

## **THE ARAB SPRING AND ITS IMPACT ON NATIVE MINORITY COMMUNITIES<sup>1</sup>**

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The subject I will try to cover is hardly touched upon by anyone considering the Arab Spring, namely its impact on native minority communities. This is a talk about phobias.

Apprehensions run deep among a variety of the Arab east's native minority communities as the Arab Spring unfolds into escalating instances of violence, as in Egypt and Syria, and resurgent Islamism, as in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Kuwait, and elsewhere. Many of these fears are also shared by Muslim moderates everywhere.

The emerging and indeed overriding issue of the Arab Spring appears increasingly to be: the place of Islam in the state after the dust has settled on the confrontations between the people and the tottering repressive regimes. In no other "spring", including the 1989 upheavals in Europe, has religion presented itself as either an alternative to the existing state or the major force poised to steer the emerging state/political order. In this regard the Arab world is an exception and a negative one at that. Majority rule is a democratic dictum only when religion is set aside and civil laws prevail. For the region's minorities there is no role for religion as such, especially a domineering religion, in the running of the affairs of the state. For these communities the issue becomes an existential one; for concerned Muslim moderates it is a source of worry and a grievance suggesting there is a clear difference in the order, magnitude, and gravity of the fears.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Arab Spring will stand or fall, will succeed or fail, on the twin tests of (a) the robustness of Muslim (especially Sunni) moderates—whether or not they will own the spring, and (b) the treatment of indigenous non-Muslim as well as Muslim minority communities: Christians of various denominations between 10 and 12 million in all, Druze, Alawis, Kurds (an ethnic minority but largely Sunnis), and Jews with remnant communities in Morocco and Tunisia. If the majority's moderation fails to assert itself and if political pluralism and the freedoms and equal rights for all that it entails fails to materialize the Arab Spring will have turned into an Arab nightmare.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

The Arab Spring descended upon us suddenly and without prior warning. It was not the result of any cold war or specific setback or calamity, and it erupted in out-of-the-way Tunisia.<sup>2</sup> In this sense the Arab Spring is a pure Arab creation and the result of deep societal crises of malaise, ennui, unfulfilled aspirations, restless (and jobless and prospectlessness) youth, etc. And this same spring has presented the Islamists—hitherto driven underground through persecution or allowed visibility under crippling restrictions—with their greatest opportunity yet.

To say the central issue of the Arab Spring has evolved into that of the place of Islam in the state and in political power is not to say that this is something new. The region has seen this debate before in several permutations with Afghani and Abduh in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and again with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the ending of the Caliphate as well as with the rise of independent Arab states in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But today there is no Arab democratic compass to attract a region that is in a turbulent transition towards any coherent democratic alternative, in the same way as Western Europe served as an attractor for Eastern Europe after communism. The west is no longer viewed as the model for democratic inspiration by many in the region, especially the Islamists who eye it with suspicion as the source of peril for the nation, the *umma*.

One of the real fears of the region's minorities, especially as the violence in Syria escalates and spreads, is growing doubts about the ability of Sunni moderates—the self-styled liberals and democrats of the opposition—to seize matters into their own hands, to hold religious fanaticism and extremism in check, and to formulate the political agenda for a post-Assad Syria that would not witness revenge attacks on Alawis and Christians. The same fear is shared by Egypt's Copts with respect to the staying power of the moderate wing of the Egyptian revolution. The Azhar recently issued documents calling for respect of freedom of belief and freedom of opinion and expression. This gives some hope for moderation, but it needs to percolate to the top in the transition period. These fears of the vulnerable minorities can be summarized as "from the frying pan to the fire" syndrome since the available alternatives are either the vicious authoritarian regimes or the slippery slope towards Salafism, Takfirism, and Jihadism.

Minority fears are not hallucinations born of a fertile imagination, and they are not the result of a trap, the sectarian bogeyman set by the regime, even though such regimes do cynically exploit sectarianism for their purposes. But these regimes did not fabricate sectarianism; it exists as an independent reality throughout the region. Giving voice to these minority fears does not imply "support" by these minorities for the repressive regimes now under attack. Such accusations are unjust and untrue. Minority fears have been further bolstered by Islamist trends in

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<sup>2</sup> See Farid El Khazen in *Al-Nahar* newspaper, March 6, 2012.

the early elections in Tunisia, Egypt, and Kuwait. Admissions by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Dempsey that the Syrian opposition is infiltrated by Al-Qaeda and other Islamists and Salafis only confirm what these minorities already suspected.

Another fear harbored by these minorities is that the Islamic world, particularly the Middle East, is in the throes of a massive sectarian confrontation between Sunnis and Shiites. This could be a long, drawn-out conflict involving neighboring and even intermingled communities, as in Iraq and Syria, and also pitting entire nations against each other as with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the Emirates lined up against Iran with Bahrain and Kuwait as actual and potential flashpoints. In Lebanon the unplanned rift within the Christian community following the assassination of Rafiq Hariri in 2005 with some siding with the Sunnis and others preferring to edge closer to Hezbollah—this rift may have spared the country another round of Christian-Muslim strife, but it is indicative of the depth of Sunni-Shiite animosity region-wide and not only in Lebanon. Minorities on the whole seem far more sensitized to the toxicity coming from Saudi Arabian policies than anything comparable emanating from Iran.

