Preliminary Historical Observations on the Arab Revolutions of 2011

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Towards the end of his long, eventful life, in 1402, the renowned Arab historian Ibn Khaldun was in Damascus. He left us a description of Taymur’s siege of the city and of his meeting with the world conqueror. None of us is Ibn Khaldun, but any Arab historian today watching the Arab revolutions of 2011 has the sense of awe that our forbear must have had as we witness a great turning in world affairs.

This juncture may be unprecedented in modern Arab history. Suddenly, despotic regimes that have been entrenched for 40 years and more seem vulnerable. Two of them – in Tunis and then in Cairo – crumbled before our eyes in a few weeks. Others in Tripoli and San’a are fighting to survive. The old men who dominate the rest suddenly look their age, and the distance between them and most of their populations, born decades after them, has never been greater. An apparently frozen political situation has melted overnight in the heat of the popular upsurge that began in Tunisia and Egypt, and now is spreading. We are all privileged to be experiencing a world-historical moment, when fixed verities vanish and new potentials and forces emerge. Perhaps one day some of us can say, as Wordsworth said of the French Revolution, “Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven.”

These have so far mainly been revolutions fashioned by ordinary people peacefully demanding freedom, dignity, democracy, social justice, accountability, transparency and the rule of law. Arab youth at the end of the day have been shown to have hopes and ideals no different from the young people who helped bring about democratic transitions in Eastern Europe, Latin America and South, Southeast and East Asia. These voices have been a revelation only to those deluded by the propaganda of the Arab regimes themselves, or by the Western media’s obsessive focus on Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism whenever it deals with the Middle East. This is thus a supremely important moment not only in the Arab world, but also for how Arabs are perceived by others. A people that has been systematically maligned in the West for decades is for the first time being shown in a largely positive light.

Nothing has yet been decided in these Arab revolutions. And the most complex tasks are yet to come. It was difficult to overthrow an out-of-touch tyrant and his greedy family, whether in Tunis or Cairo.
Thoroughly changing the regime and building a functioning democratic system will be much harder. It will be harder still to ensure that a democratic system, if one can be established, is not dominated by entrenched, powerful interests. Finally, it will be a daunting task for any new popular democratic regime to achieve the social justice and rapid economic growth that will be necessary to provide equal opportunity, quality education, good jobs, decent housing, and desperately needed infrastructure. The old regimes failed to provide these very things: those in Egypt living with under $2/day grew from 39 to 43% of the population during Mubarak’s last decade in power. Failure at any of these daunting tasks could well lead to a comeback for the lurking forces of reaction and repression, and indeed the Arab counter revolution is active in Libya, Bahrain and elsewhere. Failure in these tasks could also favor violent tendencies that prosper in circumstances of chaos and disorder, such as were unleashed by the American occupation of Iraq. And we must never forget that this is the Middle East, the most coveted region of the world and the most penetrated by foreign interests. It is vulnerable, as it has been throughout history, to external intervention that could easily distort outcomes.

Nevertheless, what has started in Tunisia and Cairo has opened up horizons that have long been closed. The energy, dynamism and intelligence of the younger generation in the Arab world has been unleashed, after being dammed up by a system which treated them with contempt, and which concentrated power in the hands of a much older generation. Seemingly out of nowhere, young people in the Arab world have gained a confidence, an assurance, and a courage which have made fearsome police state regimes that once looked invincible tremble.

Is this revolutionary upsurge truly unprecedented? The Arab world has been a scene of uprisings and revolts for its entire modern history. During the French occupation the people of Cairo revolted repeatedly, briefly liberating the city from the French in 1800. Egypt revolted again against foreign rule in the years up to 1882; it revolted again against the British in the great revolution of 1919, and once again in 1952. During the Syrian revolt of 1925-26, the French were driven out of most of Damascus, and bombarded the city savagely. Similar examples abound elsewhere. The Libyan resistance against the Italians that started in 1911 and went on for over 20 years, the great Iraqi revolution of 1920, that of Morocco in 1925-26, the Palestinian Revolt of 1936-39, all provoked ferocious colonial campaigns. These episodes marked the beginning of a somber chapter in human history: the first use of aerial bombardment against civilians in Libya in 1911; and the first use of poison gas against civilians in Iraq in 1920.

What so far distinguishes the revolutionary upsurge that we have been watching across the Arab world from its many predecessors? One of the apparent distinctions is that in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain and
several other countries, it has so far been largely peaceful: “Silmiyya, silmiyya” the crowds in Tahrir chanted. But so were many of the great Arab risings of the past. These included many episodes in Egypt and Iraq’s long struggles to end British military occupation, and those of Syria, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia to end that of France, not to speak of the first Palestinian intifada against Israeli occupation from 1987-1991. While tactics of non-violence were broadly employed in the recent uprisings in Egypt and elsewhere, this is by no means the first time that Arab uprisings have been largely non-violent, or at least unarmed.

