



THE MIDDLE EAST

STRUGGLING FOR THE ARAB SOUL?

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He is a pharaoh without a mummy!

Ali Salem, Egyptian playwright, referring to ex-President Hosni Mubarak

15 February 2011

Tunisia started it on 17 December 2010 and Egypt consolidated it on 25 January 2011. But as the present success of those two uprisings spreads across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region - Yemen, Libya, Bahrain and perhaps elsewhere tomorrow - it is time to take our analysis one notch higher by examining what is occurring today - not yesterday - and then linking those events to another telling moment that unfolded at the UNSC in New York last week.

It is quite true that those uprisings started by and large as popular, spontaneous and almost leaderless protests by ordinary Arab citizens venting their anger and frustration against poverty, unemployment, unfair distribution of wealth and resources as well as repression, discrimination and wholesale violation of basic fundamental freedoms. Those were largely secular uprisings by men and women from different backgrounds and differing convictions and were neither dictated by the austerity of theocracy nor the precincts of ideology.

It is also interesting to ask the reasonable question "why now?" Why have the citizens of this region embarked today upon such an act of manumission after decades of voiceless submission? Is it that those on the streets today are more courageous than the older generations who were inhibited by power and remained quiescent? I am not a sociologist, or worse an inkhorn, but let me suggest my parallel contributory reasons. The first is that revolutions are not necessarily pre-planned events and it only takes a spark to produce a reaction - and the initial spark in this case was Tunisia that triggered the sluices against accumulated problems with a crippling stasis and suddenly led to an explosion. However, even this spark could have been snuffed out by the repressive tools of any state were it not for the global nature of our world today - unlike the one of yesteryears - that facilitates the younger social network generations to keep in touch with each other through their laptops, iPads, mobiles or networks. Add to this phenomenon the coverage that Al-Jazeera satellite channel provided from every single corner of any country where protests were taking place and the answer becomes somewhat more obvious.

However, this unstoppable and spreading momentum today speaks loudly not solely about economics and social justice but rather about the whole being of the Arab soul - its voice and its vision - that had waned painfully and gradually since the early 1980's. For far too many decades, Arab politics had fallen silent as Arab regimes had no clear and effective approach toward any of the key issues impacting their collective future. In fact, those few policies they did implement usually

contradicted popular feeling and did not necessarily represent the interests of their peoples. An Arab world that had been vibrant as much by its mistakes as by its successes had flat-lined and the impetus for almost any motion originated from supporters and allies abroad.

In a sense, it is the MENA leaders' collective apathy, vision-drain (let alone emigrant brain-drain) and self-centredness that seem to have finally caught up with the peoples of much of the region. So taking to the streets with such resolute stamina - peacefully in Tunisia and Egypt, but with violence in Libya, Yemen and Bahrain - is no longer a mere act of protest. It is an act of self-determination in the making. Where the USA and the EU have only seen moderation and cooperation, the Arab public has witnessed a loss of dignity and an inability to take free decisions. True independence had been traded in for Western military, financial or political security.

In our armchair analysis of events, we also should not be too easily tempted to consider the whole region as one homogeneous demographic entity. It is not, nor is its geography for that matter. However, and whilst each country has to be looked at separately, one thing most of the citizens of this region share in common is a political culture based on tribal, religious or personal allegiances (as well as an uneasy mixture of all three) rather than on Western-style political parties. In other words, the variables of those societies in the Middle East and North Africa are not identical to those in the so-called West and it is therefore imperative for us to think a bit outside the box when trying to interpret those events, follow their course or fathom their significance.

Such an outlook might also help us appreciate the subtler realities affecting this vast region. Look at Bahrain for example: in some ways, it has been a model for the region. It gives women and minorities a far greater role than its neighbours, has achieved near universal literacy for women as well as men and has introduced some genuine democratic reforms. Of the 40 members of the [admittedly powerless] Lower House of Parliament, 18 belong to an opposition party. But the problem is that Bahrain has an educated "middle class" no longer content to settle for crumbs beneath a paternalistic Arab potentate - more so since this country is inherently unstable as a predominately deprived Shi'i one (roughly 70%) ruled by a Sunni royal family. This is one patent reason why the upheavals in Bahrain are sending a tremor through other autocracies - whether in the Gulf or further afield.

