



MIDDLE EAST NORTH AFRICA

A Political Homo Erectus! - The Middle East North Africa

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In a recent piece I wrote on digital diplomacy and the Middle East North Africa region, I suggested that the tools being deployed today were vastly different from those used even a decade ago! It is frankly quite arduous for me at times to keep up with all those innovations and technological expectations let alone find the time to cover all fronts. After all, most people like me are not pundits or journalists who can devote their time to those diverse aspects of social media, nor are they for that matter modern-day cyber-nerds who willingly dedicate their whole lives to a virtual world!

However, I - like countless other men and women - do this because I believe that I have a message to share with others, but also because I learn from others and tap into the vast resources floating in cyberspace. However, I shall revert today to the more traditional and admittedly far more prolix form of analysis - one that overreaches 140 characters - in anticipation of the second anniversary of the MENA uprisings that started in Tunisia on 17 December 2010 in order to posit my thoughts about the somewhat irresolute and erratic compass of many of those challenges in this vast region.

Palestine:

The statehood bid at the UN General Assembly had been building up for a number of months. I recall how it was discussed with some earnestness during The Russell Tribunal on Palestine (RToP) at its Fourth International Session in New York on 6th October as it considered the failure of the UN to date in implementing the relevant resolutions that should lead to the full recognition of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people for their self-determination.

The genesis of the RToP goes back to the British philosopher Bertrand Russell who set out to investigate the legality of the United States' military interventions in Southeast Asia - namely in Vietnam and Laos. The first three sessions on Palestine were held in Barcelona (March 2010), London (November 2010) and Cape Town (November 2011) and the idea was to globalise the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in order to try and show that Israel is also acting with impunity toward Palestinians because it enjoys the support of international parties such as the United States, the United Nations and the European Union who have not been enforcing International law let alone being honest brokers in this conflict.

But the RToP was followed by another war between Israel and the Palestinian factions in Gaza that neither party won in the sense that Israel again could not muzzle the Palestinians and Gaza could not impose its agenda on Israel either. However, this outcome led to a hudna or truce that will now last for a while till both parties get ready for the next battle.

In the light of these developments, Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, managed with uncharacteristic tenacity and despite gargantuan pressures to win his statehood bid at the UN General Assembly with a respectable 138 nation-states voting in favour, 9 against, 41 abstentions and 5 countries lost from the global map. This result was huge on symbolism albeit rather sparse on practicality. However, it now enabled the new-born Palestinian state to become member of 15 organisations such as the WHO, FAO, ICJ and ICC. Of those, the most consequential for Palestinians is clearly the possibility of joining the Treaty of Rome and having

the option to take Israel to the International Criminal Court for what they would deem as its crimes against humanity. In fact, as far back as 7 August 2012, a group of eminent international law scholars had already written a letter to Ambassador Tina Intelmann, President of the Assembly of States Parties to the Rome Statute in New York, urging her to place the question of the Statehood of Palestine, for the purposes of Article 12(3) of the Rome Statute, on the agenda of its forthcoming meeting.

However, as Robert Malley, the Middle East programme director at the International Crisis Group suggested quite astutely, this move for statehood was more of a desperate bid for political legitimacy rather than a threat to Israel or to the prospects for a future peace agreement. In fact, a lawyer colleague of mine from Nazareth commented wryly in her shrewd text message after the vote that Falastin dawle men doon watan (Palestine is a state without a homeland).

However, despite the symbolic nature of a successful vote, Israel and the USA expressed all manner of indignation. More so, Israel proceeded in its downward spiral of punitive efforts by defiantly digging in on its plans to build 3,000 more housing units in contested areas east of Jerusalem and in the West Bank let alone to continue planning a development in the most contentious area known as E1. For the uninitiated, the E1 plan to build 3,910 housing units, 2,192 hotel rooms and an industrial park, would physically separate Ramallah and Bethlehem in the northern and southern bounds of the West Bank from Jerusalem and deal a fatal blow to the two-state solution. Not happy to stop there, Israel also announced that it was withholding the transfer of \$100 million in tax revenues that it has collected for a financially-strapped Palestinian Authority. (Israel receives 3% of the transfers as its fee).

