Almost two years after the Arab Spring, it is time to take some distance and reflect on the outcomes of the movement. Today the popular uprising in Syria has become a full-fledged civil war with more than 30,000 fatalities. Islamist political groups won elections in Tunisia and Egypt and minority and women’s rights have been put under pressure. Can we actually speak of any positive changes in the Arab World? For those interested in the Middle East and the effects of the Arab Spring, they will find an excellent read in The Battle for the Arab Spring, Revolutions, Counter-Revolutions and the Making of a New Era.

By Boris van Westering
What started as a single protest of one unique Tunisian individual, soon became a widespread revolution throughout the region. What did exactly happen, and where does the region stand now? The authors of *The Battle for the Arab Spring* Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren, combined extensive research, news articles, wikileaks, and have tapped first-hand material from their trips to the Arab region to answer these questions thoroughly. They succeed in providing the reader with a complete overview of the ‘cacophony of overlapping battles’ and provide a convincing context of the causes that unleashed the battle of the Arab Spring. Noueihed and Warren describe this battle as follows: ‘The battle for the Arab Spring is a battle for identity of a region buffeted through the past century by the rise and fall of European empires, by Cold War and by the encroachment of triumphant US superpower that aggressively pressed its interests. It is a battle for satisfying jobs, decent housing and the right of young people to grow up and build families and futures of their own. Most of all, it is a battle for dignity and justice after years of repression’.

The book can be divided into three main parts. The first section, *Roots of Rage*, provides more historical context and digs into the question of why Arab countries did not develop into more open societies? Can it be explained by the resilience of the repressive regimes? Foreign influence? Or is the society unprepared for democracy? It is not easy to pick and choose but a convincing argument can be detected in the combination of the increasing divide between the rich and the poor in combination with a very perverse form of elite corruption which seemed to be normal practice in most Arab countries. The authors describe that a combination of ‘economic hopelessness’ and ‘political powerlessness’ slowed the Arab population from claiming their dignity and calling for change, until that day in the small Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid where the young street vendor Muhammad Bouazizi set himself on fire. This act of self-emulation eventually made him the martyr and symbol of the Tunisian Jasmine Revolution and of the Arab Spring in 2011.

In the second section, Noueihed and Warren analyze the different revolutionary paths taken by Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. According to the co-authors these countries share similar patterns in their battle for the Arab Spring. Underlying factors of unemployment, corruption, and a democratic deficit led to social unrest and demonstrations, triggered by a small event. The reaction of the regime was often disproportional, employing extreme violence against the crowds. Bloody images were spread through social media and satellite television, which sparked new demonstrations. Not all revolutions were as successful as they were in Tunisia and Egypt. Foreign intervention prevented a long tribal conflict in Libya, and Syria is trapped in a military conflict with absolutely no room for a political solution. Interestingly, in the case of Bahrain where the Shia community saw an opportunity to claim more equal political rights and demonstrate peacefully, the demonstrations were crushed and Saudi Arabia intervened, restoring order by sending its military troops and securing all strategic places.

The foreign meddling of Saudi Arabia and its regional role in preventing the Arab Spring from affecting the kingdoms and emirates in the region is very well developed in the third and final section of *The Battle of the Arab Spring*. As the wealthiest country in the region and the birthplace of Islam, Saudi Arabia used its power and influence to protect other monarchies from the revolution. Noueihed and Warren write that Saudi Arabia supports ‘political forces emerging in the new-look republics that were not threatening to its own broader regional and international interests.’ The co-authors come to the conclusion that for the moment we cannot expect that the Arab Spring will affect the Arab monarchies and emirates.

Noueihed and Warren are of the opinion that Western media are wrong to conclude that the Arab Spring turned into an Islamist winter. It is true that Islamist political groups like the Muslim Brotherhood gained power during the elections in Egypt, yet the authors warn us that ‘the notion that a win for the Islamist political parties necessarily equals a loss for democracy is false in the context of the Arab Spring’. There is a lot of diversity among the Islamists parties and therefore not all fall in the same category. As such the authors are convinced that in the end voters will choose their parties not because of their religious practice but rather of their success in the economic sphere.

The challenges ahead for the newly elected leaders are huge, and it will take years or even decades before we can see real progress. They need to write new constitutions, create democratic institutions and encourage democratic practices, safeguard the rights of minority groups. For many in the region, the foremost level of success will come in their capability to create jobs and create a better future for people in cities like Sidi Bouzid. According to the co-authors, Tunisia has the most favorable conditions to a successful transition to democracy. A message to the Western countries is to respect the local dynamic, learn from its implications, and not to try to offer blueprints for democracy. Noueihed and Warren are optimistic about the future as uncertain as it may be. The people of the region have learned that they can change their world and shape its future.