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ON THE CONCATENATION IN THE ARAB WORLD

Editorial

The Arab revolt of 2011 belongs to a rare class of historical events: a concatenation of political upheavals, one detonating the other, across an entire region of the world. There have been only three prior instances—the Hispanic American Wars of Liberation that began in 1810 and ended in 1825; the European revolutions of 1848–49; and the fall of the regimes in the Soviet bloc, 1989–91. Each of these was historically specific to its time and place, as the chain of explosions in the Arab world will be. None lasted less than two years. Since the match was first lit in Tunisia this December, with the flames spreading to Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, Oman, Jordan, Syria, no more than three months have passed; any prediction of its outcomes would be premature. The most radical of the trio of earlier upheavals ended in complete defeat by 1852. The other two triumphed, though the fruits of victory were often bitter: certainly, far from the hopes of a Bolívar or a Bohley. The ultimate fate of the Arab revolt could resemble either pattern. But it is just as likely to be *sui generis*.

1

Two features have long set the Middle East and North Africa apart within the contemporary political universe. The first is the unique longevity and intensity of the Western imperial grip on the region, over the past century. From Morocco to

Egypt, colonial control of North Africa was divided between France, Italy and Britain before the First World War, while the Gulf became a series of British protectorates and Aden an outpost of British India. After the War the spoils of the Ottoman Empire fell to Britain and France, adding what became under their calipers Iraq, Syria, the Lebanon, Palestine and Transjordan, in the final great haul of European territorial booty. Formal colonization arrived late in much of the Arab world. Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, the Subcontinent, not to speak of Latin America, were all seized long before Mesopotamia or the Levant. Unlike any of these zones, however, formal decolonization has been accompanied by a virtually uninterrupted sequence of imperial wars and interventions in the post-colonial period.

2

These began as early as the British expedition to reinstall a puppet regent in Iraq in 1941, and multiplied with the arrival of a Zionist state on the graveyard of the Palestinian Revolt, crushed by Britain in 1938–39. Henceforward an expanding colonial power, acting sometimes as partner, sometimes as proxy, but with increasing frequency as initiator of regional aggressions, was linked to the emergence of the United States in place of France and Britain as the overlord of the Arab world. Since the Second World War, each decade has seen its harvest of suzerain or settler violence. In the forties came the *nakba* unleashed by Israel in Palestine. In the fifties, the Anglo-French-Israeli attack on Egypt and the American landings in the Lebanon. In the sixties, Israel's Six-Day War against Egypt, Syria and Jordan. In the seventies, the Yom Kippur War, its upshot controlled by the us. In the eighties, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and crushing of the Palestinian intifada. In the nineties, the Gulf War. In the last decade, the American invasion and occupation of Iraq. In this, the nato bombardment of Libya in 2011. Not every act of belligerence was born in Washington, London, Paris or Tel Aviv. Military conflicts of local origin were also common enough: the Yemeni civil war in the sixties, the Moroccan seizure of Western Sahara in the seventies, the Iraqi attack on Iran in the eighties and invasion of Kuwait in the nineties. But Western involvement or connivance in these was also rarely absent. Little in the region moved without close imperial attention, and—where necessary—application of force or finance, to it.

3

The reasons for the exceptional degree of Euro-American vigilance and interference in the Arab world are plain. On the one hand, it is the repository of the largest concentration of oil reserves on Earth, vital for the energy-intensive

economies of the West; generating a vast arc of strategic emplacements, from naval, air and intelligence bases along the Gulf, with outposts in Iraq, to deep penetration of the Egyptian, Jordanian, Yemeni and Moroccan security establishments. On the other, it is the setting in which Israel is inserted and must be protected, as America is home to a Zionist lobby rooted in the country's most powerful immigrant community, which no president or party dare affront, and Europe bears the guilt of the Shoah. Since Israel is in its turn an occupying power still dependent on Western patronage, its patrons have become the target for retaliation by Islamist groups, practising terror as the Irgun and Lehi did in their day, and screwing imperial fixation on the region to a still higher pitch. No other part of the world has enjoyed the same level of continuous hegemonic concern.