However, despite what I would label as petulant if not also chauvinistic and at times irredentist attitudes pursued by Israel, this statehood bid is not an entirely pyrrhic Palestinian victory either. Whilst it will clearly not produce tangible results on the ground for most Palestinians in their daily lives, it moors nonetheless the political choices squarely in front of both parties to choose between a finite two-state solution that requires an end to occupation or else the expiry of the Palestinian dream for a sovereign let alone contiguous state and the start of further violence and bloodshed within the occupied territories with its spill-over into the region and beyond. No wonder that Gershon Baskin, let alone Shlomo Ben Ami, Ehud Olmert and other Israeli organisations or individuals, supported this Palestinian move as a responsible step toward a two-state solution rather than one that weakens further any sign of hope for a future peace.

Egypt, Tunisia & Libya:

It is quite clear to me that Egypt is still undergoing the pangs of its revolution of 25 January 2011. It is also quite clear that Egypt is living an alarmingly divided demography whereby there are now two almost diametrically opposite viewpoints about the future of this country in terms of its political vision, its orientations or its strategic choices.

Having just come out of a dictatorship that had become increasingly more entrenched during its presidential 'reign' (since 'term' would not apply in situations where the presidency becomes a right rather than a responsibility), the country lurched toward an Islamic system of governance whereby the Muslim Brotherhood and the more Salafist Islamist parties were vying for control of the country and competing with each other. From the previous Mubarak era of torrid political and financial corruption arose the spectre of a shari'a-led theocracy that did not sit down well with hundreds of thousands of men and women who swept Mubarak out of the presidency or even with many other Egyptians whose slogans were centred on bread, dignity and freedom - and not necessarily on a takeover of power through religion.

However, and whilst the Islamic or Islamist parties could have striven to become inclusive politicians for the whole country and set a responsible example for the region, they sadly and hurriedly overran their ambitions. They began leading the country in a direction that restricted the rights of large sectors of Egyptians. In fact, the political shenanigans surrounding the Constituent Assembly that was meant to draft the new Constitution, the constant tussles between judges (including the High Constitutional Court responsible for judicial oversight) and the president, as well as Mohamed Mursi's presidential edict or his decision to submit the draft constitution

hurriedly to a public referendum, suggested to some Egyptians that the president was merely striving to enforce his partisan agenda. Gone were the ideals of the revolution. The draft constitution fell short of the demands of many Egyptians, and as Human Rights Watch deduced in its report, the six key concerns about this document included those principles of the protection of rights, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, military trials of civilians, women's rights and the status of international obligations.

One septic issue bedeviling Egypt is that its new president - although democratically elected - is still behaving at times as if he is the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood rather than that of the whole of Egypt. For a man who has tasted the bitterness of imprisonment, injustice and ostracism in the past, he appears at times as a new pharaoh striving to change the fabric of the country and turn it into an Islamist one that leads to a theocracy unacceptable to liberals, leftists, Copts or intellectuals. Perhaps the president and the majority members of the inactive parliament thought - like many Western pundits too for that matter - that the MENA region could only sway between corrupt dictatorships and austere theocracy.

However, Egyptians have disproved this binary formula in the huge numbers that have demonstrated in Tahrir Square, in front of Al-Ittihadiyyeh presidential residence or elsewhere country-wide against those new measures and in favour of the original ideals and fundamental freedoms of the revolution. In fact, some political leaders who fumbled their revolutionary strides rather awkwardly have now found their second wind and might be emerging as real statesmen for a country in need of such leadership. I speak for example of Dr Mohamed El-Baradei who served as Director-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and is now the head of the Constitution Party or else of the Nasserist opposition figure Hamdeen Sabbahi who is also member of the National Salvation Front.

But why did autocracy morph so quickly into theocracy? Many Egyptian and international analysts would inform me that this was part of a bigger deal whereby the USA facilitated President Mursi's ascendance to power with the quid pro quo being the safe exit of the army leadership as well as the safekeeping of Israel's security and the survival of the Camp David treaty. Otherwise, why is it that the West has remained almost apologetic towards the violence that occurred across Egypt and led to scores of men and women taking to the streets in many of the provinces of Egypt?

Coincidentally enough, the two-year-old revolution as much as the recent convulsions in Egypt bring to my mind Taxi by Khaled Al-Khamissi. A best-seller in the author's home country of Egypt, Taxi consists of fifty-eight dialogues with Cairene taxi drivers, taking the reader on a roller-coaster of emotions as bumpy and noisy as the city's potholed and chaotic streets. Described as an urban sociology, an ethnography, a classic of oral history - and a work of poetry in motion - it recounts tales of the struggle for survival and dignity among those 80,000 drivers in Greater Cairo. This book came out in Arabic in 2006, with later translations, and the people of Egypt rose up five years later in 2011, but what strikes me is that many of the grievances on the streets of Egypt in fact also matched those in this earlier book.

