



THE MIDDLE EAST

The MENA Region: Where Can We Go From Here?

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James Abbott is not only a good journalist in his own right but also a colleague with whom I have recorded many pod-cast interviews over the past two years. Those interviews, some short and others not so short, focused initially on the different ecumenical, political and legal dynamics of the broader Middle East. However, over the past six months, our focus of attention shifted quite dramatically to the popular uprisings in the MENA region - starting of course with the almost fabled encounter between an anonymous street vendor and an equally anonymous woman police constable in a small village in Tunisia which morphed into nothing less than an Arab Spring across two adjacent continents.

This Arab Spring began with so much promise and offered a new sense of national identity built on the idea of citizenship. With the unstoppable power of demographics - 60% of the population across the Arab world is below the age of 30 - it was almost thrilling to witness those Arab men and women across different strata of society teem together into the streets of Tunisia and Egypt and - wait for it - use their Face-Books, Twitter feeds, smart-phones, You-Tubes and hastily-improvised local news networks in order to help depose two presidents. And before we could truly grapple with the significance of those two seminal events, the popular uprisings had already spread into Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria. Across the region, there was a renewed sense of a collective destiny echoing the headiest days of Arab nationalism in the 1950's and 1960's.

As James sought my opinion on those epic events, I often expressed both admiration and enthusiasm that the Arab streets were no longer dormant or subservient to their 'overlords' but were now actively joining the 21st century in a long leap of faith from an older and hermetically controlled 19th century of suppression, coercion and corruption. In a nutshell, the MENA subjects no longer accepted to remain mere subjects but strove to overcome decades-long top-down humiliation and re-acquire their robbed dignity and lost freedoms so as to become fully-fledged citizens of their respective states.

But James often used to ask me to project the course that those uprisings would take in the future. I always had a standard mantra-like answer: despite the formidable courage of those men and women who had demolished the walls of fear and paralysis that the regimes had inculcated into them and who now faced live bullets and baton charges with incandescent hopes and peaceful slogans, I was no prophet or soothsayer to forecast the future!

Today, this inbred caution - based perhaps on instinct, on an intuitive understanding or even observation of the political hyper-motility of the region or simply on experience that teaches me the severe limitations of pedestrian prophecy - seems an apposite response to the uncertain realities emerging from those uprisings. True, they are still continuing - spreading even in some places across the MENA - but the initial awe and shock that catapulted Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak from power has skidded into a much more erratic course. Those leaders who are so beholden to power that the very idea of reform does not really figure in their

lexicons have learnt their lessons and are now cleverly resisting these popular onslaughts with all the arrows in their quivers. The most ready tool of course is sheer force, pummelling the peoples with fear again and cowing them into submission as a preferred method for managing those uprisings. Yet, this brutal stick also goes hand-in-hand with the clever carrot that promises reform but then prevaricates and often does not deliver on them.

So where can we go from here? With an Arab Spring confronting rulers who use lethal force to preserve their powerbases, is there any sense of a collective 'we' emerging from the different revolts that could constitute a regional citizenship?

It is becoming limpid to activists, demonstrators and analysts alike that the region so far has no model that enshrines diversity and tolerance without it breaking down along more divisive identities. In other words, would the uprisings manage to congregate around an identity that helps them forge alternative ways to cope with a variety of clans, sects, ethnicities and religions? Was President Obama somewhat correct when he suggested in his recent speech that "divisions of tribe, ethnicity and religious sect were manipulated as a means of holding on to power, or taking it away from somebody else, but [that] the events of the past six months show us that strategies of repression and strategies of diversion will not work anymore"? Or would striking diversities within most of those countries stifle the Arab Spring and lead the region into those dire predictions and nightmares scripted by their own autocrats?

After all, Tunisia that led the way and represents one of the few institutional entities in the region is already getting caught up in mounting tensions and confrontations between the coastal (and largely secular political) elites and the proponents of the al-Nahda Islamist party which draws most of its support inland. Egypt is also getting mired down with increasingly ugly bouts of violence between Muslims and Christians who are not only fighting street battles now - such as the latest ones in the alleyways of the Imbaba shantytown in Cairo - but are also refusing to rally together at the symbolic Tahrir (Liberation) Square in central Cairo when only five short months ago they were intertwining crosses and crescents in a show of peoplehood against state oppression and corruption.