But also striking are some of the similarities between those countries. While we have learnt that the main square in Manama, capital of Bahrain, is called the Pearl Roundabout, it is more interesting to point out that the 1952 Nasserite revolution in Egypt belatedly inspired the 1962 revolution in Yemen, which split Yemen in half for nearly three decades. There is even a celebrated Tahrir (Liberation) Square in the Yemeni capital of Sana'a.

If we agree with Lord Palmerston, a 19th century British prime minister, that "nations have no permanent friends or allies, they only have permanent interests", then it becomes clearer that one critical bind facing the West today is our high-profile and decades-long friendships let alone vested interests with mediaeval rulers. Bahrain, for instance, is a critical ally of the USA and is home to the American Fifth Fleet navy. Moreover, Washington entertains close relations with the ruling Khalifa family as it did with those in Tunisia and Egypt and still does with many other rulers today. So how do we choose between interests and friends on the one hand, and our support for democracy and good governance on the other? A Hobson's choice in many ways! But if I were advising PM David Cameron today, I would respectfully suggest tilting toward the second option since this strategic choice would still secure our interests and help forge new friendships albeit on a more even keel.

The Western omnipresent fears about Islamist takeovers in those hotspots demonstrate at times the limitations of our own political imagination or of our Arabist knowledge let alone the reality of the regional dominance of those movements. We should be careful to make the correct distinctions between 'Muslim', 'Islamist', 'jihadist' and 'al-Qa'eda-inspired movements' and appreciate that they are not monolithic forces but ones that often oppose each other. Whilst it is truly justifiable for us as Europeans to be cautious of some of their exclusivist and discriminatory teachings, we should also agree for instance that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Yemeni Islamist Congregation for Reform (Islah) Party cannot be qualified simply as rabid anti-Western agents.

Equally pertinently, we should perhaps also ask ourselves whether our support of autocratic regimes provides real regional stability, wards off such Islamist "takeovers" and as such reinforces our own security interests. Or whether it could well be counterproductive in that it nurtures the very 'bogeyman' we are understandably trying to keep at bay? Should we not align ourselves with the 21st-century aspirations for freedom of Arabs and help the local regimes understand that representation, not ostracism, would be the better tool of good governance and long-term interests? After all, with our support of autocracy to date, we have not eliminated Islamism, have we? Might we not achieve our goals more coherently if we were more open to their participation in public life?

Some of our policymakers and pundits have also suggested that seizing the moment to promote the Israeli-Palestinian peace process may well be the best way to placate this public outrage. Much as I agree with the truism that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains the central hub of issues affecting the region or emanating from it, I am also acutely aware that there is an element both of denial and wishful thinking in this approach. Why? Simply put, it is because Middle Eastern and North African leaders no longer steer the agenda of the conflicts in 'their' region - hence my initial point about the Arab soul, its hopes and dreams, which have been extinguished and replaced by an internal inertia and foreign surrogacy. Besides, and Turkish or Iranian "helpful efforts" notwithstanding, there is an erroneous presumption that a peace agreement acceptable to the West and to Arab leaders will be acceptable to the larger Arab public too. In truth, it is more likely that such an agreement will be seen as an unjust imposition and denounced as a betrayal of deeply-held nationalist feelings. No wonder there was such revulsion, albeit lesser analysis, over the leaked 'Palestine Papers'. They showed at first glance Palestinian and American politicians exploiting the future hopes of the local populace without referring to them.

But with this Arab inactivity and its inconsequential behaviour comes the US perennial role. In fact, it can once more be best summed up by the position of the US Administration on 18th February at the UN Security Council. Whilst all 14 members of the Security Council backed an Arab Resolution, endorsed by the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and sponsored by 130 countries, declaring that Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories were illegal and a "major obstacle to the achievement of a just, lasting and comprehensive peace", the USA - whose president had once demanded a total freeze on settlements - single-handedly vetoed down this resolution.

This US veto cast by Susan Rice was explained away by suggesting that the UN is not the appropriate forum to discuss Israeli-Palestinian issues. I suppose the Israeli Knesset (parliament) would be more appropriate? Or else why not Capitol Hill which Afif Safieh, a former Palestinian ambassador and member of the Fatah Revolutionary Council since 2009, described in his article *Awaiting the Eisenhower Moment in The Majalla* on 5th February as 'another Israeli-occupied territory'? This latest US veto speaks volumes in my opinion about the unerring failure of this Administration - not unlike

previous ones - to understand that this vote alone will have undone the 2009 oratory fireworks of President Barack Obama in Cairo and Ankara and his oft-stated assertion that he wishes to extend a hand of friendship to Muslims worldwide. From where I am standing, it appears well nigh impossible for a US Administration to have the capacity to prioritise the long-term interests of the American people and to evince a Suez moment that breaks the logjam in this intractable irenic process.