In the midst of the Egyptian debacle, let us not conveniently forget the country that epitomises the birthplace of the 'Arab Spring' in its first flush. After all, Tunisia heralded two years ago the changes that we are witnessing - joyfully or painfully, visibly or invisibly - across a whole region. From the first spark of the Jasmine revolution that was set off by a vegetable vendor in Sidi Bouzid and that later covered the whole of Tunis, this North African country has also been experiencing the pangs of such a new birth with the different forces competing for their vision of the future.

Tunisia today is caught between different political and religious forces tugging in different directions. To a human rights activist who became president to international applause and then proved to be something of a letdown, to Al-Nahda party that has struggled between its own Islamist credentials and its attempts at representing a whole population, Tunisia today is reeling from mass strikes called for by trade unions to the serious disempowerment of women whose rights are being purloined to various attempts at controlling academic life. The thought police have crept out of the pages of George Orwell's 1984 and are imposing their own edicts upon an uncertain revolution that continues to date.

Libya is perhaps best remembered by the NATO campaign to rid the country of a ruthless leader who was often mistaken for a buffoon, to his gruesome death at the hands of a band of vengeful rebels to the wanton murder of Ambassador J Christopher Stevens in a deliberate and clearly pre-planned attack on the US Consulate-General in Benghazi.

A country that often reminds me of an idyllic vacation spot if only it were more peaceful, Libya is different from Tunisia, Egypt or Palestine in that it has oil. Black gold alters the priorities not only of politicians but also of multi-national corporations and big businesses. This is no longer only about rights and freedoms as much as it is about money and energy. However, even if viewed from this prism, Libya can only move forward if it discovers the stability necessary for investors. But the tribal nature of Libya, whereby each region today is almost autonomous in its governance and where Benghazi and Tripoli are as different as chalk and cheese, render any efforts for cohesion more difficult. Add to this the near-total lack of any infrastructure or state institutions, with an over-abundance of gun-toting machismo, and it becomes perhaps a tad clearer as to why the levels of violence and instability have not subsided and the country is still struggling to establish law and order that alone could make Libya more peaceful and therefore more prosperous too.

Iraq:

For a country that has the second largest proven oil reserves in the world, and with all its other fertile resources, this country is still suffering from an inexorable defragmentation if not dissolution of its institutions that was highlighted by the unwise debaathification (de-institutionalisation) following the equally unwise invasion some nine years ago.

Today, Iraq is a hotchpotch of sectarian struggles. Shi'i internecine fights are aplenty. Sunni-Shi'i struggles continue unabated and those political differences often lead to the loss of lives. Kurdistan is moving forward with its own attempts at carving out an autonomous enclave for itself that would get rid of the Arab element in the south of the country. In this direction, Massoud Barzani and his KDP movement have found in Turkey a surprising bedfellow. As for the other smaller communities, they are literally caught between a rock and a hard place: some of them manage to leave the country, others displace themselves internally to safer parts, or others face the consequences of instability in the country.

However, one can also pit internal dynamics aside and opt to look at Iraq in a broader geostrategic lens. There are two dominant axes today. One axis represents an alliance between the central government of Nuri Al-Maliki in Baghdad with Iran (crudely put also as a Shi'i axis) whilst the other one is between the Kurds in northern Iraq with Turkey (crudely put also as a Sunni axis). Given the ructions in Syria, those alliances that I would view no more than tactical marriages of convenience are of a temporary nature - involving Western influence as well as vast oil revenues in the north and south.

Syria:

No country and no people have suffered more bloodletting in the past two years than Syria. What started as a series of peaceful demonstrations aspiring to get rid of a merciless web of dictators has been turned into a bloodbath with over 40,000 deaths, as well as half a million Syrians turning into refugees in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and even Iraq, let alone millions more of internally displaced men and women. The warfare in Syria has decimated many sectors of the economy and tested societal loyalties, sectarian roots, tribal allegiances or confessional backgrounds.