It has also been said that what distinguishes these revolutions from earlier ones in the Arab world and elsewhere in the Middle East is that they are focused on democracy and constitutional change. It is true that these have been among their most central demands. But this is not entirely unprecedented. There was sustained constitutional effervescence in Tunisia and Egypt in the late 1870’s until the British and French occupations of those countries in 1881 and 1882. Similar debates led to the establishment of a constitution in the Ottoman Empire in 1876 that lasted with interruptions until 1918. All the successor states to the Ottoman Empire were deeply influenced by this chequered constitutional experiment. In 1906, Iran established a constitutional regime, albeit one that was repeatedly eclipsed. In the inter-war period and afterwards, the semi-independent and independent countries in the Middle East were mainly governed by constitutional regimes.

These were all flawed constitutional experiments, which faced massive obstacles in the form of entrenched interests, the autocratic proclivities of rulers, and massive illiteracy and poverty. In the end, they solved few of the problems faced by their societies. But the failures to establish sustained constitutional regimes were not solely due to these internal factors. They were also due to these governments being systematically undermined by the Western powers, whose ambitions were often obstructed by democratic parliaments and a nascent public opinion and press which insisted on national sovereignty and a fair share of their own resources. From the late 19th century onward, this was a pattern that was constantly repeated. Far from giving support to democratic rule in the Middle East, the Western powers generally undermined it, preferring to deal with pliable and weak autocrats who did their bidding, and conspiring with anti-democratic local elites.

So it is not the democratic nature of the revolutionary uprisings of 2011 that makes them unprecedented. Rather, the revolutions that took place from 1800 until the 1950’s were primarily directed at ending foreign occupation. These revolutions for national liberation ultimately succeeded in the expulsion of the old colonial powers and their hated military bases in most of the Arab world. These revolutions eventually produced nationalist regimes in most Arab countries. Those in Algeria, Libya, the Sudan, Syria and Yemen still cling to power. That in Iraq was
removed by invasion and occupation which devastated the country. Only in Tunisia and Egypt have such regimes so far been removed by their peoples, and this outcome is by no means assured.

What distinguishes the revolutions of 2011 from their predecessors is that they mark the end of the old phase of national liberation from colonial rule, and are largely inward-directed, at the problems of Arab societies. Of course, with the cold war the old colonialism eventually gave way to a more insidious form of external influence, first of the two super-powers, and for the last two decades of the US alone. The entire Arab regional system was upheld by that hyper-power, whose support was crucial to the survival of most of the dictatorial regimes now trembling as their peoples challenge them. But while this important factor was always in the background, the focus of the 2011 revolutions has been on the internal problems of democracy, constitutions, and equality.

There was another demand in 2011, however. This was for dignity. And this has to be understood in two senses: the dignity of the individual, and the dignity of the collective, of the people, and of the nation. The demand for individual dignity is easily understandable. In the face of frightful police states that crushed the individual, such a demand was natural. The incessant infringements by these authoritarian states on the dignity of nearly every Arab citizen, and their rulers’ constant affirmations of their worthlessness, were eventually internalized and produced a pervasive self-loathing and an ulcerous social malaise. This manifested itself among other things in sectarian tensions, frequent sexual harassment of women, criminality, drug use, and a corrosive incivility and lack of public spirit.

One of the worst things about the authoritarian Arab regimes, beyond their denial of the dignity of the individual, was the contempt the rulers showed for their peoples. In their view, the people were immature, were dangerous, and unready for democracy. The patronizing, patriarchal tone of Mubarak in his final speeches perfectly characterized all of these regimes: we still hear such a tone from Qaddafi in his ramblings, and from the kings and presidents for life in the other Arab states. Only Qaddafi is saying openly what other rulers believe: that their peoples are easily deluded and misled, that in fact they have no dignity.

This brings us to the demand for collective dignity which is also raised by the revolutions of 2011. The absence of a sense of Arab collective dignity relates to the situation of this region, one of the few to be unaffected by the democratic transitions of the late 20th century which have swept other parts of the world. Suddenly, the Arabs have proven that they are no different than anyone else. These revolutions have created a sense of collective dignity that was best reflected in the pride of Tunisians and Egyptians after the fall of their respective tyrants. “Raise
You are an Egyptian!” the crowds chanted in Tahrir. This was the collective dignity of the Egyptian people, and with them of the entire Arab people, that was being asserted.

This relates to the question of the role of the United States and of its spoiled protégé, client and enforcer in the region, Israel. While there has been little mention of this huge elephant in the room in the popular ferment of the 2011 revolutions, it was always there in the background. So was the fact that the Arab police states benefited from top-of-the-line equipment, and extensive training in the best facilities the United States and Europe could provide. American tear gas canisters were used copiously against peaceful protesters in Tunis and Cairo, as they have been systematically used for years against Palestinians demonstrating at villages like Bil‘in in the West Bank. The thugs of Ben ‘Ali and Mubarak were on excellent terms with the intelligence services of the United States, and European countries. Western support for “stability” really meant support for repression, corruption, the frustration of popular demands, and the subversion of democracy. It also meant the subordination of the Arab countries to the dictates of US policy, and to the demands of Israel. The demand for collective dignity is a call to end this unnatural situation.

