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The Arab Spring in Historical Perspective

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Much has been said and written about what has commonly become known, rightly or wrongly, as the ‘Arab Spring’. After a destitute street vendor in the Tunisian countryside set himself on fire, on December 17, 2010, in an absolute gesture of desperation initiating a chain reaction of unprecedented social, political, strategic, and economic changes in the contemporary history of the Arab World, the ongoing and open-ended nature of the transformations behooves us to take a step back and assess the overall significance of this period and the impact of these dynamics on the Middle East and North Africa and their international partners.

As we engage into such early historical diagnosis — which invariably will have to be revisited in due time — two key dimensions emerge with some clarity as particularly important. First, this is arguably one of the most important phases in the contemporary period of the region, both as regards internal developments and regional ones. The process is complex and protracted and the jury is still out on the ultimate shape of these events — their successes and failures, their living up to hopes and their disappointments of dreams — but one thing is already clear: there is no way back and patterns of state-society interaction have been irremediably altered. There is, thus, no need for semantic queries which have been at times indulged about ‘the Arab Spring’ — whether these are revolts, uprisings, revolutions, or *intifadas*. What we have before us is *an event of global impact with manifold local societal dimensions*. As consequential transformations, the implications of the Arab Spring are still playing out and their shadow will be invariably long and complex.

Secondly, the transformations are not uniform but they are interconnected. From the initial mimetism that saw Tunisians, Egyptians, Bahrainis, Libyans, Yemenis, Syrians, and many more echo each other’s concerns about dignity, rights, social justice, legitimate governance, and representative democracy to the transitions currently being born which impact one another, there is an interconnectedness to the events that we must register, although with time it will be more accurate to speak of the Arab Spring in the plural and no longer in the singular. Importantly, the harvest is complex and it is pulling in many a different direction, as it usually is and does when societies are in the midst of transformation, and what we see before us is complex: more democracy, more religion, more conservatism, more globalization, more conflict, and more citizen empowerment.

Against this background, is then the Middle East and North Africa, and specifically its Arab core, at long last witnessing a democratic wave? How

widespread and lasting is this freedom surge? And what of the actual nature of the changes that this breakthrough is ushering? We must, above all else, stress the historical significance of the events. Indeed, for all the second-guessing about the uncertainty of what we can expect in the long term, it is important to indicate unambiguously how transformative these changes are in and of themselves. For what precisely has been missing in the Arab World for such a long time (close to a century since the fall of the Ottoman Empire) is a *bona fide* mutual definition of the state-society relationship.

We must then demonstrate patience. Nothing can hurt more the sensitive processes at play than unrealistic expectations that the region should do in four months or even for years what it took Latin American 40 years to do and Western Europe 400 years. We must equally register the simple yet powerful fact that, for all the conceptualizing by experts and media alike and the disparate causes of the uprisings, in the present case, it is merely *injustice*, *inequality*, and *unemployment* that drove these revolutions — more specifically, the continuing frustration of viable channels of expression. It is a plea for dignity that we witnessed, which was furthered by increased social cooperation (whether digital or tribal for that matter) and a steady widening of contestation.

Still, given the well-known nature of the sociopolitical deadlock in the region, what is arguably surprising is that it took so long for the revolutions to materialize. In 2008, Egyptian author Abdelhalim Qandil was writing of *Al Ayaam Al Akhira* (The Last Days) providing explicit and prescient warnings of a dying regime in Egypt — in that book Qandil was also forecasting that the future of Egypt will be conditioned by the military and the Islamists, making reference in a follow up work, *Al Raiss al Badil* (the Replacement President), to the scenario of a power shift to Vice-President Omar Suleiman which indeed almost came to pass). In the presence of gradual mass delegitimization of the Tunisian and Egyptian states, notably, why had there not be mobilization leading to revolution earlier? Truth be told, there had been uprisings before in all of these countries; regularly (food riots, bread riots, unemployment riots, post-electoral riots). Similarly, there also had been democratization attempts, notably in the 1990s. Yet the 1990s democratization thwarted wave was mostly institutional and government-led. Its outcome was cosmetic and neither expressed nor responded to people' aspirations.

Subsequently, the security and stability mantra combined with the post-9/11 über-terrorism atmosphere allowed for a type of neo-authoritarianism to emerge whereby the ubiquity and sacralization of the War on Terror was an

open invitation to putting democratization on the back burner and turning a blind eye on repression. In essence, the longevity of the regimes and their ability to weather previous storms had also led to the weakening of a central actor of socioeconomic development, the middle class. In that context, the systemic and systematic rise of corruption led to a feeling of unending arbitrariness. Citizens had to suffer the ills of corruption not to obtain favors, but in effect to secure basic services.

A further factor of weakening of the system (which we read about in Ibn Khaldoun's analysis of early Arab dynasties) was the increased internal infighting amongst elites, notably the new businessman classes that emerged (often in partnership with foreign partners) in several of these countries (Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya in particular, indeed in Syria). Such late entry into globalization also took place in a context of weakening of regimes now prone to elite division and clientelist infighting.

