its secular character. Thus, one of the founders of the Arab national idea Mustafa Saty al-Husri, avoiding open attacks on Islam, did a tremendous job of delimiting religion and the Ummah, leaving only the past to Islam and ascribing the present and the future to the Arabian Ummah. He argued that “Islam is not able to provide a lasting political community. It generates only a certain spiritual intimacy, and the idea of creating a state on its basis is unreal” (Tihonova 1984). All this made fitnah an increasingly less urgent form of protest, opening the way for thaura, with its support for the masses and secular semantic content.

The events of the Arab Spring renewed the reference to fitnah in the description of protest movements in the Arab countries. At the same time, Muslim religious and legal experts are currently using this idea in an updated form. The fitnah of the twenty-first century is less of a purely Qur’anic term, containing moral condemnation of certain political actions. It is no longer a local event, much less an elitist form of protest, but it becomes a universal instrument of political pressure on power where there are no other forms of communication between the ruler and the people.

In other words, in the modern world, fitnah loses its unambiguously negative connotation. The ease with which the authoritative Muslim theologians give simultaneously different definitions to the events of the Arab spring—fitna and thaura—“points to the erosion of the meaning of these concepts in contemporary political culture” (Zelenyev 2016). Therefore, as it was a century ago, Arab political and legal thought today is again on the verge of rethinking its basic guidelines.

³ The National Convention was an assembly that governed France from 20 September 1792, until 26 October 1795, following the two-year National Constituent Assembly and the one-year Legislative Assembly.

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