



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

Reports

How does the Middle East look today?*

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I must begin by thanking the Frankfurt Book Fair for inviting us at Aljazeera to join you in discussing our region, which is conventionally known as "the Middle East" or "the Near East" at a time of dramatic transformations unprecedented since the birth of the so-called post-colonial state in the Arab world. As we speak, this part of the world is undergoing serious changes which may alter its face for decades to come, sudden changes unpredicted by even the most optimistic, or pessimistic (depending on the perspective), of American and European politicians. The pessimists are those who have founded their strategies in the region on the demand for stability, and the optimists are those who have been seeking change in the existing status quo.

Before we speak of the Middle East's political geography, I would like to make a general observation regarding the relationship between "Christendom" and what had previously been known as the "land of Islam" and what is now referred to as the "Middle East". This is a relationship governed by a strange paradox that may be summed up as follows: that these two regions are so close to each other in terms of geographic proximity, religion and culture, yet so distant and remote at the same time. This may have something to do with the complex nature of Europe's relation to the southern Mediterranean sphere, where a long process of acculturation, trade and cooperation overlaps has gone hand in hand with conflicts and wars. It is a complex, multifaceted relationship that cannot be reduced to a single aspect or dimension. We cannot read this history only from a lens of conflicts and wars or one of cooperation and communication alone.

When talking about today's Middle East, there are two intertwined facts that may be brought up: the political changes generated by what has been labeled as the "revolutionary Arab Spring" that has swept three regimes away (Tunisia, Egypt and Libya) and threatens to add more to the list, and the geo-strategic transformations that have taken place in the region since the end of the Cold War to the present and which have become clearer mainly in the last decade.

The Arab Revolutions

The Arab revolutionary tide started in a small town in the inner Tunisian provinces called Sidi Bouzid by a young university graduate by the name of Mohammed Bouazizi. Little did Mohammed know, by burning his own body in protest against socio-political marginalization, he set Tunisian cities aflame, toppled President Ben Ali, and sparked an Arab revolution that grew fiercer as it spread to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain and other parts of the region.

What these revolutions proved was that the Arab world remains interconnected to a large degree, on the level of culture and language, as well as on the level of political geography. Even more importantly, the Arab world is united by a general sense of crisis and disillusionment generated by its ruling band of corrupt brutal dictatorships. This explains why what happened in Tunisia did not remain an internal local event by spread rapidly to the Arab neighbourhood.

The Arab revolutions is in reality the outcome of decades of an accumulation of anger and failures, both political and economic. They express a yearning for change, and that is one of the main messages conveyed by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, that change is possible, and that dictatorship, no matter how mighty they may seem, is not the region's fate. It is obvious that these revolutions opened up a third path alongside the either-or options of

life under dictatorship and corruption and al-Qaeda's terrorism. The myth long peddled by yesterday's Ben Ali and Mubarak, and today's Abdallah Saleh and Bashar al-Assad as well as other Arab tyrants is 'either me or abyss'. This ultimatum was accepted by Western governments that considered these despotic regimes as the least bad of the available alternatives in a region unworthy of democracy for a long time. The Arab revolutions showed that these alternatives are not inevitable and that another option existed: imposing change and forming political alternatives by the force of popular protest as a way out of the dark tunnel fortified by corrupt regimes and their foreign supporters. Sadly, we continue to see that this logic is still at play today, as we read in the British or American press that Ali Abdullah Saleh, for example, is better than any other unsafe alternative.

The Arab revolutions proved two fundamental points:

- 1- The region is not a decadent swamp as it had long been portrayed in academic and political discourse.

For decades if not centuries, the so-called Middle East had been perceived as the hallmark of political and cultural deficiency. Since the 18th century, Montesquieu in his *Lettres Persanes* compared the dynamic and liberal Parisian way of life and political system with that of despotic Persia and Turkey, which summed up the Muslim world at the time. This is by no means an exception. In fact, it has been the dominant narrative about the Middle East and has been reproduced in countless ways since. The Orient, or Middle East, as Said noted in his *Orientalism*, is in reality a mixture of fabrication and imagination based on the game of binaries and negation. Islam is what Europe is not and Europe is what Islam is not.

