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The Revolutions in the Arab World: The Promise and the Illusion

A Palestinian Perspective

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It is not by chance that I'm not using in the title the much used name of "**The Arab Spring**", a word first used by the Lebanese thinker of Palestinian origin **Samir Kassir** in one of his articles. I'm not using it because it brings with it a **positive connotation and qualification** that i can't take as a given. Rather i would like to look on what is happening in the Arab world today only in a **dialectical way**: this Arab revolution, I firmly believe is **open ended** and carry with it both a promise and an illusion at the same time.

To know where we stand today, we need to see where we come from, hoping that this will help us understand where we are heading. If we look back at the history of the Middle East in the last 40 years, we see that there were four decisive moments that shaped this history in the last half century in our region and that led to this moment:

Where Do We Come From?

1. First we have to remember that all of these leaders that are being ousted from the Middle East today **came to power through national revolutions**. They were the revolutionary 40 years ago. They brought with them at that time the **promise of independence** from the "Colonial West"; they brought with them the **promise of unity** of the Arab world; the **promise of socialism**: that the ordinary person would have a better life. This was true for Ghadafi, Nasser and Mubarak after him, Borkeba who preceded Bin Ali in Tunisia, Assad the father, but even the PLO...etc. So the national revolutions were the first decisive moment.
2. The second decisive moment was in **1967** when all of these leaders were defeated by Israel. This moment was the first time when the people in the Arab world were encountered with the **illusion of the revolution**. Great revolutions ended up but in

a **humiliating defeat**, and this sense of being defeated shaped the last 40 years in the Arab world.

3. The third decisive moment came in **1979** when another revolution, this time an Islamic one, took place. This **Islamic revolution** came to throw away a dictator, the “Shah”. So basically, Iran had their current revolution 30 years ago, when a dictator was removed and the promise of a divine state became loud.
4. And last but not least, the fourth decisive moment in the Middle East came in **1982**. Here, I do not mean the Lebanon war. I am talking about another revolution. This revolution happened under the radar screen, but for me this might be the most important revolution. The year 1982 was basically the year of the **electronic revolution** when the world moved away from typewriters to computers. This revolution was not about typing; this revolution changed the whole economy worldwide, and it changed the whole way of education. This revolution was **the only revolution that did not make a stop in the Arab world**; it bypassed our region. In the United Nations “**Arab Human Development Report (2003)**”, one can see in a chart how the development in the Arab world up until 1982 was going somehow parallel with the rest of the world. However, starting in 1982, the Arab world began sliding downward because the governments did not actually recognize the importance of this revolution and so they missed the future.

Thus, that is where we came from 40 years ago. However, during these 40 years **a new generation was born**. The old generation “**who left Egypt**” through all of these revolutions “**died in the desert**”, and was **not able to see “the Promised Land”**. **This new generation looked around and what did they see?**

Where Are We Now?

1. The new Arab generation did not see anything left from those national revolutions; **nothing but a security state that is making their life miserable**. Just to give you an idea of what I am talking about, I will share this story: We were planning a conference on “Religion and State” and we wanted to have it in the Arab world. But the question was: where do we do it? We thought Egypt might be a good place, but the security forces said:” Yes, you are welcome but we will sit in on the sessions with you”; Syria was even more difficult; Lebanon was possible but not everyone can get there; Palestine was possible but no one from the Arab world can get here. So, we ended up having it in Turkey. This

experience showed me what it means that the Arab world was controlled by security states. ..

The other thing that this generation saw was that all of **the nation states were run as private businesses: power was handed over from father to son** even in the most socialist oriented countries; the wife of “X“ controlled 70% of the economy; the brother of “Y” ran a good portion of the state business and so on. **This new generation “born in the desert” became totally disillusioned.** One month before the whole revolution started, we conducted a study on the **“Cultural Practices of the Palestinian Youth”**, and our findings were that only 18% of the young people in Palestine were connected to a political party. The majority did not even want to hear the word politics; they are disillusioned.

2. This new generation “born in the desert” was hearing throughout their life about Israel being the enemy, and yet they felt that **the 1967 defeat is continuing.** I mean the rhetoric was that all the Arab countries were working hard to free Palestine, but these young people saw the second intifada, they watched the war on Gaza, and they **felt humiliated.** And it is not easy to feel, as young people, humiliated.
3. This new generation “born in the desert” opened their eyes to find a **polarized society.** They turned on the television stations and all what they saw were **either clergy men preaching or belly dancers** and nothing in between. It is very tough to live in such a polarized society, where you do not have anything in the middle. It is very interesting that in the study Diyar did on **“Cultural Practices of the Palestinian Youth”**, there was a question about religion. The answers to this question were polarized. The young people in Palestine were either totally for religion or totally against religion. But what is in common among all of the young people of this new generation was that they do not have a problem in **“worshipping the golden calf”**, or what we call today **consumerism.** The one event at Dar Annadwa that attracted the biggest number of young people was an Egyptian film called “Omar wa Salma”, starring the young Egyptian actor Tamer Hosni, who is like the superstar of the young people in the Arab world. This film was the only event where we had 2,200 young people pouring into the streets and closing the old city because they wanted to see it. I said to myself that I have to see what this film is all about! It was about the new Arab consumer society. The film was showing the young people the cars, mobiles, iPads, girls and boys in open relationships, etc... that they are dreaming of but do not have: **the promise of the illusion.**