In the belligerent fighting fields, the situation is even more tenuous. In Yemen, for instance, President Ali Abdullah Saleh is proving to be one of the more versatile political chameleons of the region. Using intelligence, intimidation, dud promises and popular support mutatis mutandis, he is not only stalling to sign the GCC-tailored deal that calls for him to step down and would pave the way for fresh elections, he is also consolidating his powerbase in the face of a remarkable array of protestors from Aden to Sana'a and from all four corners of the country. In Libya, the Qadhafi family is relying on clan rivalries and deep regional differences to stay in power, with the extended tribes of the east and west so impermeably mistrustful of each other that I question whether the members of the Interim Transitional National Council alone would be able to model a successful revolution across the whole country that promotes the citizens' civil and political rights. In Bahrain too, although we do not get ample news coverage these days about the unrest, imprisonments or even death sentences, tensions between the Sunni ruling minority and the poorer Shi'i majority still remain volatile despite President Obama's recent verbal admonitions.

Equally explosive but far more critical in a broader sense are the blood-curdling events over the past nine weeks in Syria - a country that is at the very heartland of the Arab world, its history, politics, culture and lore. Yet, this is the same Syria whose countryside has witnessed a deadly crackdown by elite army units and raised fears of sectarian score-settling. In fact, after four decades of an iron rule by one unbending dynasty, the latest uprisings are worsening the tensions amongst the Sunni majority and the smaller Christian as well as heterodox Muslim communities belonging to the Druze, Kurdish or Alawite confessions. Sadly, an ostensibly

secular Syrian government is fear-mongering among its Alawite loyal members and using the allegiance of many Christians who by and large are more fearful of 'the devil they don't know than the one they do' in order to fan the flames of a Machiavellian divide et regna policy. There are daily reports of killings, injuries, arrests of scores of demonstrators, and all this absent any independent reporting being allowed into the country. Besides, in an effort to enhance opacity further, the regime is now seemingly seeking to disrupt protesters with a crackdown on its social media.

Unlike other rulers, whether already ousted or in power, I also believe that the young Syrian president is still viewed fondly and enjoys popularity within some sectors of the country. So I would refute the facile - emotive - argument that the whole country wants to be rid of him and that he should therefore relinquish power. Conversely though, I would equally emphasise that his violent and bloody response to those large parts of the country who do not wish to see him stay in power is both horrendous and objectionable. To counter the hopes of the country with tanks, armed units and shabiha-styled anonymous and unaccountable thugs, let alone with an insistence upon a one-party system of governance that runs the country like a grocery shop, is not only inimical with any definition of human rights but constitutes no less than a war of attrition against all Syrians. Regardless of the inner dynamics of the Assad family and their closest allies, President Bashar should decide whether he wishes to be at the avant-garde of history through a truly genuine and transparent national dialogue with the different cross-sections of Syrian society or hang on to power and be compared to a latter-day Ceausescu or Milosevic. Worse still, the president might soon discover that the real challenge to his powerbase does not come from the largely helter-skelter masses but from those intelligence services or individuals that are becoming increasingly more potent as they go quelling the demonstrators. It is a moot point that the regime might well hang on to power, and those intelligence services will then dictate to a regime that has become even more beholden to them - rather than the other way round. For now, though, the EU hopes are dashed and Brussels is amplifying its sanctions against a president it no longer believes is reform-friendly or is capable of becoming part of the larger aspirations of the people let alone of a dignity-hungry region.

If so, why are the USA and EU hesitating in upping the ante in Syria further - as in Libya? Apart from the fact that there is no real consensus on Syria as in the Libyan case, I believe it is more principally because Syria remains a keystone nation across the whole region whereby there is a belief amongst our own mandarins that an autocrat such as President Assad who has been weakened and moderated is still a safer bet than an unknown alternative with more sinister ramifications to global interests. Some pundits might disagree with this school of thought, but it is a fact that any shift in Syria would impact six-fold the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq as well as the militia-style movements of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. In fact, a quick look at Lebanon - from the incapacity to date of Premier-designate Najib Miqati to form a government to the tensions about those Syrians fleeing into northern Lebanon and then being repatriated to Syria without any judicial process - speaks volumes about the osmotic relationship between those two countries whereby the future of one is largely dependent upon the configuration of the other. However, and unless the regime learns fast to exercise restraint and enact reforms - no matter how difficult to perceive at this stage - I remain confident that a day of reckoning will come sooner or later and it might well be too late by then to salvage the situation on the ground.