- 2- Arab nations' yearning for change and democracy is no less profound than that of other nations around the world. The last two decades, since the collapse of communism has seen the rise of the misguided notion of Arab and Muslim exceptionalism in relation to democracy, with culture and religion as its justification. We were repeatedly told by academics, journalists, and politicians in the US and Europe that Islamic culture is undemocratic by nature. It crushes the individual with its norms of the ummah or community of believers, in favour of subservience to the Allah the Almighty. This notion though indefensible, still continues today, having been fuelled by the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

What the revolutions proved is that Arabs eagerly yearn for democracy and that what has been impeding change is not culture or religion, but internal foreign-backed despotism. If we want a cause for the so-called "democratic deficit", we should look in geo-political strategies and oil, rather than culture and religion. We all know there is no culture per se or undemocratic culture or religion per essence, since any culture or religion is a subject of a variety of strategies of interpretations, and Islamic culture is no exception.

Geopolitical Transformations

The Middle East is witnessing great geopolitical changes whose effects will last for decades to come. These transformations, which have been accumulating since the end of the Cold War and the Second Gulf War, may be summed up in the following points:

- 1- The Arab revolutions have disrupted the division that has stood in the region in the last few years between the so-called camps of moderates and hardliners, striking both in so-called moderate Tunisia and Egypt, and radical Syria and Libya. Although the revolutions started in the most tyrannical and corrupt

republics, this does not mean that kingdoms are immune from the contagion, as the events in Bahrain, Jordan, and Morocco illustrate. If we borrow Hegel's notion of the spirit of each age, we can say that the spirit of this age in the Arab region is a demand for change and democracy. This can no longer be sidestepped or overlooked. Either the region's regimes and their foreign backers heed the calls of the people and their will, or find themselves in a costly confrontation with them.

- 2- Arab revolutions represent as much a challenge to the region's autocracies as to the great powers led by the US. Based on US policies during World War II, there has been a doctrine of political stability, or the preservation of political stagnation and protection of allied regimes so long as they safeguard American interests. Western governments were taken aback by the ousting of Ben Ali and Mubarak even if they are now seeking to ride the wave of revolution and direct it to suit their strategies by using soft power and public diplomacy .
- 3- The American superpower is regressing in the region as a result of its military failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, leaving its allies with the sense that they cannot depend on it to protect themselves. It has equally emboldened the United States' opponents and encouraged them to defy its dominance. Although the US remains the most powerful force in the region, it is no longer an uncontested power or sole player in the field. In an increasingly multi-polar world, with a resurgent Russia and rising powers such as China, Brazil and India, the Middle East is no longer the United States' preserve.
- 4- There has also been a rise of regional powers, which have emerged to fill the political vacuum in the Middle East. Iran has increased its influence and built up its profile through the adoption of the Palestinian cause and support of Shia minorities. But the last few years have also seen the ascent of Turkey, which has been looking increasingly eastward, towards the Middle East , having knocked repeatedly on the EU's doors to no avail. Turkey has been successfully investing in its long geographic and cultural ties with the region to expand their commercial and political interests. It is, however, important to note that this new equation is by no means fixed. For instance, the Arab revolutions have undermined the Iranian role in the region significantly and opened up greater opportunities for Turkey, which appears much more attractive to Arabs due to both its economic achievements and political successes. We are also likely to see Egypt activate its presence as a regional power in the Arab region and Africa, as well strengthen relations with Turkey. There is a profound feeling among Egyptians that the Mubarak regime has embroiled the country in crisis after crisis and crippled its natural movement and activity as a leading power in the region. As a result, there is a drive among the Egyptian elite today to rectify what they perceive as serious errors and the squandering of potential capability of the country under Mubarak's rule in order to restore the country's regional standing.
- 5- The last point that must be noted is that the Arab revolutions would inevitably cause changes to the local political maps of Arab countries, with the retreat of some forces and the rise of others. This will undoubtedly be reflected in the ballot boxes. Those who had long been repressed and banished would most likely become significantly active and influential in the emerging political equation. Such players can no longer be ignored or brushed aside, which confronts us all with an undeniable reality: one cannot have a made-to-fit democracy that places our friends in the driving seat and crowns our allies. It is essential to accept those democracies created by the people of the region regardless of the political

outcomes they may yield. This is the only way the region may evolve politically and guarantee real durable stability.

The revolutions have unveiled the powerful presence of two strong forces which cannot be ignored and which will influence the region's future: Arab armies and Islamists. These armies have helped tipped the balance in the revolution's favour and continued to play a leading role in the interim period thereafter, both directly as in Egypt and indirectly as in Tunisia, and the Islamists, or political Islam, who have seen their presence and influence grow in the Arab political and cultural scene. This is exactly what we have witnessed in the recent election in Tunisia, where the al-Nahda party took the lead in the ballot boxes.

In brief, these are the defining features of the Middle East in the years, if not decades, to come.

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