4

The second distinguishing feature of the Arab world has been the longevity and intensity of the assorted tyrannies that have preyed on it since formal decolonization. In the past thirty years democratic regimes, as understood by Freedom House, have spread from Latin America to Sub-Saharan Africa to Southeast Asia. In the Middle East and North Africa, nothing analogous occurred. Here, despots of every stripe continued to hold sway, unaltered by time or circumstance. The Saudi family—the aptest sense of the term is Sicilian—which has been the central saddle of American power in the region since Roosevelt's compact with it, has ruled unchecked over its peninsula for nearly a century. The petty sheikhs of the Gulf and Oman, propped up or put there by the Raj in the time of the 'Trucial Coast', have had scarcely more need to go through the motions of listening to their subjects than the Wahhabite helpmeets of Washington next door. The Hashemite and Alaouite dynasties in Jordan and Morocco—the first a creature of British, the second a legatee of French, colonialism—have passed power down three generations of royal autocrats with little more than gestures at a parliamentary façade. Torture and murder are routine in these regimes, the best friends of the West in the region.

5

No less so in the nominal republics of the period, each as brutal a dictatorship as the next, and most no less dynastic than the monarchies themselves. Here too, the collective longevity of rulers had no parallel anywhere else in the world: Gaddafi in power for 41 years, Assad father and son 40, Saleh 32, Mubarak 29, Ben Ali 23. Only the Algerian military, rotating the Presidency in the manner of Brazilian generals, have departed from this norm, while respecting every other principle of oppression. In external posture, these regimes were less uniformly subservient to

the hegemon. The Egyptian dictatorship, rescued from a terminal military debacle in 1973 only by the grace of the United States, was thereafter a faithful pawn of Washington, with less operational independence from it than the Saudi kingdom. The Yemeni ruler was bought at a bargain price for service in the War on Terror. The Tunisian cultivated patrons in Europe, principally but not exclusively France. The Algerian and Libyan regimes, enjoying large revenues from natural resources, had a greater margin of autonomy, if within a pattern of increasing overall compliance: required by the Algerian variant to ensure Western blessing for its decimation of Islamist opposition, by the Libyan to atone for its past and place lucrative investments in Italy. The one significant hold-out remained Syria, unable to submit without a recovery of the Golan Heights, blocked by Israel, and unwilling to let the fossil-mosaic of Lebanon fall completely into the hands of Saudi money and Western intelligence. Even this exception, however, was brigaded without difficulty into Operation Desert Storm.

6

The two hallmarks of the region, its continuing domination by the American imperial system and its continuing lack of democratic institutions, have been connected. The connexion is not a simple derivation. Where democracy is reckoned any threat to capital, the United States and its allies have never hesitated to remove it, as the fates of Mossadegh, Arbenz, Allende or currently Aristide illustrate. Conversely, where autocracy is essential, it will be well guarded. The despotisms of Arabia, resting on tribal hand-outs and sweated immigrant labour, are strategic pinions of the Pax Americana which the Pentagon would intervene overnight to preserve. The dictatorships—royal or republican—presiding over larger urban populations elsewhere in the region have been somewhat different conveniences, of a more tactical order. But the gamut of these tyrannies has mostly been aided and supported, rather than created or imposed by the United States. Each has indigenous roots in its local society, however well watered these may have been by Washington.

7

In Lenin's famous dictum, a democratic republic is the ideal political shell for capitalism. Since 1945, no Western strategist has ever disagreed. The Euro-American imperium would prefer in principle to deal with Arab democrats than dictators, provided they were equally respectful of its hegemony. This has rarely proved to be a difficulty in the regions newly democratized since the eighties. Why has the same process not applied in the Middle East and North Africa? Essentially, because the United States and its allies have had reason to fear that, just because of

the long history of their imperial violence in the region, and the perpetual exactions of Israel, popular feeling might not deliver comparable electoral comfort to them. It is one thing to rig up a client regime at the point of a bayonet, and round up enough votes for it, as in Iraq. Freer elections are another matter, as Algerian generals and Fatah strongmen discovered. In each case, faced with a democratic victory by Islamist forces judged insufficiently amenable to Western pressures, Europe and America applauded cancellation and repression. Imperial and dictatorial logics remain intertwined.

8

This is the landscape in which the Arab revolt has finally erupted, in a concatenation facilitated by the two great cultural unities of the region, language and religion. Mass demonstrations by unarmed citizens, nearly everywhere facing repression by gas, water and lead with exemplary courage and discipline, have been the lance of the uprisings. In country after country, the over-riding demand has gone up in a great cry: *Al-sha'b yurid isquat al-nizam*—‘The people want the downfall of the regime!’ In place of the local despotism, what the huge crowds in squares and streets across the region are seeking is essentially political freedom. Democracy, no novelty as a term—virtually every regime made ample use of it—but unknown as a reality, has become a common denominator of the consciousness of the various national movements. Seldom articulated as a definite set of institutional forms, its attractive force has come more from its power as a negation of the status quo—as everything dictatorship is not—than from positive delineations of it. Punishment of corruption in the top ranks of the old regime figures more prominently than particulars of the constitution to come after it. The dynamic of the uprisings has been no less clear-cut for that. Their objective is, in the most classical of senses, purely political: liberty.