If I wanted to be crudely simplistic, I would suggest that the civil war in Syria is pitting the Sunni majority against the Alawite (Shi'i) community of President Bashar Al-Assad, whilst the Syrian Kurds are stealthily trying to forge an autonomy for themselves in the north-eastern regions of the country that are also geographically contiguous with the Iraqi Kurds. The smaller communities (including the Christians and Druze) are largely fearful for their safety, divided in their future hopes and unable to decide upon their loyalties and - therefore - upon their allegiances in this epic struggle.

Syria has been fragmented further by the fact that it has become a hub not only for intra-Syrian historical memories or bitter rivalries that span well over four decades, but also one of regional and global tugs-of-war that confront not only Iran against the Arab Gulf countries, but also Turkey as well as the West against Russia (and somehow) China. With a Syrian president whose determination to battle it out as yet unshakeable and an opposition that is still fuzzy about its future post-Assad options but still able to checkmate the regular army, the country is being destroyed in slow motion. The outside world is watching, commenting, expressing regret, looking at the UN, undertaking global or regional initiatives, or arming the different forces in ways that are only synchronous with its own agendas, whilst at the same time creating a jumble of competing forces that are bleeding the country dry, polarising further its communities and fomenting radical forces that were not heretofore characteristic of Syria. A very topical example is the Nusra Front, allegedly an offshoot of Al-Qa'eda in Iraq, that has become one of the most effective forces inside Syria today.

I come across many people who argue that dialogue between all the parties is the only way out of this war. But I suspect that the time for dialogue as those people would understand it - in other words with President Bashar Al-Assad sitting at the same table too - is already past its sell-by date. This became obvious again only earlier this week in Dublin and later in Geneva. The dialogue I would advocate at this stage pre-supposes an agreement whereby the president and his inner coterie of advisors would leave the country - presumably having been granted asylum as I cannot see him accepting to give himself up and I wouldn't condone any fate akin to that of Muammar Al-Qadhafi either. The coalition of opposition forces will then sit around a table with politicians from the Assad regime as well as independents under the auspices of the League of Arab States in order to chart a way forward - not only politically but also for urgent humanitarian needs.

The sheer irony of Syria is that it would not have reached this acrimonious stage had the Syrian people not been left to their own devices. But the clear inability or unwillingness of the international community to impose a solution well over six months ago is tantamount to a dereliction of duty in humanitarian and political terms. It has meant that many Syrian factions - from the regular army to some factions associated with the Free Syrian Army - have exercised brutal coercion, summary executions and the destruction of almost 30% of the country that would require Marshall-Aid-style assistance once the dust settles down. Yet, the longer that the president clings to power, the more inevitable the radicalisation of Syria becomes, the more abuses will be perpetrated by both sides and the more suffering will be sustained by Syrian men and women. It is principally the fault of the president and his closest cronies or advisors that we are in this deplorable situation today, but it is also clearly the fault of the Arab countries that have been pumping up their allies at the expense of the whole country let alone the fault of the rest of the world that has fiddled whilst Syria has been burning away.

Joint envoys such as Kofi Anan and Lakhdar Brahimi never stand a chance in finding a roadmap for this conflict so long as politics are checkmating any attempt at anchoring peace. And responsible voices such as Riad Al-Turk, Moadh Al-Khatib, Yassin Al-Haj Saleh, George Sabra or many others are being swamped if not overridden by partisan voices.

Critical Afterthoughts:

It is two years since the Arab uprisings started and we are no nearer to an end-game or to a crystalline understanding as to where those uprisings would lead us all. However, let me moot a few of my own critical afterthoughts today:

Let me first get rid of the trite afterthought by reminding my readers that the boundaries dividing many of the countries in the MENA region were artificially imposed by the British and French colonial powers - with the assent of Russia - as part of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 between the UK and France. Those lines did not take into consideration the tribal nature and different characteristics of the peoples of Asia Minor whose boundaries they were delineating and focused singularly on the zones of influence that both governments carved out for themselves. This agreement explains to some degree the reasons why there is so much trouble at the moment when disparate people with different ethnic, confessional and linguistic affinities are clumped together.

