

The Arab Revolts

Ten Tentative Observations

The extraordinary developments in Tunisia and Egypt during the first six weeks of this year, and more recently in Bahrain, Libya, Yemen and elsewhere, have inaugurated a revolutionary moment in the Arab world not experienced since 1958. If sustained uprisings continue and spread, it

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has the potential to develop into an Arab 1848. Based on what we have witnessed thus far, the following observations appear relevant:

1. The Arab world is a fundamentally different beast than Eastern Europe during the late 1980s. The latter was ruled by virtually identical regimes, organized within a single collective framework whose individual members were tightly controlled by an outside, crisis-riven power increasingly unable and unwilling to sustain its domination. By contrast, Arab regimes differ markedly in structure and character, the Arab League has played no role in either political integration or socio-economic harmonization, and the United States – still the dominant power in the Middle East – attaches strategic significance to maintaining and strengthening its regional position, as well as that of Israel.

Whereas in Eastern Europe the demolition of the Berlin Wall symbolized the disintegration of not only the GDR but all regimes between the

Danube and the USSR, the ouster of Ben Ali in Tunisia did not cause Mubarak's downfall any more than change in Cairo is producing regime collapse in Libya or leading to the dissolution of the League of Arab States. More to the point, neither the Tunisian nor Egyptian regimes have yet been fundamentally transformed, and may even survive the current upheavals relatively intact. (The nature of the Libyan case is somewhat of an anomaly, with regime survival or comprehensive disintegration the only apparent options.)

2. Many if not most Arab regimes are facing similar crises, which can be summarized as increasing popular alienation and resentment fueled by neo-liberal reforms. These reforms have translated into growing socio-economic hardship and disparities as the economy and indeed the state itself is appropriated by corrupt crony capitalist cliques; brutalization by arbitrary states whose security forces have become fundamentally lawless in pursuit of their primary function of regime maintenance; leaders that gratuitously trample institutions underfoot to sustain power and bequeath it to successors of their choice – more often than not blood relatives; and craven subservience to Washington despite its regional wars and occupations, as well as increasingly visible collusion with Israel proportional to the Jewish state's growing extremism.

Even the pretense of minimal Arab consensus on core issues such as Palestine has collapsed, and collectively the Arab states not only no longer exercise influence on the world stage, but have seen their regional role diminish as well, while Israel, Turkey and Iran



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have become the only local players of note. In a nutshell, Arab regimes no longer experience crises of legitimacy, because they have lost it irrevocably. In perception as well as reality, with respect to the political system as well as socio-economic policy, reform – in the sense of gradual, controlled change initiated and

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supervised by those in power – is not an option. Meaningful change is possible only through regime transformation.

Furthermore, the contemporary Arab state in its various manifestations is incapable of self-generated transformation. This applies no less to Lebanon, whose elites have proven unwilling and unable to implement de-confessionalization as agreed in the 1989 Taif Agreement. With Iraq having demonstrated the catastrophic consequences of foreign intervention, sustained pressure by indigenous forces – perhaps only mass popular pressure – has emerged as the only viable formula.

3. Arguably, the Tunisian uprising succeeded because no one anticipated that it could. An increasingly rapacious, repressive and narrowly-based ruling clique that seems to have lost its capacity for threat recognition, proved incapable of pro-actively deploying sufficient carrots and sticks to defuse the uprising. The violence it did unleash and extravagant promises it made – as well as their timing – only added fuel to the fire of revolt. Faced with a choice between removing their leader and imminent regime collapse, Tunisia's elites and their Western sponsors hastily and unceremoniously forced Ben Ali out of the country.

4. Although Egypt's Mubarak was also initially slow to respond, he had the benefit of a significantly broader, better organized and more

deeply entrenched regime whose preservation additionally remains an American strategic priority. Given the severity of the threat to his continued rule, Mubarak played his cards reasonably enough to at least avoid a fate identical to Ben Ali.

After the initial gambit of unleashing the police and then battalions of thugs failed, Mubarak's appointment of intelligence chief Omar Suleiman to the vice presidency – vacant since Mubarak left it in 1981 – was never meant to appease the growing number of demonstrators demanding his immediate departure. Rather, Mubarak acted in order to retain the military (and Sulaiman's) loyalty. By sacrificing the succession prospects of his wolverine son Gamal to the security establishment (and by extension restraining the boy's insatiable cohorts), Mubarak *père* calculated that his generals would crush the uprising in order to consummate the deal. (He presumably intended to use the aftermath to re-insert Gamal into the equation, perhaps by scapegoating those that saved him.)

With Washington positively giddy over Sulaiman's appointment, the scenario was foiled only by the Egyptian people. Indeed, their escalatory response to Mubarak's successive maneuvers – a resounding rejection of both reform and regime legitimacy – appears to have led the generals to conclude that the scale of the bloodbath required to crush the rebellion would at the very least shatter the military's institutional coherence. No less alarmingly for them and for Washington in particular, Mubarak seemed determined to drag Sulaiman down with him if he wasn't given a satisfactory exit.

