

**CRISIS IN THE ARAB CRESCENT:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REGION AND THE WORLD**

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**The Crisis**

The details vary but the incident is clear. On December 17, 2010 a 26-year old man selling fruits and vegetables in the small town of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia had his weighing scale confiscated and his cart tipped because he did not have a permit and no money to bribe. In the process he was allegedly beaten up and spat on by a female municipal worker and her colleagues.

Mohamed Bouazizi ran to the Governor's office to lodge a complaint and demand his weighing scale back. The Governor refused to see him. In despair and rage the jobless Bouazizi secured a can of gasdine, then doused and set himself alight. In doing so he set the whole Arab crescent alight.

Within the space of months unrest spread from Tunisia to Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Algeria, Bahrain, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and several other Arab countries. Presidents and kings whose decades-old grip on power appeared to be solid and unshakeable suddenly became vulnerable. In Tunisia and Egypt President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and President Hosni Mubarak, who had been in power for 24 years and 42 years respectively, were forced to flee. Libya is engulfed in bloody civil war. Bahrain, Yemen and Syria are the scene of massive and prolonged popular protests, as well as violent repression. Elsewhere demonstrations have been smaller in scale, but serious enough to force the autocratic governments to respond with a mix of force, hastily arranged hand-outs and promises of political reform.

What the world is witnessing is a political tsunami of truly historic proportions. Events are still unfolding and the degree of political change that will occur in the region is not yet clear. It will take years before the dust settles on the current ferment in the Arab crescent. Some countries

may move forward on democracy while others remain mired in autocratic rule. Even countries like Tunisia and Egypt, where progress is apparently being made, could regress. The long-time presidents are gone but the structure they led remains largely intact. Everywhere the old order may take some time to dismantle and replace.

But politics is unlikely to be ever the same after the tsunami recedes. It will not be surprising if in the years ahead the Arab world becomes significantly more democratic and representative though segments of authoritarian monarchic and republican rule persist for some time to come. The days of autocratic rule, not only in the Arab crescent but elsewhere on the planet as well, are numbered. Modern technology, the media and economics will ensure the demise of the control systems on which all authoritarian systems depend. The universal yearning to be heard and to be governed only by those you choose, will be difficult to deny.

The turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa caught almost everyone by surprise. This should not have been the case. The Arab crescent was a powder keg ready to explode. The Arab world has been cursed as well as blessed. It has witnessed the heights of splendour as well as the depths of despair. Home to ancient civilisations, mighty empires and the world's great monotheistic faiths, blessed by the world's most geostrategic location and the largest reserves of black gold, the crescent has also seen bloody wars, invasions from outside and treachery by foreign powers. None incidentally, have been more deceitful and treacherous than the British and the French and the Italians who carved up the region; yet today they pontificate and are the most morally indignant and vociferous about what is happening in their former colonies. It is as if they are entitled to some sort of postimperial paternalism.

The Arab crescent, despite its many wealthy countries and communities, is also probably the most backward region in the world in terms of human development. Though Kuwait, Qatar and UAE are gauged by the UNDP as in the Very High category of human development, others are far down the scale. Yemen is ranked 140<sup>th</sup> in the world and Sudan 150<sup>th</sup>.

Illiteracy rates are between a staggering one-quarter and one-half of the population in several Arab League countries. One in four youths in rich Saudi Arabia are unemployed, and unemployment rates are as high as 70 per cent in some parts of the Maghreb. One in three Yemeni and every fifth Egyptian live on less than US\$2 a day. Women are the great undeveloped and untapped human capital resource of the region despite their emancipation in some Gulf countries. Corruption, nepotism and discrimination are prevalent in much of the region, and the deficit in democracy and good governance is probably the highest in the Arab crescent compared to other regions. Much of economic stewardship also lay in expatriate hands, and in the richer countries many Arabs live on the dole and on hand-outs while the work is farmed out to the legions of foreign labour.

Against this backdrop and rising food prices the youth are credited with sparking the revolution and making the so-called 'Arab spring' happen. Many were educated yet unemployed (Mohamed Bouazizi was himself an unemployed graduate). They were keenly aware through the media and literature of the prosperity, freedom and liberty that many enjoyed in the developed world. They were also Internet- and mobile text-savvy, and well equipped to mobilise and voice dissent. In Egypt at least it was the young educated, both middle class and affluent, which first took to the streets before they were joined by the others.

The region was thus politically, economically and socially ripe for revolution and rebellion. Yet, as I said, the rise of the people against governments in the Arab crescent that began with the self-immolation of a single jobless vegetable seller in Tunisia in 17 December, caught nearly everyone by surprise.

It is interesting to reflect on why we were surprised. Perhaps we believed too much in stereotypes and established wisdom, and especially the narratives bred in the West. Arabs are supposed to be respectful of authority. Arab communities are thus essentially tribal and the people submit to authoritarian tribal leaders easily. The democratic tradition is not strong in Arab society, and democracy is not supposed to dwell high on the list of Arab aspirations. Arab anger is directed more at Israel than at their own leaders, and Sunni Arabs are more apprehensive

of Iran and the Shiites than they are of their own rulers. Restrictions on the media, dissent and public demonstrations are manifestly strong in virtually all Arab states. And the subsidies and various forms of assistance and allowances distributed by the ruling elite in oil-rich states helped blunt the edge of dissatisfaction and resentment.