Yet, as the Christian lobbying movement Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) declared from Washington DC on 2nd February, Palestinians deserve self-determination just as Israel deserves recognition by its neighbours and both parties deserve security. Is this not a win-win solution, or is the colonialism that is being challenged by the Arab masses let alone the occupation that is perpetuating it today still inhabiting our Western minds? In fact, is this slow-motion sprint toward emancipation not being obstructed by totalitarian regimes in the region?

However, whilst the UNSC veto might appear on paper as a defeat for Palestinians, and whilst a US abstention or an outright veto were both predictable, the Palestinians should still be satisfied by the degree of support they garnered with 130 countries co-sponsoring the resolution and 14 members of the Security Council voting in its favour. In this sense, the result was not only a strong endorsement of the Palestinian position on Israeli settlements - that they are illegal and an obstacle to peace - but it stripped bare the fig-leaf that masks US-Israeli entrenched biases as much as the failure of the Quartet and its peripatetic envoy. But my question for now is more inward-looking and challenges the Palestinians to seize this opportunity, coordinate their positions and consolidate their response. Or will they prove once more the verisimilitude of Abba Eban's statement after the 1973 Geneva Peace Conference that "the Arabs never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity"?

The Roman lawyer and philosopher Cicero once stated that "ignorance is the cause of evil". So given the ferment of the Middle East and North Africa region, it is imperative we all take in fully the epic significance of this drawn-out moment. This is a popular and trans-national struggle for the dispersed Arab soul, for its lost past and also for its uncertain future. But it is also vital to acknowledge that this is largely a national and secular revolution that might well benefit Islamists within emerging political configurations and parties once - if - they agree to weave their future together.

But today, nobody can paint with certainty a picture of how the Middle East and North Africa region would look in few weeks, months or even years. In fact, few are the prophets who would predict the political landscape next week let alone next year. Where would the 'revolution' spread next - into Algeria, into the Palestinian territories of Gaza and the West Bank against a vicious occupation on the one hand and feral Palestinian autocracy in Gaza and the West Bank on the other (with Israel already putting in place contingency plans to counter such an uprising) or will Iraq become the next target? Nor can anyone accurately predict whether the Iranian regime that has countered popular uprisings with furious force and tried to neuter the likes of Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi (ironically companions of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the Iranian Revolution) will also be toppled by this momentum just as its predecessor regime of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi was in 1979 despite maintaining a facade of strength and stability.

However, what I can profess with a minimal degree of conviction is that the energy those uprisings have channelled in seven short weeks seems to have challenged decades of top-down domination and has drastically altered the topography of a heretofore stagnant region. Ordinary citizens, encouraged by the spellbinding coverage of Al-Jazeera satellite TV, have conquered fear, locked

horns with the threat of political castration, shown raw courage and decided to stretch out in order to touch their Arab Spring moment. In fact, they are doing all this no matter the perils or obstacles lurking ahead and no matter the forces - whether homebred or imported - that face, obstruct or even maim and kill them.

Again, we in the West find ourselves in a dilemma in terms of our reaction to those momentous events. Perhaps we should stand back and respect this moment of change - as we did in East Europe as well as some parts of Latin America or Africa. It is best if we do not muddy the waters further with our uninvited intrusiveness and too much unsolicited - and alas inexperienced - advice. Courageous Muslim and Christian men and women across the MENA region are struggling against so many odds to salvage their citizenship rights in their countries after having been boxed in for far too long by local autocracies and foreign oligarchies alike. If we are judicious enough in our standpoints, we might find out that we still have a big role to play in this region once the dust settles and the much harder task of state-building starts in earnest.

In the final analysis, if I were to leave readers with one overriding thought today, it will be to affirm that this ongoing popular outburst has confirmed to my mind one inescapable reality. Despite the pernicious narratives of past decades, and despite the myriad insalubrious jokes about the Middle East and North Africa, Arabs are showing that they can practise democracy after all. This is a struggle for the Arab soul. I do not know whether it will be successful nor what we will deal with in later months ... but at the very least it should not make us shudder but rather make us proud too.

Freedom is a great, great adventure, but it is not without risks. There are many unknowns.

Fathi Ben Haj Yathia, Tunisian author and former political prisoner, over the role of Islam in politics
20 February 2011

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