Finally, we should make mention of (i) the role of the military which, at least initially, behaved as a republican military, (ii) the regional media that beamed powerful scenes of historical change, and, of course, (iii) the social digital media which defined these e-revolutions and the youth which drove them to success. All three factors functioned as mutually-reinforcing energies.

The first phase of the Arab Spring was then, for all intents and purposes, over by the summer of 2011. Six months after this accelerated chain of events had been set in motion from the Tunisian countryside, state-society relations in the Middle East and North Africa had been profoundly reordered and political dynamics throughout the region impacted lastingly. In quick succession, solid presidencies were brought to an end in Tunisia and Egypt, and irreversible processes launched generating the same results a few months later in Libya and Yemen. Once fatalistically the domain of the populace, fear had changed sides and authoritarian states were now on the defensive actively looking for a way to avoid being the next breaking news story of regime collapse.

At the close of that initial, romantic period of the Arab Spring, a situation had materialized whereby, in spite of the spectacular and most consequential fall of long-entrenched leaders — Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak, Muammar Gaddafi, and Ali Abdallah Saleh, cumulatively in power for 125 years — uncertainty had, nonetheless, come to dominate the overall picture of the events. To wit, the initial widespread international enthusiasm was gradually replaced by skepticism, swinging from one unrealistic extreme of

overnight societal transformation to the other of negation of unprecedented change. What was lost in those hasty assessments was *the unpredictability of transitions and the complexity of the process of political liberalization*. As the revolution moment dissipated — whether successfully in Tunisia, ambiguously in Egypt, violently in Libya, or painstakingly in Yemen — the longer-term nature of the transformations began taking shape.

As these second phase dynamics were being born, the Arab Spring plot had thickened with stalled revolutions in Bahrain and Syria. Besides Morocco which pursued a different mode of change, namely political reform, the Tunisian matrix of mass uprising-regime collapse-new power configuration was losing steam and ad hoc configurations appeared allowing for increasingly lengthy regime push-back, notably in Syria. In the same way that multi-layered commonalities among the countries of the region could allow a generic, and often simplified, understanding of the variegated domestic manifestations of the revolts and uprisings, the exit configurations of the second phase might arguably take the road of some earlier regional stories. Specifically, the Arab Spring is on its way to producing two power transformations of lasting consequence: the Lebanonization of Syria and the Iraqization of Libya.

Muammar Gaddafi's seven-month resistance to the revolution initiated in his country in mid-February 2011 and his unleashing of armed force against revolutionaries initially demonstrating peacefully will come to pass as the moment the Arab Spring morphed into a sequence in which leaderships which had witnessed the downfall of Ben Ali and Mubarak with a palpable sense of political paralysis, realized that resistance was an option — that is, if one was willing to go against a historical moment and pull their society into a fall. True to his self-style autocratic rule, Gaddafi engaged in a violent and suicidal fight-to-the-finish which allied against him the vast majority of Libyans. However, the emasculation which he had long imposed on Libyan society revealed itself in the immediate aftermath of the king of kings' brutal death. In making himself the subject of every Libyan's hatred, Gaddafi had provided the revolution with a center of gravity which propelled it forward in spite of poor organization and external dependence. In exiting, he stripped it of a tangible common purpose necessary to the transition, which so far has not been replaced by a compelling project of society.

Libya has, as it were, entered a cycle akin in many ways to what Iraq has experienced since the 2003 United States invasion and the subsequent death of Saddam Hussein. The two main developments which took place in Iraq

over the past few years have similarly emerged in Libya: division and disorder. Even before the fall of Tripoli and the last act of the February 17 revolution, dissensions had chronically plagued the Libyan uprising painting the picture of a shaky national alliance led with visible difficulties by a National Transition Council whose best ally was Gaddafi's endgame. Upon losing the one element that cemented them, the various factions reverted to their atomized identities. More than the absence of common dynamic of integration, the division proved problematic in ironically perpetuating what Gaddafi had achieved over his four decades of rule, namely the prevention of state-society symbiosis.

For the foreseeable future, Libya is the theater of naked struggles for power, which in contradistinction to Tunisia or Egypt, are not expressed through political parties or structured civic movements. Instead, urban center affiliation (with at least four key hubs: Misrata, Zentan, Benghazi, Tripoli), wider regional origin (Cyrenaica, Fezzan, and Tripolitania), and tribal identity are, in addition to newfound affirmation by both Islamist militants and the country's Berber population, the main markers of Libyan political life much as the same mixture of components dominated Iraq in the mid-2000s. Similarly, insecurity has been on the rise in Libya due to the concomitant presence of large number of weapons circulating in the country, the frustrated expectations of the revolutionaries, and the absence of a strong government able to disarm the militias and bring democratic order to the country. Leadership was the problem of Libya before the Arab Spring and it remains so in the revolution's aftermath.