If in Tunisia the revolt's arrival in the capital set alarm bells ringing, it appears that in Egypt the spread of mass protests beyond Cairo and Alexandria played an equally significant role. As towns and cities in the Suez Canal zone, Nile Delta, Sinai, and then Upper Egypt and even the Western Desert joined the uprising, and growing numbers of workers in state industries and institutions went on strike, it became clear Mubarak had to go, and go immediately. Since

in contrast to Ben Ali he retained sufficient authority to prevent his own deportation, and therefore the ability to threaten his generals with genuine regime change, he was able to negotiate a less ignominious end in time to escape the massive crowds gathering around his palace, but apparently too late to fulfill Sulaiman's leadership ambitions. Given that

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Sulaiman and Gamal between them effectively governed Egypt in recent years, their ouster is of perhaps greater significance than Mubarak's.

5. The success of the Tunisian uprising inspired and helped spark the Egyptian revolt rather than produced the conditions for it. Indeed, there had been a steady growth of activism and unrest in Egypt for a number of years, which began to spike in the wake of the police murder of Khaled Said in Alexandria in June 2010 and then the December 31 government-organized bombing of a church in that same city. The Tunisian revolution, in other words, sprouted so easily on the banks of the Nile because it landed on fertile soil. The same can be said about protests and incipient rebellions in other Arab states in recent weeks and months. It is noteworthy that neither Tunisia nor even Egypt have – in contrast to Arab revolutionaries in the 1950s and 1960s – sought to export their experience. Rather, other Arabs have been taking the initiative to import what they perceive as a successful model for transformation.

6. If Tunisia has largely existed on the Arab periphery, Egypt forms its very heart and soul, and the success of the Egyptian uprising is therefore of regional and strategic significance – a political earthquake. Indeed, where the ouster of Ben Ali was celebrated in the region on the grounds that an Arab tyrant had been deposed, many non-Egyptian Arabs responded to the fall of Mubarak as if they had themselves been his subjects – which in a sense they were.

The impact of Egypt could already be observed the day Mubarak's rule ended. Where Arab governments largely acted to suppress celebrations of Ben Ali's removal, there were scant attempts to interfere with the popular euphoria that greeted the success of the Egyptian uprising. To the contrary, governments from Algiers to Ramallah to Sana'a rushed to demonstrate that – like Ben Ali – they "understood" the message emanating from their populations. And the message, of course, is that if Mubarak can fall then no autocrat is safe.

In the coming months and years, it can reasonably be expected that Egypt will seek to re-assert a leading role among Arab states, and whether alone or in concert with others seek to balance Israeli, Turkish and Iranian influence in the region.

7. Absent genuine regime change in Cairo, it appears unlikely that Egypt will formally renounce its peace treaty with Israel. It may however seek to restore unfettered sovereignty to Sinai by renegotiating key aspects of this agreement. More importantly, it seems inconceivable that Egypt will or can continue to play the role of regional strategic partner of Israel that was the hallmark of the Mubarak era. Rather, Egypt is likely to begin treating its relations with Israel as a bilateral matter. This in turn will place significant pressure on Israel's relations with other Arab states, as well as the framework for domination through negotiation established with the Palestinians.

8. The Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, and incipient rebellions in a number of other Arab states, suggest that a new generation has come of political age and is seizing the initiative. Organized, even disciplined, but not constituted through traditional party or movement structures, the region's protesting populations appear to be led by coalitions of networks, more often than not informal ones. This suggests

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that Arab regimes have been so successful in eradicating and marginalizing traditional opposition that their opponents today lack the kind of leaders who exercise meaningful control over a critical mass of followers, and whose removal or co-optation can therefore have a meaningful impact at ground level. Ironically, in his desperate last days the only party leaders Mubarak found to negotiate with represented little more than themselves.

9. The current rebellions in the Arab world have been overwhelmingly secular in character and participation has spanned the entire demographic and social spectrum. This is likely to have a lasting political and cultural impact, particularly if this trend continues, and may form a turning point in the fortunes of Islamist movements who for almost three decades have dominated opposition to the established Arab order and foreign domination.

10. The key issue in the coming months and years is not whether Arab states organize free and fair parliamentary elections and obtain certificates of good democratic conduct. Many probably will. Rather, the core question is whether the security establishment will continue to dominate the state or become an instrument that is subordinate to it. Most Arab states have in fact become police regimes in the literal sense of the word. Their militaries, while remaining enormously influential, have been politically neutralized, often by leaders who emerged from its ranks and – recognizing better than others the threat officer corps can pose – have relied on the forces of the Interior Ministry rather than soldiers to sustain their rule.

That Ben Ali, himself a former Interior Minister, was the first to fly, and that intelligence chief Sulaiman shared his fate gives cause for optimism.¹ By the same token, those who have seen Ben Ali and Mubarak fall can be expected to cling to power more tenaciously if effectively challenged. Gaddafi, whose head appears well on its way to a rusty pitchfork parading through the streets of Tripoli, is but a horrific case in point.

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¹ By the time of writing, Omar Suleiman was still in his position. The sentence was put in past tense by editor [Editor's note].