In the West, given its strategic interests and bias, many saw regional political and security dynamics as being essentially driven by the Arab-Israeli conflict and the presumed threat from Iran, and not by domestic Arab social and political dissatisfaction. 9/11 skewed American and Western perceptions even more. The paramount threat became “militant Islam”, “Islamic terrorism”, “jihadists”, Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda and of course, tragically, Iraq and Afghanistan. The West was completely unprepared for the revolution, confident in the longevity of the autocratic rulers they coddled and the military and other assistance they gave to countries like Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, U.A.E. and Qatar.

To me the surprise lies not so much in the uprisings but in their timing and more importantly, how they spread so quickly across so many Arab states. Who knows, would the Arab world be in turmoil now if the municipal woman and her colleagues in the town of Sidi Bouzid had not confiscated Mohamed Bouazizi's weighing scale, or had she not allegedly slapped and spat on him, or if the municipal officials had entertained Bouazizi's complaints regarding the incident rather than turned him away, causing him to set himself alight in despair?

This is sometimes the stuff of which history is made. When he vegetable seller torched himself he set the Arab world on fire. He released pent-up furies and passions for democracy, justice and dignity that challenged the ruling elite and brought down mighty rulers. In the process he also sharpened the conflict between Sunni rulers and Shiite citizens and heightened tensions between Iran and its Arab neighbours.

There is also another side to the story, the ‘dark’ side if one may call it that. This is the role of neighbouring Arab states and foreign hands in the Arab uprisings. The former European colonial powers and later the

United States and Israel have of course long intervened and tried to influence policy and shape the course of events in the region.

The current Arab uprisings though, appear to have been spontaneous domestic phenomena with little if any foreign involvement initially. Nevertheless, some neighbouring Arab states as well as Western powers very soon became involved especially in Libya. There is active and overt as well as covert military and material support for the movements resisting the Gaddafi government under the umbrella of UNSC Resolution 1973 that authorised the 'no-fly zone'. That this resolution to protect civilians is being blatantly abused to kill Gaddafi or effect regime change is only too clear.

Saudi Arabia headed a GCC military contingent into neighbouring Bahrain, another US ally, to support the government there. There is no doubt too that Iran has more than a passing interest in Shi'a communities and interests in the countries of the region.

As ever in such situations conspiracy theories abound and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish fact from fiction and substance from allegation.

One last point before we consider the strategic implications of the turmoil in the Arab crescent. The global media and many experts and observers in the West and elsewhere portray what is happening in the Arab crescent today as essentially a movement for democracy led by the young empowered by the Internet, Twitter and Facebook. Arab governments are described as repressive regimes that oppress their people, deny them basic human rights and are uncaring of their welfare. Gaddafi in particular has been described as a vile and delusional dictator. It is good versus bad, democracy versus dictatorship.

This narrative, especially found with CNN, BBC and Al-Jazeera and in the West, is not far from the truth, but it masks at least three important facts. In many Arab states the conflict is as much tribal and sectarian as it is about a push for democracy. In Libya it is a tribal war pitting Gaddafi's Qadhafa tribe and its allies including the largest tribe, the Warfalla, against other tribes. In Bahrain it is the minority Sunni government versus a majority Shi'a population that is also quite affluent. The

Sunni/Shi'a cleavage is a prominent fault line running through the tensions and the turmoil in many of the countries of the region.

A second important fact is that the almost ideological obsession with democracy in some quarters has led to the disproportionate demonization of the other. The best example is Col. Muammar Gaddafi. He no doubt dealt harshly with those who challenged him. He also ruffled many fellow Arab feathers, besides being a bitter foe of Israel and its friends in the Arab world. But little is said of the good things he also did for his country and his people, like the free and generous public housing he provided, or the Great Manmade River project which delivers 6,500,000 cubic metres of water from underneath the Sahara Desert to the cities of northern Libya every day. Or the fact that Libya enjoyed a growth rate of no less than 10.6 percent in 2009.

The third important fact is the role of the global media, especially CNN, BBC and Al Jazeera. They have a profound impact on shaping values and perceptions, and in ennobling dissent and some would say in selective targeting. Saudi Arabia for instance, is let off very easily, as is Qatar, the home of Al Jazeera. Both are absolute monarchies closely allied with the US and the West. I also do not think that it would be an exaggeration to say that the three media played a significant role in facilitating the spread of the democratic wave in the region.

### **The Strategic Implications**

The Arab crescent is in a state of flux. It will not be possible to assess the full strategic impact on the region and the wider world until the situation stabilises. The implications are almost certain to vary as the situation unfolds.