Much like Iraq's recent and as-of-yet unresolved experience with disorder is being replayed in Libya, Lebanon's lengthy and violent instability of the 1970s and 1980s may come to pass as the future of Syria. Misreading Gaddafi, and indeed Ali Abdallah Saleh's resistance as potential game changers instead of delaying tactics, Bashar Al Assad embarked by the summer 2011 onto a full-fledged war with large segments of Syrian society which spelled the de facto end of the Syrian Ba'athi regime he once inherited from his father. Syria is today a state whose very fabric will need to be reconstituted on the basis of a societal body whose components have been violently pitted against each other.

Making use of a better organized police state and, as heir, beholden to it in more existential ways than the other fallen autocrats who had the ultimate say in the systems they had built, Al Assad was able to resist and indeed

shift the original parameters of the uprising, without, however, meaningful prospects of long-term survival. Hence, Syria is beginning to resemble the full-scale degeneration which was the hallmark of Lebanon for so many years. Just as that country had, in the aftermath of ...Syria's 1975 intervention, lapsed into state collapse, confessional war, regional interference, and international intrigue, Syria is currently in an advanced state of transformation towards those very same characteristics. The militarization of the revolution might have been an avoidable evolution in the face of the regime's unrestrained violence, but it just as once underscored that shift into a conflictuality which is set to last and involve increasing number of sectors of that society. The Syrian crisis also simultaneously engulfed external actors (the United States, Russia, China, France, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Arab League, the United Nations, and Al Qaeda) and overflowed onto others (Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon). Above and beyond the divided society, falling regime, and transnational export of instability, the routinization of insecurity will be a far cry from the original Arab Spring promise of days of better governance.

In the final analysis, the jury is still out on the legacy of the Arab Spring. Political processes are forging ahead positively and peacefully in Tunisia and in Morocco. Egypt and Yemen still need to put their revolutions into the proper tracks of a viable transition. Yet uncertainty dominates elsewhere. As for Libya and Syria, they have for now have given indications of potentially most problematic evolutions — new stories being written but which in both case, surprisingly, echo old regional patterns.

What can the region expect next? The most important element as it exits from the romantic phase of the revolutions is that it must process the difference between revolutions and transitions. Historically, transitions are far more difficult than revolutions. They last longer. They are more complex. They can fail. Revolutions are about energy (release) and transitions about skill (acquisition).

Democratization is a process of political liberalization towards an end result, namely democracy, which by nature is fleeting and requires strong institutions. Democratization is the institutionalization of uncertainty. Revolutions end with the devolution of a social contract, an agreement, not merely tolerance, of representation. Combined with societal mutations such as those we are witnessing this process is eminently arduous. Are there pre-conditions for a proper transition? Yes and we have garnered much 'transitology' from those that took place in earlier decades in Southwestern Europe in the 1970s, in Latin America in the 1980s and in Eastern and

Central Europe in the 1990s. At a minimum those factors of success are: national unity, sustainable peace, actor commitment, demonstrated good will, political consensus, and staying the course.

Secondly, in the case at hand, both the Islamists and the military must demonstrated more pronounced commitment to the rule of the democratic game. Their respective tactical game plans are not ultimately as important as long as these plans remain true to the societal transformation towards democratic accountability and legitimate representation. To be sure, a republican army and democracy-respecting, religiously-oriented political actors are concomitant with democracy. Here too, certainly, the jury is still out. What is in fact more challenging is the weakness of political parties that have been emasculated by years of co-optation by the ruling regimes.

Overall, revolutions take a life of their own, and in each country the story will be written differently. Not all the countries will follow the same path and the distinguishing fault line will be the willingness to go or not along an unavoidable transformation. There is good news — a transition forging ahead in Tunisia, a substantial reform in Morocco, both taking place rather peacefully and hopefully with precedent-setting normality. As noted, there is worrying news — a process in Egypt that needs to institutionalize the momentum of the revolution rapidly or risk losing it, violence and volatility that must be dealt with swiftly in Libya lest they lead to strife and division. And there is a particularly complex and tragic situation in Syria which can unfortunately very well deteriorate further than it has already.

Clearly, we are merely at the end of the beginning. Any new international policy agenda will have to recognize the nature of this new reality. Abandoning an adversarial role, international partners have better play a constructive supporting role, an *accompagnement* in this difficult journey. In the final analysis, the Arab Spring is but the latest phase in the incomplete history of the postcolonial story of the Arab world. A savvy youth has ushered a national momentum to demonstrate that there is more to democratic reform than hastily convened cosmetic elections. The revolutions highlighted the universal relationship between deprivation and aspiration. They illustrated the fact that skill acquisition leads invariably to demand formulation. They demonstrated the tactical limits of authoritarianism once it is faced with its own insurmountable contradictions, unable to take the initiative beyond cabinet reshuffle, vague promises of better days, and struggling to keep pace with precisely the pace of changes within its own society. But revolutions are merely a moment of freedom. Transitions are a different issue altogether. The transitions of the post-Arab

Spring will invariably be difficult, but they will build on revolutions which have by and large succeeded in writing a new page in the region and that is a historical event to be saluted by men and women of good will all over the world.