Another minority fear focuses on Turkey's future role in Arab affairs given the eclipse of Kemalism and its replacement by the "Islamism-lite" of Erdogan, Gul, and Davudoglu—there is another slippery slope potentially lurking here. Turkey got the message that it is not welcome in Europe, and since Pan-Turanism has always been little more than a pipe dream, therefore facing south as a Sunni power and a counterweight to Iran with dreams of a neo-Ottoman revival has become the favorite policy orientation of Ankara.

Specific fears beset specific communities. The Alawis, an offshoot of Shiism, are caught up in the overall Sunni-Shiite conflict. They ruled Syria and Lebanon for decades with an iron fist, and they are now afraid of revenge from the Sunnis whom they subjugated and the consequent weakening of the Shiite axis extending from Qom in Iran to southern Lebanon if Assad should fall. The Druze, found mainly in Lebanon, Syria, and Israel, operate like clockwork as barometers of how the political winds are blowing in the region at any given point in time—just witness Walid Jumblatt's endless pendulum swings.

As for Christians, historically they did not participate in the creation of these repressive regimes except individually and intellectually for certain specific Greek Orthodox theoreticians of Baathism and Arabism. On the other hand, they helped to usher in modernity to the Arab region during the Arab renaissance of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and ever since. They also led in the defense of the great Arab national causes including that of Palestine. Christians therefore don't need a certificate of good behavior, a seal of approval, from anyone. Today, these same Christians of the Arab

world are basically afraid of the unknown—the absence of any Arab model for democracy: their region is historically freedom-starved, Islamism is on the rise, there is no real pluralism or tolerance for minorities, and there is no roadmap to guide this transition to democracy and no one is available to offer them any reassurance — not Muslim moderates, not the West, and not Russia although the latter has been vocal about its concern for their plight in the words and visits of Moscow Patriarch Kyril. Add to all this the fact that native Christians suffer chronic demographic shrinkage and mounting emigration: witness the battering endured by Lebanon’s Christians since 1975, the decimation of Iraq’s Christians since 2003, the continuing harassment of Egypt’s Copts, and now the fears of Syria’s Christian communities.

Since the 1930s Sunnis in both Lebanon and Syria have sporadically been calling for unity among Sunnis in both countries. Christians are not enamored by adventurism nor do they support the repressive regimes. Their aims are modest: not to have their churches and communities targeted in Iraq and Egypt; to try and retain even a token presence in the Holy Land; to enjoy equality and freedom in a pluralist political system; not to be singled out as scapegoats or revenge objects in the mayhem in Syria; and not to revisit any of Lebanon’s recent sectarian and religious horrors. It is not their specialty to address the crucial question of the place of political Islam in the running of the Arab state and the prosecution of political power. What Christians want for themselves they also want for their fellow Muslims and for the other minorities: freedom, mutual respect, and no maltreatment.

To sum up, the plight of native minority communities is important for three basic reasons:

1. In themselves, these ancient integral communities deserve attention and protection from possible Salafi repression. They often lead the region in innovation and modernity, particularly in the areas of education and the free flow of ideas. Theirs are very real fears worthy of being taken seriously because if these fears are realized, all stand to be adversely affected.
2. Their fate is a test for how much of a spring the Arab Spring really is. Their treatment will signal the degree of commitment to genuine democracy and political pluralism. They stand as a challenge to the effectiveness and durability of Sunni moderation which alone can prevent the region’s slide down the slippery slope of Salafist fanaticism.
3. If the Arab Spring is in the process of unleashing the underlying ethno-religious and tribal primordial map of the region, then the fate of these native minority communities in this heterogeneous region could point the way to possible emerging creative political solutions of a federal nature.

Of course federalism will have to come about from the bottom up, something that will necessitate the shattering of existing repressive state monoliths followed by a slow and willing re-aggregation of the various component parts to form loose federations or confederations. It behooves policymakers in the West therefore not to resign themselves to the inevitability of Islamist ascendancy instead to explore seriously viable federal alternatives for the region. True federalism does not depend on size. There is no need to think in terms of an all-encompassing United Arab States entity stretching from Morocco to Dubai to achieve federalism. The only meaningful political solution for divided, mixed, and composite societies no matter their size remains federalism since it accommodates the authentic makeup of the wider region. It needs first to be aided to establish viable beachheads in the region in parallel with vigorous educational initiatives to explain what federalism really is or is not. There lingers much confusion around the concept of federalism in Arab minds all of which need to be dispelled. Currently, federalism is being subverted by illusory triumphalism, whether Sunni or Shiite. All must realize that the only way forward for a diversified region in a globalized world is creative federalism.