

The Arab Spring: Restructuring of Internal and External Political Relations – Current Views of Arab Thinkers

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Peoples of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya celebrate the first anniversary of their spring and the overthrow of their former dictators. Scholars in the Arab world, as well as elsewhere, are discussing the causes and the consequences of such changes. It is difficult to judge the result of all the events in the Arab World because little time has passed since the uprisings and the process is continuous. However, so far it seems that intellectuals and politicians agree on the causes of the uprising but the agreement does not stretch to its course and outcome. In this article, the view of the Arab intellectuals regarding the restructuring of Arab relations will be discussed.

In his book, *Taxi* from 2008, Khaled Al Khamissi describes the prevailing conditions of daily life in Cairo. He narrates 58 taxi drivers' stories during his fares in the city between 2005 and 2006. These stories reflect the common views and opinions of people in Cairo. It is a parameter of the street to the ruling, president, government national party and the whole state elite. All stories reflect the deep distrust in and anger towards the regime. It seems that the rentier-state¹ as a political and social system could emerge and perpetuate only in specific countries and only for a limited period of time. In the case of Egypt, the regime was not in the position to satisfy the wide parts of the people economically. Instead, it turned to the state elite which secured itself by the state auspice and could freely remain in power and exercise corruption in all its forms. What is more amazing in the stories of Al Khamissi is the trickling down of corruption to the security and administrative state's employees. No one can escape the corruption and tyranny. Such an environment played a major role in founding a hot-bed for resources to be exhausted, social unrest and political agitation. And Egypt was not an exception among the Arab countries. The situation in the other Arab countries was even worse than the Egyptian case. Therefore, the self-immolation of the Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi was just a spark to ignite the popular uprising in a number of Arab countries.

Hafez (2009)² analyses the "culture of rent" in the Arab World and its relationship with factionalism and corruption. The deterrents of the Arab Renaissance stressed by the Centre for Arab Unity Studies became the most required elements in the Arab Spring. Hafez mentioned these elements, as follows: "democracy, social justice, balance and independent development, Arab unity and cultural renewal".

Another cause of the uprising is the question of legitimacy of the Arab World's rulers. Peoples of the Arab countries believe that the legitimacy of the most regimes is no longer valid. Mohammed Hassanein Haikal, one of the prominent Egyptian journalists of our time, likens the legitimacy of any regime to "water tanks" on the roofs of the houses. Once the water is used, new water must flow in to supply the residents of the house permanently. Hereby he states that legitimacy is limited and finite and could run out. It means that legitimacy, even by undemocratic regimes, needs to be renewed.

¹ Rentier-states are those whose governments receive at least 40% of their revenues as rent (oil, remittances of their workers abroad, tourism, leasing of national assets and alike); i.e. wealth is not generated through production.

² Contribution to the workshop by the Arab Anticorruption Organization (AACO) held in Beirut, October, 2008.

Most regimes in the Arab World depend on more than one source for their political legitimacy. It seems that the “traditional sources” are less valid than allocative ones. Legitimacy stemming from religion (Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Morocco) was traditionally accepted when the individuals or societal groups gained additional material benefits. This is why the Saudi Arabian regime distributed billions of Saudi Riyals (SAR) during the uprising and donated together with the GCC billions of US dollars for the neighboring countries like Bahrain, Jordan and Oman to protect their regimes. In the same manner, external legitimacy, either on regional or global level, became insufficient. The Syrian regime’s legitimacy was derived from ideology (for example, Ba’ath Party); the support of the Palestinian cause by rejecting the Israeli occupation of Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian territories; and hosting the leaders of the resistance organizations in Damascus. On a global level, the regimes that gain the support of the West and enjoy the silence of the global public opinion on their authoritarian and undemocratic governments are currently subject to critique and to more challenge. The leading countries in the West, such as USA, Great Britain and France, are accused of being in coalition with the Arab dictator regimes and they are to a large extent responsible for the pertaining of these regimes (Giacaman 2011:187). They tried (with Israel) to keep Mubarak in power even after the uprising of the Egyptians. The absolute silence of the West towards the other regimes in the Arab Peninsula and elsewhere lowers the authenticity of the West and delineates their double standards of dealing with Arab countries. The pretention of supporting the Arab spring is just to appear decent and to go a new way to contain the revolution.

Traboulsi (2011) underlines the demographic factor and mentioned that 60% of the Arab population is younger than 25 years old; that the majority of the people live in urban areas and the unemployed percentage of them is too high. He used the expressions “demographic time bomb”, “birth of slums” and “the disintegration of the patriarchal structure amongst young people”. All these factors are likely to create a fertile ground for radicalism and empowerment of political Islam.

To sum up, most thinkers and columnists in the Arab world’s newspapers have, at least from the outset of the uprising, shared a common ideal: The people (and not the armed forces) who were absent for many decades took the initiative of change. The failure of the ruling regimes and their self-created parties to achieve economic development and to generate democracy, transparency and equity to their societies is the main reason behind their movement. The masses considered the regimes as illegitimate ignoring all forms of legitimacy claimed by the rulers. The step-down of the rulers and the dissolving of the ruling parties were the main slogans in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Syria. In other

countries, the slogans were different and ranged from political reform and demand of constitutional monarchy as seen in the cases of Jordan, Bahrain and Morocco to end the sectarian system in Lebanon and to end the division and the Israeli occupation by the Palestinian. All these demands start with the slogan: "the people want...."