9

But why now? The odious cast of the regimes in place has persisted unaltered for decades, without triggering mass revolts against them. The timing of the uprisings is not to be explained by their aims. Nor can it plausibly be attributed just to novel channels of communication: the reach of Al-Jazeera, the arrival of Facebook or Twitter have facilitated but could not have founded a new spirit of insurgency. The single spark that started the prairie fire suggests the answer. Everything began with the death in despair of a pauperized vegetable vendor, in a small provincial town in the hinterland of Tunisia. Beneath the commotion now shaking the Arab world have been volcanic social pressures: polarization of incomes, rising food prices, lack of dwellings, massive unemployment of educated—and uneducated—youth,

amid a demographic pyramid without parallel in the world. In few other regions is the underlying crisis of society so acute, nor the lack of any credible model of development, capable of integrating new generations, so plain.

10

Yet to date, between the deeper social springs and the political aims of the Arab revolt there has been an all but complete disjuncture. In part, this has reflected the composition of its main contingents so far. In the big cities—Manama is the exception—it has not, on the whole, been the poor who have poured into the streets in force. Workers have still to mount any sustained general strike. Peasants have scarcely figured. That has been an effect of decades of police repression, stamping out collective organization of any kind among the dispossessed. This will take time to re-emerge. But the disjuncture is also an effect of the ideological limbo in which society has been left by the same decades, with the discrediting of Arab nationalism and socialism, and the neutering of radical confessionism, leaving only a washed-out Islam as a *passe-partout*. In these conditions, created by dictatorship, the vocabulary of revolt could not but concentrate on dictatorship—and its downfall—in a political discourse, and no more.

11

But liberty needs to be re-connected to equality. Without their coalescence, the uprisings could all too easily peter out into a parliamentarized version of the old order, no more able to respond to explosive social tensions and energies than the decadent oligarchies of the inter-war period. The strategic priority for a re-emergent left in the Arab world must be to close the rift in the revolts by fighting for the forms of political freedom that will allow these social pressures to find optimal collective expression. That means, on one side: calling for the complete abolition of all emergency laws; dissolution of the ruling party or dethronement of the ruling family; cleansing the state apparatus of ornaments of the old regime; and bringing to justice of its leaders. On the other side, it means careful, creative attention to the detail of the constitutions to be written once the remnants of the previous system are swept away. Here the key requirements are: unrestricted civic and trade-union liberties of expression and organization; undistorted—that is, proportional, not first-past-the-post—electoral systems; avoidance of plenipotentiary presidencies; blocking of monopolies—state or private—in the means of communication; and statutory rights of the least advantaged to public welfare. It is only in an open framework of this kind that the demands for social justice with which the revolt began can unfold in the collective freedom they need to find any realization.

12

Notable has been one further absence in the upheaval. In the most famous of all concatenations, the European 1848–49, not just two, but three fundamental kinds of demands intertwined: political, social, national. What of the last in the Arab 2011? To date, the mass movements of this year have not produced a single anti-American or even anti-Israeli demonstration. The historic discrediting of Arab nationalism with the failure of Nasserism in Egypt is no doubt one reason for this. That subsequent resistance to American imperialism came to be identified with regimes—Syria, Iran, Libya—just as repressive as those which collude with it, offering no alternative political model to them, is another. Still, it remains striking that anti-imperialism is the dog that has not—or not yet—barked in the part of the world where imperial power is most visible. Can this last?

13

The United States can afford to take a sanguine view of events to date. In the Gulf, the rising in Bahrain that might have put its naval headquarters at risk has been crushed by a counter-revolutionary intervention in the best traditions of 1849, with an impressive display of inter-dynastic solidarity. The Saudi and Hashemite kingdoms have held firm. The Yemeni bastion of the battle against Salafism looks shakier, but the incumbent dictator is dispensable. In Egypt and Tunisia, the rulers have gone, but the Cairene military hierarchy, with its excellent relations to the Pentagon, remains intact, and the largest civilian force to emerge is in each country a domesticated Islamism. Earlier, the prospect of the Muslim Brotherhood or its regional affiliates entering government would have caused acute alarm in Washington. But the West now possesses a reassuring blueprint in Turkey for replication in the Arab lands, offering the best of all political worlds. The akp has shown how loyal to nato and to neo-liberalism, and how capable of the right doses of intimidation and repression, a pious yet liberal democracy, swinging the truncheon and the Koran, can be. If an Erdoğan can be found for Cairo or Tunis, Washington will have every reason to be satisfied at the exchange for Mubarak and Ben Ali.

