

A View from the Arab Spring, towards the Following Summer

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The phrase “Arab Spring” is a surprisingly appropriate description of current events in the Arab world. It relates not only to the awakening of anger and to the desire for change by the Arab masses, but also to the lack of understanding of the circumstances, by most European and American observers. Winter in New York, London or Berlin is often accompanied by a mild depression. It is a period when nothing blooms, very little remains green, sunshine is rare and most birds are gone. And then comes the spring, when everything begins to blossom, warmth returns, birds are chirping and life restarts. Alas, in most of the Arab world, winter is a pleasant period relative to what comes next. The winter temperature is quite comfortable and the sun often shines. When spring arrives, the heat returns, heralding an unbearable summer, without one drop of water and a harsh and dry brown-yellow land. The little that was partly green, during the winter, is gone. Indeed, “The Arab Spring” inevitably leads to a difficult and unpleasant summer. The metaphor reflects not only what it purports to describe, but also the mentality gap between its Western authors and the real situation.

Many of the demonstrators in the streets of Tunis, Cairo and Damascus were truly fed up with the corrupt dictators, lack of democracy and absence of freedom. Indeed, democracy is long overdue in the Arab world. But democracy and freedom are not trivial concepts. Democracy is not removing the Shah of Iran and replacing him by a cruel Ayatollah regime. Democracy is not removing the Russian Tsar and replacing him by Stalin and democracy is not electing Hitler. Democracy is not even just an honest election, once every four years. None of the above guarantee the rule of law, freedom of speech, free press, proper judicial system, equality for women, fair treatment of minorities, freedom of religion, equal opportunity and social mobility, to quote just a few basic ingredients of a real democracy.

Achieving any of the above in a society in which all significant organized forces are hostile to each of these concepts, and in which the majority of women are illiterate, cannot happen through street demonstrations. Successful protests in such countries are as good as pressing a “restart” button on a machine which can be controlled, at present, only by one of three previously existing forces. And, if all of these forces are hostile to every single element of democracy, the Arab Spring will indeed lead to a long and harsh summer.

There are 22 Arab states from the west end of North Africa to the Gulf. They are as diverse as the 27 member states of the European Union. Like the EU they have a dominant common religion, coming in two major flavors, and numerous variants for each flavor. Like Europe, they have substantial ethnic and religious minorities and many arbitrary national borders. But, at the same time, all or most Arab states have many things in common. Not last among these features is the total absence of democracy, by any definition that is even remotely acceptable by Western standards.

At the risk of oversimplification, we might observe that, in every Arab country, in different forms and at various levels, there are at most three major organized types of political forces: First, “Royalty” of one sort or another, supported by the military-police-intelligence complex; Second, fanatic political Islam, Sunni or Shiite; and third, tribal forces and rivalries or organized ethnic minorities. In some Arab countries, one of these three types of forces is partly missing. In others, one of the forces appears in more than one flavor (for instance, the extremist Sunni and Shiite Islamic groups in Iraq or in Lebanon).

The first and, until the current “Spring”, the dominant organized force is the military, coupled with the police, intelligence services and related bodies, supporting a ruler, who is either a King (Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan), a Sultan (Oman), an Emir (Kuwait, Qatar, UAE), or a “non-royal quasi-monarch” who is, in some sense, royalty without a crown (Assad, Ghaddafi, Mubarak). In several cases, the ruling military-backed regime is also tribal or sectarian, controlled by a well defined minority of the population (the Allawites in Syria, the Bedouins in Jordan and the Sunnis in Bahrain).

The second force is the extreme political Islam, Sunni or Shiite. The Sunni version is usually the Muslim Brothers or variations on its themes, and the Shiite version is largely inspired, if not directly guided, by Iran’s Ayatollahs, who have an active hand in much of the tumult in the Arab world. Iran and Turkey are, of course, Muslim but not Arab. However, both interfere in a variety of ways in the upheaval of the “Arab Spring”. In a full analogy to a kingdom, which has a king, a prime minister and an army, political Islam is often organized in three layers: The “military wing”, which might be a strong organized force like the revolutionary guard in Iran, or the Hizbullah in Lebanon; the “political wing”, which pretends to be the real leadership but has only limited influence; and the “spiritual leader” who is the actual dictatorial ruler, approximately equivalent to an absolute King, although he is always pretending to play the role of a religious scholar and he never stands for election.

The third force is the old tribal structure, based on family or clan loyalty and surviving in the 21st century in a way of life not unlike that of several centuries ago. Somali, Yemen and, to a large extent Libya, are countries in which such allegiances are extremely strong and tribal forces must be reckoned with. In other countries various private armies may belong to specific religious or ethnic groups, rather than to tribes. This is the case with the Druz in Lebanon and the Kurds in Iraq.