The one-party-system, the rentier-state paradigm and the alliance with the West are declared to be abolished. The Arab regime trap was also abolished to dazzle the people and even the foreign counties by polarized extremes like "national stability or chaos" or despotic regimes vs. Islamic fanatics. Suddenly the peoples of almost all Arab countries tore down the wall of fear and discovered self-empowerment.

What is amazing is the collective power of the youth. Within days, social capital that was out rooted in the societies became obvious. Young people cleaned the streets, organized the traffic and defended themselves against the police forces. Families provided the protesters with food and water. The people seemed to stand together for the first time.

Arab Spring as a disputed event

Pan-Arabs presented in political national parties and intellectuals consider the Arab Uprising just as a new "Sykes-Picot- agreement" not to divide and occupy the Arab territories as Great Britain and France did in 1916, but to share the Arab resources as NATO countries did in Libya, where 30% of Libyan oil will go to France, 20% to Britain and the rest to be divided between different countries, especially Italy. The establishment of American and British military bases in Benghazi is part of the game. Therefore, the "Libyan Revolution" is called "The NATO Revolution" by this group. The acceptance of the changes in Egypt and the tolerance of the Muslim Brotherhood by the West seem to result in an escalation of the dispute between Shi'as and Sunnis in the Arab camp. Iran has been appointed the main state to fear, and Syria, as an ally of Iran, should be weakened and politically restructured as a consequence of this alliance. Supporting this development are conservative Arab oil states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar who are providing financial aid and help confine the Arab League to secure legitimacy for such steps.

The development in Iraq is taken as proof for the pessimistic discourse of the Pan-Arab thinkers. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the signing of economic and political agreements between the government of Iraq and the USA is viewed as an example of the hypocrisy of the USA. All promises to establish a new, free and democratic Iraq are considered hollow. The government of Iraq is based on a sectarian system which divides the people of Iraq and blocks the

political development with the result that the state of Iraq was never as weak and insecure as after the invasion.

The vexed questions among the Arab intellectuals who oppose or dissipate doubt to the uprising are: How could undemocratic and authoritarian states (GCC countries) lead the democratic change in the region? Why do such states suppress the movements in Bahrain and in the eastern part of Saudi Arabia and interfere negatively in Yemen but supporting the downfall of Assad in Syria? How could Arabs trust the USA and allies after the deeds in Iraq and its unlimited support to Israel? Furthermore, the takeover of the governments in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt by Muslim political parties and the infiltration of radical Islamists to Syria and Libya is considered suspicious.

In general, intellectuals were in favor of supporting the uprising in Tunisia and in Egypt and show antilogy in the cases of Libya (due to the intervention of the NATO) and in Syria for its political position in the Levant. Syria is considered the only firm front against Israel and any external intervention would not eliminate the regime but would end its position as a front state "dawletmomana'ah". This is why some intellectuals support the regime of Syria.

The advocators of the revolutions reject the rigid political structure of the Arab states and make the regimes responsible for the backwardness of the Arab nation in all fields of life.

Arab Spring: Intra-and Inter-Arab Relations

Arab –Arab relations witnessed an enormous deterioration in the year 2011 and the beginning of 2012 exceeded that of the time Naser (Egypt) in the sixties. The unsettled situation in Egypt, the destruction of Iraq and the quasi-civil war in Syria created a vacuum in the region that many Arab countries compete to fill. The Gulf Cooperation Council states (GCC), especially Qatar and Saudi Arabia "escaped to the fore" and guided the front against Syria and the former Kaddafi regime. Both states used their relations to the Moslem Brotherhood and the Arab League and feigned the protection of human rights to build a wide front with the West against Syria and Iran, which are packed by China and Russia. Intellectuals in the Arab World were never divided and fragmented as they are nowadays. The cold war started already between Arab countries, despite the silence of the majority of them. Gulf States packed by Arab League brought the case of Syria to the Security Council of the UN and later on to the General Assembly to legitimate interference (even with military forces). The Russian and Chinese veto thwarts this scheme. The call for step down of the President Bashar El Assad and the armament of the Syrian opposition, including "The Free Syrian Army" fits in such scenario. Diplomatic relations between GCC coun-

tries and Syria has been cut. The same steps have been taken by Libya and Tunisia. The Arab World was never fragmented as it currently is.

It seems that the Arab Cold War is leading to a global one. Then Russia is leading the front against the intentions of USA and its alliance. The political support of Russia and China stands behind the Assad's oomph to go on.