For the present though, we can highlight the following:

1. A profound shift towards political transformation is taking place in the Arab region. If the eventual result in many of the Arab states is greater democracy and better governance it would bring about a sea change to Arab and Muslim dignity and well-being. At the same time Arab and Muslim image, which is already changing for the better as a consequence of the uprisings, will rise in the eyes

of the world. The Arab region will no longer be noted for its serious democracy and governance deficits. In this regard, may I add that good governance (which includes good political governance) is far more important than mere democratic change.

The process of transformation however will be long and difficult in many countries, as for any other developing region of the world. Among other things, radical change to education systems, economic policies and political and administrative systems may be required.

One cannot also discount worst case scenarios. These include extended domestic strife and instability, inter-state conflict and fragmentation or partitioning of countries like Libya.

2. The on-going movements for political change have put to rest at least two myths about the Arab and Muslim world. One is that Arab culture or Islamic teachings are incompatible with democracy; an off-shoot of this is the flawed notion of a 'clash of civilisations' between the West and the Muslim world. The other is that the 'Arab street', itself a pejorative phrase, is prone to violent extremism and incapable of moderate and peaceful protest.

On the first, it should have been quite clear that the examples of Indonesia, Malaysia and Turkey are enough to rubbish the argument that Muslim societies are incompatible with democracy. Yet the perception to the contrary continues to persist. Unless some Arab states at least are able to eventually transition to democracy, the perception will remain.

The demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt which were largely peaceful even in the face of provocation from security forces have put paid to the second myth. Nothing in the streets of Tunisia or Cairo can compare with the bloody excesses that accompanied democratic change before in so-called civilised countries like France and the United Kingdom. Yet it must also be noted that demonstrations have turned violent in some countries. In most cases they have been a response to extreme suppression

measures rather than a natural proclivity to violent agitation on the part of the demonstrators and dissidents.

3. If the current ferment results in democratic change across much of the Arab world Israel will likely be the great loser. It will lose the support and collusion of the governments in Egypt and Jordan, the only two Arab countries that have a peace treaty with Israel, for the population in these two countries and elsewhere in the region are staunchly opposed to illegal Israeli occupation and excesses in occupied territories. The Rafa crossing is already being opened though the peace treaty remains. A unity agreement has been forged between Hamas and Fatah under the auspices of Cairo, something unthinkable in the Mubarak days. This has incensed Israel.

Israel will also be severely impacted by the rise of Shia and Iranian influence in the region. Tel Aviv will at the minimum have to review its policy towards the Palestinian issue and the peace process and become more accommodative and less intransigent. A desirable outcome would be a just and lasting resolution to the conflict with Palestine sooner rather than later. In the meantime however, while the gaze of the world is upon the turmoil in the Arab crescent, Israel is expanding its illegal settlements and is talking and acting tough. It will no doubt try to sabotage the unity deal as much as possible.

4. US strategic interests and influence will also be greatly affected so long as it fails to realign its pro-Israeli policy and become a genuinely honest broker. Its bases on Arab soil and its military presence in the region will also be negatively impacted. However if America is able to become an impartial and honest broker and contribute to a just solution to the Palestinian problem, it will continue to have good friends in the Arab world. US soft power is considerable, and its ability to assist Arab states to strengthen their economies with the support of its European allies will benefit US interests significantly. Arab concerns about the ascendancy of Iranian power and influence in the region will also enable the United States to forge close links with Arab countries and sustain a



measure of military presence and influence. The strategic importance of the Mediterranean and the Gulf to the US, oil and America's own democratic impulses will move the US to forge amicable links with a democratised Arab region. The current close ties that exist between the US and Vietnam despite their past bloody conflict give some indication of the possibilities available for the United States.

5. The Iran/Arab and Shia/Sunni contest for power is likely to increase in the region. Their positions however are likely to coalesce more closely on the Israeli issue. The Iran/Arab conflict is ripe ground for exploitation by third parties.
6. A direct consequence to Malaysia of the crisis in the Middle East is that we woke up today to find we now have to pay RM2.90 for a litre of Ron 97. The instability and uncertainty in the Middle East and North Africa have played havoc with oil prices. Brent Crude Oil exceeded US\$125 per barrel a few weeks ago but has since fallen to US\$117 per barrel in the US yesterday.

The Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific released by UN ESCAP yesterday assessed that rising oil and food prices could threaten economic growth and retain as much as 43 million more people in poverty in the Asia Pacific region. Regional growth could decline up to one per cent. As usual, the poor as well as the poorer countries will suffer the most.

### **Concluding remarks**

Let there be no mistake. The world's tallest building rises majestically from an Arab city. Some of the most affluent and highly educated and skilled people are Arab. Some Arab countries are ranked higher in the UNDP Human Development Report than even some European nations. But the Arab crescent as a whole suffers from multiple deficits and is one of the more backward regions of the world.

The events of the last four to five months seem to indicate that the Arab world is in the cusp of possibly momentous change. If most of the Arab nations take this historic opportunity to move in the right direction

politically, economically and socially we will see one of the great transformations in human history. 350 million people will reap the rewards in human dignity, peace and prosperity. If this happens that vegetable seller in the small town of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia would not have died in vain.

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