The Arab revolutions of 2011 raise many questions. After a night seemingly without end, a spirit of liberation has been released in the Arab world. It is impossible to say whether it can be sustained sufficiently to surmount the daunting structural problems of the Arab countries, and to overcome the forces of reaction that want to preserve the status quo. Although entrenched elites in Tunisia and Egypt have been shaken by the revolutionary wave, they will not easily cede their privileges. Moreover, other elites still in power will do everything they can to stop this wave throughout the region.

A related question is whether what started in Tunisia and Egypt has the potential to overthrow other Arab tyrants. For all the similarities between their regimes, each Arab country is different from the others. The populations of several of them, notably Jordan, Algeria, Yemen, Bahrain and Iraq, are less homogenous than Egypt or Tunisia, with significant ethnic, regional or religious cleavages that rulers can exploit to divide and rule. And in some cases, notably Algeria, Iraq and Jordan, there is memory of bloody civil strife that recently or not so recently rent these societies, and may make people hesitant about protesting. All of these factors have been marshaled by the forces of Arab reaction, as they operate across borders to sustain undemocratic and discriminatory systems, whether in Bahrain or elsewhere.

Nevertheless, the new spirit abroad in the Arab world has been contagious, and demands for democracy and constitutional limits on the powers of the rulers that started in Tunisia and Egypt can now be heard in Morocco, Algeria, the Sudan, Jordan, Syria, Yemen, Iraq and the Gulf...
countries. The slogan raised first by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutionaries is now everywhere from the Atlantic to the Gulf: “Al-sha’b yurid isqat al-nizam” (“The people want the fall of the regime.”)

Whatever the result, these events are a spectacular confirmation not only of the common aspirations for freedom and dignity of an entire generation of young Arabs, but of the existence of a common Arab public sphere. Although this owes much to modern media, it is a mistake to focus excessively on the specifics of the technology, whether Facebook, Twitter, cell phones or satellite TV. Such a common public sphere existed in the past, relying on earlier forms of technology, whether the printing press or radio. As with all revolutions, this one is the result not of technology but of a ceaseless struggle over many years, in this case by workers’ unions, women’s groups, human rights activists, Islamists, intellectuals, campaigners for democracy and many others who have paid dearly for their efforts. If there is anything new, it is the non-hierarchical and networked forms of organization that developed among many of these groups.

The last question the Arab revolutions raise is that of the role of the western powers in upholding the rotten Arab status quo. The United States has always been torn in its foreign policy between its principles, including support for democracy, and its interests, including upholding dictators who do what is wanted of them. When there is little public scrutiny, the latter impulse invariably predominates in US policy in the Middle East. Today, with the American media featuring stories of charismatic young Arabs bringing down hated dictators and calling for democracy in perfectly comprehensible English, the American public is watching, and Washington has responded by tepidly supporting a democratic transition, and weakly calling for restraint by its other Arab clients in repressing their peoples. The role of sordid interests has already reasserted itself in US policy on Bahrain and Libya, which are being treated differently from one another and from other Arab countries witnessing upheavals.

This new moment in the Middle East will make the old business as usual approach much harder in Washington, in Tel Aviv, and in the Arab capitals. The Mubarak regime was a central pillar of both American and Israel regional domination, and it will be difficult if not impossible to replace. The other absolute Arab rulers, even if they manage to stay in power, can no longer ignore public opinion, as they have always done in the past. Whether this meant submissively following Washington’s lead in its Cold War against Iran, or in protecting Israel from any pressure as it colonized Palestinian land and entrenched its occupation, these unpopular policies of most Arab governments are harder to sustain. The systematic input of public opinion into the making of the Arab states’ foreign policies is still in the future. But one can
reasonably hope that the day when Arab rulers could ignore Arab public opinion and cozy up to Israel while it brutalized the Palestinians is past.

No one in Washington can rely on the complaisance and submissiveness towards Israel and the United States that was one of the key features of the stagnant Arab order that is being challenged all over the region. What will replace it will be determined in the streets, as well as in the internet cafes, the union halls, newspaper offices, women’s groups and private homes of millions of young Arabs. They have announced that they will no longer tolerate being treated with the contempt their governments have shown them for their entire lives. They have put us all on notice: “The people want the fall of the regime.” They mean by this the regimes in each and every Arab country which robbed citizens of their dignity. They also mean a regional regime whose cornerstone was a humiliating submission to the dictates of the United States and Israel, and which robbed all the Arabs of their collective dignity.