



ESSAY: Asher Susser

Turmoil in the Middle East

THE UNPRECEDENTED UPHEAVALS ACROSS THE region from Tunis to Yemen, with Egypt at their epicenter, have catapulted the Middle East overnight into a new era of popular empowerment and domestic instability.

The long-term implications for the region, however, are far from certain and it is equally unclear what is in fact actually happening behind the scenes, in the corridors of power, and beyond the images and the hype of the “cheerleaders of the revolution” in much of the Western media. It will take a while to discover who has actually come out on top in this first round of struggle between the old regimes and the newly empowered, but ill-defined and inchoate popular opposition movements. The regimes in Egypt and Tunisia have been shaken to their very core, but the fight in both countries is not over.

In Tunisia, and more importantly in Egypt, despite the upheavals, the military and the old regime are still in control (despite the ouster of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia). In Jordan the popular demonstrations did not even call for the downfall of the monarchy, but for the replacement of the government and political reform. The frequent change of government in Jordan is nothing exceptional. But the removal of the prime minister on this occasion did come against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving regional context. The monarchy has been shaken into demonstrating a greater willingness to engage with the opposition. In Yemen President Ali Abdullah Saleh has agreed not to run again for office in two years time. Not an earth-shattering development.

The causes of the uprisings and the unrest have been in play for decades as the Arab world has fallen into a prolonged period of political decline driven by the socioeconomic crises of insoluble proportions in the non-oil rich Arab economies. In most of these countries population growth has stifled economic development and made it impossible for the regimes to maintain a level of growth over time that can contain the pressures of a rapidly growing population.

Unemployment and poverty are rife in these countries, and even though birth rates have declined, these states have to find employment, here and now, for the huge younger generation that was born 20 to 30 years ago and who are also the great majority of the unemployed in these societies.

This is a lost generation of youngsters, often college and university graduates, who are not properly equipped for the modern market, whose vision of the future is one of sheer hopelessness. Decent jobs, or just any jobs, are not available. Recently hit by inflation and rapidly rising food and fuel prices, their miserable predicament prevents many of them from piecing together the means even to get married, to have a home and family and to live normal lives.

THE SOCIOECONOMIC MALAISE IS DEEPLY ROOTED in a number of historical deficiencies in the Arab countries. Arab Human Development reports published by the UN over the last decade have been devastatingly critical of the state of development in

these countries. At the beginning of the 21st century the Arabs numbered some 280 million; they are well over 340 million now and in the 2020s they will pass the 400 million mark with no solution in sight for joblessness, poverty and widespread illiteracy.

Three crucial shortcomings were noted in these reports to explain the Arab predicament: the lack of freedom, the deficit of knowledge, and the poor status of women. Regimes were oppressive and civil society had a very long way to go. Arab education systems and scientific research lagged far behind Western standards, there was a dearth of creativity and a general lack of openness to foreign cultures as represented, for example, by the pitifully low number of translations made into Arabic from other languages. Only in one sphere did the Arab states outdo the West and that was in the publication of books on religion (17 percent versus 5).

Women in Arab societies suffered from a wide range of inequalities and general marginalization. This had a negative effect on Arab economies where relatively few women participated in the labor force, leading to lower levels of productivity in societies where women were still having large families. Needless to say, this was a highly combustible combination.

To all of the above one must add the retreat in secularization that has characterized much of the Arab world and the broader Middle East in recent decades. In countries like Egypt, Jordan and others, the Muslim Brotherhood are by far the strongest and best organized parties of the opposition. One frequently hears observers underplaying the sway of the Brethren as representing “no more” than 25-35 percent of the electorate. That may be so, but there are no other secular parties that have anywhere near that percentage of public support.

If secularism is the fountainhead of liberal, democratic, innovative and prosperous societies, it is hard to see how Egypt and other similar countries will make that transition while secularism is in crisis and Islamization is on the rise. In Egypt, for example, the regime has carried out a dualist policy of repression of the Islamists, while simultaneously allowing for an increasing Islamization of the public space, the courts, and the education system, partly induced by the government itself, as a means of keeping the radicals at bay. The end result was the emergence of Egypt as a “secularreligious” state, as one prominent scholar, Iranian-born Asef Bayat, professor of sociology and Middle Eastern studies at the University of Illinois, has defined it.