Finally, in the context of those regional uprisings, it is important to recall the Israel-Palestine duopoly as one of the critical hubs of the region. Mind you, we should not to be lulled into the tempting belief that this conflict no more matters in the larger political context of the whole region and its attendant uprisings. To do so would be tantamount to reading Middle Eastern politics but misconstruing Arab and Muslim psychology. Besides, much as President Obama did not provide any roadmap toward resolving this conflict, he too admitted that the border between a future Palestine and Israel should "be based on the 1967 lines" alongside appropriate territorial land swaps. He also used the word 'contiguous' when addressing the future geography of this

new state - hence his implicit reference to the obstructionism of illegal Israeli settlements. But it is clear PM Netanyahu will not simply fold his bags and withdraw from the occupied Palestinian territories, and it is also clear that a republican-dominated US Congress will provide the Israeli prime minister with enough support let alone ample AIPAC-fed adulation. However, the essential trade-off remains unchanged and will ultimately be one of Israeli security versus Palestinian sovereignty. This is why I also strongly disagree with the Israeli argument that the 1967 borders are indefensible just as I deplore the Israeli constant refrain that it has no partner for peace. In fact, having disengaged themselves from Yasser Arafat, successive Israeli governments had the opportunity to deal with Mahmoud Abbas and his IMF-minded PM Salam Fayyad but they have consistently checkmated Palestinian efforts at self-determination or any attempt at a peaceful resolution along the lines of the ground-breaking Arab Initiative of 2002, let alone the recent parameters of President Obama or even the grassroots Israeli Peace Initiative (IPI) of 6th April advocating a two-state solution.

It is high time for Israel to admit that its 1967 borders will become defensible only when it ceases to colonise a whole people and encroach upon their lands and homes. Palestinian sovereignty begins with what Obama called "the full and phased withdrawal of Israeli security forces" - including from the Jordan River border area - and with the removal of all settlements not on land covered by mutually agreed swaps. This remains the challenge today.

So where does the MENA region go from here? Yesterday, at sunrise, the World Council of Churches celebrated World Sunday for Peace with worship services, dawn vigils, tree-planting ceremonies and social media exchanges and shared prayers for peace and reconciliation around the world. But can real peace emerge out of the uncertainties challenging this vast region today? Or was Edmund Burke correct when he observed that "very pleasing commencements have often shameful, lamentable conclusions" in his reference to the spiral of the French revolution from freedom to terror?

If James were to do another pod-cast interview with me today, I would probably elicit a smile from him by repeating that I still have not discovered the gift of prophecy. But I might also resort to pessoptimism, a word coined by the Arab Israeli communist author Emile Habiby in his *The Secret Life of Saeed*, to try and explain my developing political philosophy over the MENA region, namely that I am still encouraged by forward-thinking optimism but harbour also an educated acceptance of a basic level of pessimism. What is clear alas is that the future collective realities in those two continents can only be modelled by its indigenous peoples and that this region is not homogeneous and so our expectations simply cannot be homogeneous either. When enthusiasts draw comparisons with the revolutions of 1989 to 1991 as precedents for the MENA region, I recall that much as democracy took off in Eastern Europe and the Baltic countries, most former Soviet Republics are still either dictatorships - Uzbekistan or Belarus being two telling examples - or else authoritarian like Russia.

But with the possible exception of Egypt, Morocco or Tunisia, could one not also argue that most of the MENA countries are artificial Yugoslavia-like assemblages of ethnic, religious and tribal groups put together by colonial powers for their own interests? So whilst it is encouraging that the MENA peoples are standing up against oppression, the fear is becoming rawer that if they take the lid off the political systems, they might (un)wittingly unleash civil wars rather than civil societies.

This is why I argue that those huge struggles for dignity and freedom are vital but will take a long time. After all, history in Europe and the USA alone have taught us that revolutions are never made in one swoop but take time and cause pain. However, is it not better to go through such painful moments and grow politically rather than remain downtrodden or otiose?

Let me add a final word here about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There are already those who expect - hope even - that Palestinians too would start their third uprising (following the first successful and second disastrous Intifadas in 1987 and 2000 respectively). This possibility was reinforced by the skirmishes last week on the Golan Heights, at the Lebanese-Israeli border, in the West Bank and Gaza Strip on Nakba (Catastrophe) Day. So I would suggest that the overall changes coursing across the region should inform PM Netanyahu and his coterie of hardliners that they ought to move beyond short-term tactics that feed this self-constructed siege mentality toward a strategy for lasting peace. Palestinians, much as the peoples of most of the MENA region, are smarting from humiliation and exist almost by deprivation. They have been suffering indignity and foreign dominion not only from decades of Israeli occupation but starting from the template of their original catastrophe of 1948 that - in the words of the novelist Elias Khoury - has been an ongoing tragedy that cannot yet find closure. The formula is manifest: Israeli security can only be squared with Palestinian statehood and real sovereignty.

So my prayer today, and it is indeed a long prayer, is that we can move forward - perhaps not tomorrow or the day after, but in the long run - so that the task of reformatting the MENA region and granting its peoples their fundamental rights and basic freedoms does not turn maladroitly into a hubristic effort ... or worse into an ever-punishing Sisyphean task.

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