

THE TURMOIL IN THE MIDDLE EAST: CHANCES AND CHALLENGES¹

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Reviewing developments in the Arab world in the last year, two things stand out – one that happened, the other that did not.

What happened was that the first time in modern Arab history, authoritarian regimes and rulers were toppled, or seriously challenged, by popular demonstrations. In a region which had witnessed numerous military coups and putsches, this time it was not a group of mutinying officers, but masses of demonstrations, which brought down dictators in Tunisia and Egypt. In Libya and Yemen the picture is more complicated, and in Syria the outcome is yet unknown: but it was popular mass mobilization, which for the first time in Arab history put an end to army-backed autocrats. If in 1989-90 it looked as if the Arab world stood out as stagnant and immobile while dictatorships collapsed like so many dominoes in Eastern Europe, Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia, this is no longer the case. No more can one talk about Arab exceptionalism.

At the same time, however, what did not happen may be as indicative as what happened. While dictators associated in different ways with military juntas which captured power under diverse slogans disappeared overnight or were seriously challenged, conservative monarchies did not experience their version of an Arab Spring. The dynastic rulers of Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states (with the exception of Bahrain) appear, until now, to be more or less firmly in the saddle, despite the fact that at least Saudi Arabia is in many respects much more oppressive than Bin Ali's or Mubarak's regimes had been. Oil money certainly helps, but this is not the case in Morocco and Jordan. It appears that these monarchies seem to enjoy a sort of traditional legitimacy, which the upstart erstwhile generals and colonels of the autocratic republics never had. Being descendants of the Prophet, as in Morocco and Jordan, or associated with the guardianship of the Holy Shrines of Mecca and Medina, bestows on those dynasties a traditional legitimacy, significantly connected with Islam. The only monarchical regime seriously challenged was the Sunni ruling family in Shia-majority Bahrain: but here the religious divide seems to have been the crucial ingredient in the uprising, which was then brutally suppressed with the military help from Sunni Saudi Arabia.

¹ Summary of presentation at the Conference *THE ARAB SPRING: Political and Strategic Aspects*, which was organized by the Center for European and International Affairs of the University of Nicosia, on March 13, 2012.

Yet for all the success epitomized by the symbol of Tahrir Square, it is evident that bringing down a dictatorship is one thing, and can be dramatically achieved in a few weeks, while the transition to a functioning and consolidated democracy is another matter. Here a lengthy process is involved, and its success (as has been exemplified in the post-communist transitions in Eastern Europe) depends on a series of conditions, such as the existence of a vibrant and autonomous civil society, imbued with traditions of pluralism, representation and tolerance: where these conditions exist – as in Poland or Czech Republic – the transition is relatively easy; where they are lacking or weak, as in Russia or Ukraine, the outcome is much more problematic.

Hence the outlook for countries like Egypt cannot be subsumed just under the exhilarating pictures from Tahrir everyone has seen on CNN or Aljazeera: masses of young, well educated, English-speaking young men and women, connected to Facebook and Twitter. The great majority of Egyptians were not on Tahrir, and they lack not only links to social networks, but also electricity or safe drinking water: democracy and free speech are not at the top of their agenda. They also respond to the authenticity represented by various Islamic groups, while ideas of democracy and civil rights seem to them western importations alien to their own values and life experience. So the tremendous victory of the Moslem Brotherhood and the Nour Party in Egypt, and Ennahda in Tunisia, should not come as a surprise. A similar scenario may unfold in Syria, if and when Assad falls. And the current difficulties in constructing a post-Ghaddafi regime in Libya and a post-Abdullah Saleh regime in Yemen also point to the difficulties these countries face in constructing a coherent democratic post-authoritarian regime. But if one would like to be realistic about Egypt, one should not exclude the possibility that at the end of the day the two strongest forces in the country – the military and the Moslem Brotherhood – will find a way of sharing power.

Finally, there may also be another dimension to the current and future changes in the region. Most international borders in the Middle East and North Africa were drawn by the imperial powers – Britain, France, Italy: some after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire after World War I (the Sykes-Picot agreements); some, as in Libya and Sudan, earlier. But in no case did these borders correspond with local popular will or ethnic or historical divides: basically, none of these countries, with the exception, of course, of Egypt, have ever been discrete political entities. Until recently, the rulers in all these countries had a common interest in not opening this Pandora's Box of borders.

This has now changed, and we see the beginning of the unraveling of these imperially-imposed frontiers. In post-Saddam Iraq, the emergence of a de facto Kurdish autonomous region in the north has put an end to the centralized Arab-controlled Iraq. With the independence of South Sudan, the first step towards a possible further division of an Arab-

dominated Sudan has been taken (Darfur!). In Libya, the transitional authorities find it extremely difficult to create a coherent political structure uniting two very different provinces, Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, which were held together only under the brutal rule of Ghaddafi: in Bengzai there are already the first stirrings of a development toward calls for autonomy, if not independence. Similarly the unity of Yemen is far from assured: the divisions between South and North, which had been until Saleh's dictatorship two different countries, are coming up again. And in a possible post-Assad Syria, the ethnic and religious fissures may equally challenge the unity of the country: in his own brutal way, Assad may be right that only his iron grip keeps the country together. And Syrian developments will undoubtedly have an impact on neighboring Lebanon.

The end of communist autocracies in the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and even Czechoslovakia brought about dramatic redrawing of borders. While nothing is pre-determined and one should be careful about future developments in such a highly volatile environment, one should not be surprised if moves toward democracy, difficult as they may be, could also bring in their wake redrawing of borders in such a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual region. Certainly much instability is still to be expected.