As the Sunni Arab states have contracted politically and socioeconomically, the void is being filled by the two old-new non-Arab regional superpowers, Turkey and Iran. But neither of these is a model of secularism as at least Turkey once was. Iran is an Islamic republic and Turkey has been under the rule of an, albeit moderate, Islamist party for nearly a decade.

There are many who argue that the Turkish blend of Islam and pluralist democracy could be an ideal model for the Islamists of the Arab world. That, of course, may indeed be so, but Arab Islamist parties, like the Muslim Brotherhood for example, have generally tended to be far more fundamentalist and wedded to a doctrine the centerpieces of which

The Arab world around Israel is in profound crisis from which Israel must disengage



TARA TODRAS-WHITEHILL / AP

'SECLARELIGIOUS': Egypt has repressed the Islamists, while simultaneously allowing increasing Islamization; here an anti-government protester prays at the feet of Egyptian soldiers as they stand guard near the Egyptian Museum, in Cairo on February 5

are the implementation of the *shari'a* Islamic law (*tatbiq al-shari'a*) and limitations on the rights of religious minorities and women.

Parties like the Muslim Brotherhood, in contrast to their Turkish counterpart, have been far more receptive to the procedures of the democratic system (voting in elections) than to the endorsement of its philosophical underpinnings: freedom of thought, freedom of and from religion, individual human rights, the sovereignty of man and the supremacy of man-made law.

THE US ADMINISTRATION IS PRESSING EGYPTIAN President Hosni Mubarak to enter into an orderly democratic transition that will culminate in fair and free elections.

While that is an admirable objective, one ought also to bear in mind that in the more or less fair and free elections that have been held in the Middle East in recent decades, the Islamists have either won outright or have done better than all their competitors, from Jordan in 1989 to Algeria in 1991, to the Palestinian Authority in 2006 and in Turkey from the mid-1990s onwards. In Egypt in 2005, the Muslim Brotherhood, running as independents because their party was banned, won 20 percent of the seats in parliament even though they competed in only one-third of the constituencies and despite the regime crackdown in the midst of the election to prevent them from doing even better. Elections in Lebanon and in post-Saddam Iraq are governed almost entirely by religious sectarianism.

In many Arab countries the array of more or less authoritarian secular regimes, backed by the military and the other security organs, has kept the Islamists in check.

In pressing for orderly change in Egypt, the US recognizes the critical role of the military in managing any such transition. But how does one square the circle of a democratic transition managed by the military which has hitherto been the mainstay of the status quo? Will elections in the future, under the watchful eye of the military, be free and fair? And if they are, would that mean the emergence of a regime in which the Islamists are at least a prominent, if not a dominant, player? Could that mean a new balance of power between the army and the Islamists, where

the army's interest in preserving the peace with Israel would still prevail, or would it portend a far more ominous outcome?

Perhaps, in a carefully calibrated protracted transition, the presently relatively weak secular parties will regroup and gain popularity, and the Islamists would accept the emergence of a genuine pluralistic democracy in Egypt in which they would only be a minority. That would promise the best of all worlds but such an outcome is hardly guaranteed. There is also the real possibility that the existing order, though deeply shaken, will reinvent itself, in one form or another.

The extent of change emerging from the present upheaval will determine the degree of uncertainty in Israel's relationship with Egypt. For Israel, profound change could require a far-reaching reordering of defense priorities and increased military spending, which would impact negatively on Israel's economy and many of the achievements that Israel has enjoyed in the last 30 years of, albeit cold, peace with Egypt.

What the future really holds in store is guesswork. However, it is already obvious that the Arab world around Israel is more hostile and inhospitable than it has been for many years. It is a world in profound crisis from which Israel must disengage. Despite the regional convulsions, and even because of them, Israel must find the ways and means of ending its occupation of the West Bank, with or without an agreement with the Palestinians, preserving only the absolute bare minimum of territory for national security in the new circumstances.

The realities of the Arab world should finally put paid to any residual illusions of a "new Middle East" with which Israel ought to integrate. The real "new Middle East" is one with which Israel must reduce points of friction, and protect itself as best it can from the negative fallout of a region in deep socioeconomic and political malaise. Israel cannot solve the Middle East's problems. It can only do its level best to keep its distance. ●

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