14

In such a prospect, military intervention in Libya could be regarded as icing on the cake, at once burnishing the democratic credentials of the West and disposing of its most embarrassing recent recruit to the ranks of the ‘international community’. More of a luxury than a necessity for American global power, however, the initiative for nato attack came from France and Britain, re-running as if in a time-

warp the spool of the Suez expedition. Once again, Paris took the lead, to cleanse Sarkozy of his government's intimacies with Ben Ali and Mubarak, and stem his disastrous drop in the polls; London fell in, to allow Cameron his frequently expressed wish to emulate Blair; the Gulf Cooperation Council and Arab League supplied cover for the venture, in a meek imitation of Israel in 1956. But Gaddafi is not Nasser, and this time Obama, with little reason to fear the consequences, could go along with it, hegemonic protocol requiring that the us take nominal command and coordinate ultimate success, allowing combatants like Belgium and Sweden to exhibit their aerial valour. For holdovers from the Clinton era in the current American regime, an additional bonus will be the rehabilitation of humanitarian intervention, after setbacks in Iraq. The French media and intelligentsia, predictably, have been ecstatic at the restoration of their country's honour in this line of endeavour. But even in America, cynicism is widespread: sauce for the Libyan goose is too patently not sauce for the Bahraini, or any other gander.

15

For the moment, none of this has ruffled the surface of the landscape since the revolt. Wariness of the power of the hegemon, preoccupation with national concerns, sympathy with the Libyan rebels, hope that the episode will be quickly over, have combined to mute reactions to the latest bombardment from the West. Yet it is unlikely the national can be sealed off indefinitely from the political and social in the ongoing turbulence. For in the Muslim world to the east of the zone of upheaval, the American wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan have yet to be finally won, and the blockade of Iran is still some way from its logical conclusion; and at its centre, the occupation of the West Bank and blockade of Gaza continue as before. Even the most moderate of democratic regimes may find it difficult to insulate itself from these theatres of imperial prepotence and colonial savagery.

16

In the Arab world, nationalism has too often been a clipped currency. Most of the nations in the region—Egypt and Morocco are the exceptions—are factitious creations of Western imperialism. But as in Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond, colonial origins have been no bar to post-colonial identities crystallizing within the artificial frontiers drawn by the colonizers. In that sense, every Arab nation today possesses as real and refractory a collective identity as any other. But there is a difference. Language and religion, tied together in sacred texts, were—and are—historically too strong, and distinctive, as common cultural markers not to surcharge the image of each particular nation-state with the higher idea of an Arab

nation, conceived as a single ecumene. That ideal gave rise to a common Arab—*not* Egyptian, Iraqi or Syrian—nationalism.

17

There followed the rise, corruption and failure of Nasserism and Ba'athism. They will not revive today. But the impulse behind them will have to be recovered in the Arab world, if revolt is to become revolution. Liberty and equality need to be rejoined. But without fraternity, in a region so pervasively mauled and interconnected, they risk souring. From the fifties onwards, the price of assorted national egoisms for any kind of progress in the Middle East and North Africa has been high. Needed is not the caricature of solidarity offered by the Arab League, a body whose record of bankruptcy and betrayal rivals that of the Organization of American States in the days when Castro could call it, with perfect justice, the us Ministry of Colonies. Required is a generous Arab internationalism, capable of envisaging—in the distant future, when the last sheikh is overthrown—the equitable distribution of oil wealth in proportion to population across the Arab world, not the monstrous opulence of the arbitrary few and the indigence of the desperate many. In the more immediate future, the priority is plain: a joint declaration that the abject treaty Sadat signed with Israel—scuttling its allies for the pottage of an agreement that does not even give Egypt enough sovereignty for its soldiers to move freely within its own territory, and whose associated framework agreement on Palestine, contemptible in itself, Israel has not even made a pretence of observing—is legally defunct. The litmus test of the recovery of a democratic Arab dignity lies there.