Needless to say, not every Arab country has significant versions of all of these three forces. Egypt's dominant forces are, even now, the military and the Islamists, with no other visible organized force, except for the Bedouin tribes in the Sinai. Bahrain has the Sunni Monarch and the Iranian inspired Shiite majority. Iraq has Shiite Islamists and secular Shiites, Sunnis of all flavors, Kurds of rival political factions and other smaller minorities. Saudi Arabia exhibits an intricate cooperation of Sunni Islamists, royalty and the military, and, in addition, an awakening Shiite minority, concentrated in the rich northeast oil area of the kingdom. Tunis was a secular dictatorship and Qatar is pursuing a veiled Muslim Brotherhood agenda, while serving as a main American military base. Such are some of the paradoxes and complexities of the Arab world. There are also Sunni Brothers supported by Shiite fanatics, like the Hamas, which is the Palestinian version of the Muslim Brothers, strongly supported and supplied by its Iranian sponsors.

But almost nowhere in the Arab world we can find any significant organized force, other than the above three dominant flavors: The military based Monarchy (or quasi-monarchy), the Islamic extremists and the tribal forces. In particular, there is nowhere in sight a substantial organized force pushing for real democracy. There are individuals, active in weak political parties or in street demonstrations, cheering for democracy. But, whenever one of the three major traditional forces is toppled, its place is taken by another element of this unholy trinity, or by a different version of the same type of force. No street demonstration, facebook driven enterprise or democracy seeking educated youngsters, can change this fact. A formal election day, in any such country, even if no irregularities are taking place, must inevitably lead to a victory of one of the above, usually the Islamic option. The uneducated rural masses, numerous illiterate voters and even educated, frustrated and hateful young adults are easily incited and influenced by the preachers, and the mosques are the focal points of "guided enlightenment". Since the Islamic extremists are often the only counterforce to the cruel dictator, they will usually be the winners, if one of the three dominant forces is to be replaced by another.

Even before the "Arab Spring" the Islamists won the election in Algeria, only to be undemocratically toppled by the military. Hamas won the Palestinian election in Gaza and the municipal election in the Palestinian West Bank, and Tunis, a largely secular country with a relatively liberal tradition, has now voted an Islamic party into power. It is clear that, in Egypt, the only force that can replace the military are the Muslim Brothers and any other option is a wishful unrealistic illusion. If the King of Bahrain is removed, an Iranian-inspired theocracy will replace him and, after the American departure, a similar fate is probably waiting for predominantly Shiite Iraq. The most likely replacement of Assad, if he ever ceases to butcher his own citizens, is again an extreme Islamic Sunni group ruling predominantly secular Syria.

On the other hand, in Libya and Yemen, and probably also in the Gulf States, the leading counterweight to royalty and quasi-royalty are the tribal elements. It will be interesting to see

whether Libya will now fall in the hands of fanatic Islamists or into an inter-tribal civil war. Neither alternative resembles a beautiful spring, and a third option does not seem to be in the cards. Lebanon, created by the colonial powers as a Christian enclave, is already largely in the hands of the Shiite Islamists and Qatar, an Emirate, is collaborating actively, willingly or under duress, with the Muslim Brothers everywhere, using its Al Jazeera as an instrument of propagating unrest.

Most European and American observers, those who think that spring is the beginning of a good period, observe the Islamists through the distorted lenses of Western culture. There are a few truths, which are not transparent to most of these commentators.

The first such truth, which is very clear to the extreme militant Islam, is that it is not necessary to preach for anything in order to rise into power. In most Arab countries, the only forces are the military-royal force and the extreme political Islam. All that is necessary is to incite against the regime and collect the fruits. There are two ways to eat fresh fruits from a tall tree: You may climb a ladder and pick the fruits actively, or you can lie under the tree in the storm and wait for the fruits to fall into your hands, and they will reach you because there is no one else around to enjoy them. Some of them might be rotten, but they will be yours. Even though there are very few fruit trees in the desert, this last option is the one preferred by the Islamic parties. They are always present in the street demonstrations, but they rarely take the lead. They know that an angry demonstrator is a powerful weapon against a military or dictatorial regime, and if the anger prevails, political Islam will win by default and will pick the falling fruits. The Western TV viewer sees secular youth roaming the streets in demonstrations in Cairo or Tunis, with no major visible Islamic influence, and suddenly the first post-revolution election leads to an Islamic government.

The second truth is that, once an election is declared, the real movers and shakers, namely the preachers, the Ayatollahs and the "Spiritual Leaders", will never run for office. They are allegedly selected by God, not elected by people. It is their disciples, sometimes their puppets, invariably wearing more moderate masks, who will run for office. In this way, secular voters, educated women and others are coerced to vote for what will then become a very ugly version of the religion. It is this façade that leads to amazing remarks in Washington such as "the Muslim Brothers in Egypt are not of a uniform extreme nature". But when reality is unveiled, spiritually and literally, it is quite different.