Everyone speaks of a region that had been run by corrupt and totalitarian regimes and that is now swept over

by an Islamist wave. This is true to some extent in the sense that the Muslim Brotherhood and the more Salafist parties have indeed become the leading political forces in many of the MENA countries. The assumption made by some people is that the time is for Islamists now, especially when they come into office via the ballot box. I too would endorse this assumption, but I would also point out that this time in governance will expose the Islamists' strengths as much as their weaknesses. Speaking from exile is different from exercising power, and we have already seen the reactions of men and women in Tunisia, Egypt, and even Libya or elsewhere, to what has already been perceived by some observers as an over-appropriation of power. The key question here is as follows: having come to power on the back of those uprisings, will the Islamist parties exercise open democracy or will they turn into their erstwhile nemeses, dismiss criticisms under the hackneyed mantra that 'East is East and West is West' and in so doing cloy to power. Do they import transparency or opacity with their powerbases?

No matter the vagaries ahead, or the inevitable failures and inexcusable excesses of the uprisings on this bumpy road that seeks dignity and fundamental freedoms, I refuse to join those who would argue that it is better to live in security under totalitarian authorities rather than risk exposure to chaos and uncertainty. Whilst I strongly disapprove of the abuses and discrimination exercised by any ruler, I still would not use this argument to hanker for the old regimes that treated their peoples not as citizens but at best as submissive or corruptible subjects.

I do not know how long those uprisings will last, or how many seasons they will witness before the region begins to sense the real values of dignity, freedom and equality in the eyes of the law. However, what I do perceive is that the uprisings could well impact many other countries that have as yet been untouched by the wave of uprisings unless those countries take the appropriate measures that would bring back the sense of equity and justice for everyone. However, let us also not forget the time it took for the British, French or American revolutions. So it is a tad unfair to expect the whole MENA region to be cleansed of all the accumulated detritus in two short years. We need to be patient and resilient so that history could record those moments for the future.

A word of caution though! If the uprisings are to be deemed successful, it is not enough to wish for dignity and fundamental freedoms nor is it enough to wax lyrical about democracy as an attainable goal let alone coherent concept. What matters as much is for the new faces that will gradually take over to be aware that they have to be inclusive of the rights of all colours of society - not only the liberals or Islamists - but certainly the women and minorities that are part of those societies with equal rights and responsibilities as everybody else. A society that is only patriarchal in its structures and only patrilineal in its aspirations and that ignores those rights is a failed one. After all, given that the MENA region is largely Muslim, it might well be worth for us all to recall the leading role that women played in the Prophet's life and perhaps take a leaf from his own prophetic example.

The media needs a mention here too. It is self-evident for me to suggest that the pan-Arab media - whether in terms of the written word, the Internet, or satellite television channels - have played a crucial role in keeping their audiences and viewers informed of events across the region. However, what often worries me is that those media organs have also been disseminating their own biases and prejudices. Whilst this is fine when it comes to opinions and commentaries, it is quite dangerous when it assumes the mantle of news reporting.

Last but certainly not least controversial, it is perhaps the duty of the world comity to voice a collective mea culpa in that those uprisings have come under enormous pressure from outside forces that have ostensibly shaped and moulded them in ways suitable to their own political agendas. Let us not kid ourselves: those struggling for their dignity and freedoms inside those MENA countries are politically savvy and quite sensitive to those counter-revolutionary forces, manipulative games or political ploys being played out at their expense by the global and regional powers. For instance, I have spoken with some men and women who argued that the West is not genuinely supportive of their revolutionary ideals but that all they are doing is tiring out all the parties in order to step in at a later stage and impose their own designs on the whole region and tap its resources. I often take such claims with a pinch of salt, more so given that the region runs on high-octane conspiracy theories. Moreover, I have learnt the hard way that politics by definition is not a sanitary art but rather a hall of mirrors. So whilst it is true that the peoples of the MENA region are too busy with their uprisings and with their own density of despair to tackle those fears or suspicions now, I would not wish to see a time of reckoning that could well come one day when questions are asked and the answers would boomerang against us.

Over many hundreds of millennia, the human race has evolved constantly by creating the circumstances and technologies that allowed it to adapt to new opportunities. From Homo Erectus to Homo Sapiens, we have made changes that improved our realities and helped us to stop crawling and stand up on our two feet. I do not wish to sound dramatic or surreal, but what I am hoping for today - almost on the second anniversary of the so-called Arab Spring - is that those painful uprisings and concomitant sacrifices in the Middle East North Africa will facilitate a similar dramatic shift so that the region could pull off the equivalent of a political homo erectus and proudly stand up on its two feet once more.

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