The intra-state relations in the Arab countries are more complicated than the inter-relations between the states themselves. The governments of the GCC countries, for instance tried from the beginning of the uprising to redistribute the wealth by increasing the salaries of the state employees, providing (unproductive) jobs for the youth and strengthen the security forces. It is a kind of bribe to maintain the silence of the people. There is no sign of political reform; people are still deprived to participate in the process of change. There is no change in the basic rights such as freedom of speech, gathering and building of political parties. There are no free elected parliaments except in Kuwait. The Consultative Assembly (Majlis as-Shura) in the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Oman has no power. In some countries, as it is the case in the UAE, people are allowed to elect 50% of the council and the other half is appointed by the government itself.

The turn to constitutional monarchy in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Jordan and Morocco is not to be anticipated in the short term. Instead of real political reform, the mentioned states undertook some changes to their constitutions, which are described by the oppositions as insufficient, loath and not compelling.

The state's grant of the Arab monarchies is not an alternative for political reform. Therefore, the calmness in the oil-rentier-states could just be temporary status. The current situation in the other non-oil-monarchies, such as Jordan and Morocco, the situation remains tense. The GCC countries proposed in the year 2011 to join both countries, Jordan and Morocco to the GCC. Morocco responded unenthusiastically but Jordan welcomed the idea. By the first meetings between the delegations of Jordan and GCC countries, members of the Gulf States opposed the idea. Instead, the GCC countries will aid Jordan with 5 billion US\$ to be paid within 5 years. In addition, USA, EU countries and Japan hurried to grant Jordan financial support. The solidarity and reciprocal relations between the Arab monarchies remained during the uprising sound. Saudi Arabia sent part of its army to suppress the uprising Bahrain.

The development in the Arab World divided the Middle East in two main camps. The borders between the camps are still shaky. The outcome of the turmoil in Syria would strengthen the prediction of King Abdullah II of Jordan when he forewarns the making of the Shiite Crescent (Al Helal Al Shiie) that extends from Iran in the east through Iraq, Syria and Hezbollah in the west.

This is why Iran and Hezbollah are packing the Syrian regime with all means. Once the Syrian regime survived, the borders of the mentioned camps will be visible. In this case, the Israeli, or maybe the US, decision towards the Iranian nuclear program which includes the development of uranium enrichment activities will not be lagging.

Egypt as cornerstone in the Arab World's politics

The revolution in Egypt that is still in the making is currently the main event in the Arab World. It will function as catalyst change and trigger for the restructuring of the relations with the foreign countries. As it mentioned earlier, any prediction of the future of post-Mubarak era will be premature. Analyzing the main actors in the arena of Egypt could shed light on the expected development.

The Egypt military council that acts as the temporary successor of the Mubarak's regime is trying to achieve changes within the former regime. The people of the Tahrir Square with all its momentum insist on changing the regime. Both actors demonstrate their power continuously.

The first fair election in Egypt brought the Islamic Brotherhood that was derelict and prohibited to participate in any political activities during the Mubarak era to power. They won more than 70% of the parliament seats. The Islamists are used by all Arab regimes as threat to their own society and to the West. The political Islam was presented as the only alternative to dictatorship. The "new" attitude of the Islamists in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world is defensive. Islamists declare daily that they would not suppress the freedom of the people and would accept all signed agreement with the neighbors of Egypt. The West, particularly the USA seems to be ready to accept the Islamists once they recognized the peace treaty with Israel. The Islamists have to prove their solidarity to the Palestinians not merely for their national interests, but to gain the people's legitimacy. Therefore, the Islamists in Egypt are on the touchstone. It seems that the politics of Egypt, in general, is determined by the economic development. As the military council closed some of the US NGO,s offices in Cairo and arrested 14 Americans, the USA threat with the cut of the US aid to Egypt (US\$ 1.5 billion). Last week (End of February, 2012) the government of Egypt released the arrested Americans and let them back to their home country. The Islamists in the Egyptian Parliament make it clear that the US aid to Egypt is part of the Camp David Agreement. By cutting the US aid the whole treaty will be examined. Most of Arab thinkers call for balanced and equitable relations with foreign countries without hegemony.

Furthermore, the economy in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Syria is stagnating or even deteriorating. Tourism receipts in Egypt and Tunisia (16-17 % of GDP)

declined by one third in 2011 and collapsed totally in Syria. Foreign direct investors in the most non-oil export Arab countries follow the idea, “wait and see”.

Conclusion

Despite the disputed assessment of the Arab Spring, Arab people see the light at the end of the tunnel. They expect freedom democracy, prosperity and equality. The former rulers of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen left behind many problems to solve. The economy needs to be restructured by focusing on production rather than depending on foreign aid. Arab entrepreneurs met recently in Qatar to discuss investment needs and opportunities in the Arab world which could be an adequate step in the right direction. Then the mentioned countries need direct investment to elevate poverty and unemployment, particularly by the youth. The oil producing countries need to diversify their economy and secure food for their people. The GCC countries are investing in large scale agricultural projects in Egypt and Sudan (Land grabbing) which can and should encourage economic cooperation.

The Western countries have to change their attitude towards the Middle East, accept changes and respect the choice of the people in the region. The opposing of any elected party would lead to chaos, as it happened in Algeria and Gaza.

The main raised question in the Arab world is: who will be the next? Is the fall of dictators limited to just few countries?

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