The third truth is that, once in power, the private armies of the extreme Islam are not conventional at all. They are not interested in planes or tanks. Their primary weapon is ruthless terror against civilian populations, and the leading tools are car bombs, explosive devices, suicide murders, rockets and, eventually, even hoping to acquire weapons of mass destruction. We see it in Iraq, in Somali, in the Palestinian areas, and in the Muslim, non-Arab, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The division of labor between the Iranian army and the

revolutionary guard, or between the Lebanese army and the Hizbullah, serve as models for Hamas and future Muslim Brotherhood regimes.

The fourth and final truth is that an election of an extremist Islamic regime is not a victory for democracy, even if a real majority voted for it. It is usually the first and last free election in such a country, just as in the Fascist or Communist regimes, which are sometimes elected democratically, for the first time, and perpetuate their totalitarian regime thereafter without regard to any democratic principles or human rights.

Western observers view much of the above with the naïve eyes of those who believe that removing a dictator is a guarantee for freedom, that religious leaders cannot be murderous and that a winning candidate in an election is indeed the real ruler. They also have the illusion that public declarations bear a close relationship to true plans and views. None of these are common practices in the struggle between the two leading undemocratic forces of the Arab world: The ruthless kings and dictators and the even more ruthless extreme political Islam.

The relation of Israel to the events in the Arab world is entirely asymmetric. Israel, its conflict with the Palestinians and any actions it takes, are either totally irrelevant or have a very minor impact on the events in the Arab world. But the scorching “Arab Summer” that will probably follow the “Arab Spring” may create serious problems for Israel. It is entirely clear that the protesters in Bahrain, Tunis and Yemen, and even those in Cairo and Damascus, could not care less about the Palestinians and are not spending a minute thinking about Israel. Only after the fall of Mubarak, the Egyptian Muslim Brothers tried to mobilize the masses for “a march of a million” against Israel. The attendance was meager and the great march fizzled. This was followed by a fierce attack on the Israeli Embassy, by a relatively small group, with no great visible interest of the demonstrating masses. The protests are entirely an internal affair of each Arab State, with no relation to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, and nothing that Israel might do, or avoid doing, would have the slightest effect on them. On the other hand, any power grab by the Muslim Brothers, an organization historically created with the active help of the Nazis, and committed to the annihilation not only of Israel but of the entire Jewish people, will not be good news for Israel. This topic requires a separate analysis, and we will not dwell on it here.

The American attitude of the Obama regime, during the evolving events in the Arab world, is truly amazing and baffling. One might understand and applaud an idealistic American attitude based on the principles of supporting freedom, justice and democracy everywhere. One could also understand a less honorable, but very pragmatic, American policy of supporting its friends in the Arab world, regardless of their own attitudes towards freedom and democracy. But there is no explanation, either idealistic or pragmatic, for a policy which works against dictatorial friends of America and does not oppose, in any significant way, all dictatorial foes of America.

The Obama government gave a significant boost to Hizbullah during its first months in office, by returning its ambassador to Syria in the midst of a tense and dramatic election campaign in Lebanon. The U.S. did not utter a word in support of the serious anti-government street demonstrations in non-Arab Iran. The U.S. was extremely active in removing Mubarak in Egypt, sending a shattering message to all its other Arab allies in the region. It reprimanded the pro-American King of Bahrain, host to the main American naval base in the Gulf, who was fighting against Iranian sponsored agitation of his Shiite citizens. It helped to destroy the ruthless Ghadafi, a man who only a few years earlier was elected as the chair of the United Nations Human Rights Commission and presided over its frequent condemnations of Israel, supported by many European nations and being a “born again” friend of America and the West. America did not lift a finger against the murderous Assad. It also did not utter a word when U.S. allies Turkey and Qatar started, immediately after the election of President Obama (and never earlier), to support the terrorist Hamas, which is the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brothers. The complete American departure from Iraq is a clear invitation to Iran to swallow this Shiite-dominated country, which cannot defend itself against the Ayatollahs, and the Turkish-Iranian coalition seems to be making preparations for marching into the oil rich Kurdish north of Iraq, with not one visible step taken by America or Europe to prevent such a dangerous move.

The excitement about the “first democratic election of the Arab Spring” has already led to the victory of the Islamists in secular Tunis, and that same Arab Spring is now well on its way to a hot suffocating Islamic summer. But the Western world, and its leader, President Obama, seem oblivious to the direction into which “the Arab Spring” is moving. Following the American treatment of Mubarak, and the almost absent reaction to Assad, all friends of the West in the Arab world, headed by the Saudi leaders, are now maneuvering in order to distance themselves away from the U.S. administration.

Does the Obama government not understand what is happening in the region, or do they understand and support it cheerfully? Both possibilities are mind boggling, and both endanger the entire free world. It is indeed impossible to believe either of these two hypotheses, but it is even more difficult to present a third alternative theory for the American view of the evolving events. When and if the Muslim Brothers win the first “democratic” election in Egypt, the largest Arab country, it is very likely that the “Arab Spring” will officially move into a long and dangerous dry summer, with a significant thirst, hopefully not for blood.

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