4. This new generation “born in the desert” was **25% unemployed**. This is a generation “born in the desert” that was brought up with television satellite dishes on the top of their homes with **1000+ channels**; this is a generation that spends **three hours on average on Facebook**, as it has its morning devotion with Facebook and before it goes to bed a good night kiss is given to the social networking website. Facebook is their liturgy; and they take it much more seriously than Christians reading their Bible. And what this generation sees through this 1000+ television channels and through Facebook raises their **expectations higher and higher; they see all of these endless possibilities and they want to tap into it.**

Born in the desert, **the road to the Promised Land** for this new generation was **possible only virtually**. The feeling became so strong among these young people that they are “**stuck in the desert**”: the desert is very rough, and the heat is very high, and so things started to boil. There was a **silent people’s revolution going on because the frustration** of the young people was accumulating, and all what it needed was just someone to put it on fire, which a young man in Tunisia did. After him, the Middle East started shaking. A Tsunami swept through the Arab world; starting in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, Jordan, Morocco and maybe others to follow, with **the exception of Palestine**.

For the first time, we had **the luxury in Palestine not to be on television screens but to sit and watch**. For a change, this was really good. We were able at least to catch our breath. But the changes in the Arab World will have their impact on Palestine. Right now it is forcing **Fatah and Hamas to re-position themselves** waiting for the dust of the revolution to clear before they will take a more stable position.

The Revolutions: A Promise and/or an Illusion?

The revolutions in the Middle East are both a promise and an illusion; thus, a dialectical relationship.

The promise: we see **a new era starting** in the Middle East, after which **the region will not be the same anymore**. And yet, we remain with the **same people** and the **same infrastructure**. There is **a new hope** that one could feel for the first time since 40 years in the Middle East. It is very compatible with Obama’s “**Yes We Can**”, for these young people in Middle East are saying just that. This is the promise. However, the illusion is this: it is **easier said than done** because it still needs hard work. We see how Obama's promising are fading away. Are the young people in the Arab World **ready for a long and thorny process?**

The promise: it is the **young people** who are not politicized that are **pouring into the streets like during the sixties in Europe**. **Yet the illusion: without the military**, nothing would have been possible. It is the military in Egypt, who seems to behave “neutrally”, was in favor of change; it is the Western military strikes in Libya that made the change, and it is the military in Syria & Yemen that is keeping leaders there in power.

We have **the promise of new emerging political parties**. We watched the elections in Tunisia with several parties competing. Such promise is great for this is what we needed; an alternative to the ruling parties on the one hand and to the Islamists in opposition on the other. Yet, **the illusion is that the Islamists are the most organized so far**. Perhaps the most important and decisive question in the Middle East today is not if we are going into a new Islamic era? But rather what kind of one?

In Libya just three days after the death of Ghadafi, the new leaders declared that the islamic sharia will be the main source of legislation and that anything that contradicts the sharia will not be allowed.

In Tunisia the moderate islamic Annahda party with its leader Rashid Ghannouchi won the elections with over 40%. His daughter Sumaya Ghannoushi said in an interview after the results were made known: "we are the most progressive islamic party in the region", and added: "accepting each other, accepting pluralism, accepting diversity and trying to work together- this is the lesson Ennahda can give to other islamic political movements".

In these elections, the Progressive Democratic Party failed to win much support; two other parties won more votes: The Congress for the Republic, founded by the Human Rights activists, Moncef Marzouki, and the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties known as Attakatol.

The question again is not if we are going to experience an islamic era or not, but what kind of an islamic era and what kind of Islam. Most probably several islamic models will compete with each other on who is more authentic and who is more successful.

It seems to me that a kind of a neo-conservative islam is on the horizon that is religiously conservative but is very much consumer oriented and thus economically neo-liberal and that can satisfy to some extent some "needs" of the people of the middle east and that would fit very well in western interest with a consumer market of 350 million Arab people.

The Middle East seems to be undergoing **a radical change**. Nevertheless, the actual change is still **limited** as we see in Egypt these days. The promise is that this Tsunami will sweep throughout the Arab world, but this Tsunami seems **not to affect Qatar**, which is perpetuating the revolution; seems not really to shake

Saudi Arabia. And what about **Iran**? These three countries are **major players** in the Middle East. So, the promise is that it is going to be everywhere, but the reality says that it will not. **So Why not?**

On the other hand we are experiencing a new regrouping between those countries who have a monarchy and oil and those others who are experiencing revolutions but have only scared resources; between those who can satisfy the consumer needs of their people but not necessarily their rights and those who might be able to satisfy the rights of their people but not their needs. This is a scary situation.

Besides, there is a real danger right now to see the Middle East being dismantled and **“Balkanized”**: **Sudan** was divided into two, **Iraq** might be divided by three, **Lebanon** continues to be turned into two like **Palestine** (West Bank. Versus Gaza) and we do not know how many **“Libyas”** and **“Yemen”** will come out of this war. Thus, what we might be witnessing is the whole Middle East becoming fractured in pieces.

The region might be split also between Shiities on the one hand and Suni Muslims on the other. Such a scenario might push the region into new wave of militarisation that would exploit the resources of the region and that would only benefit the war lords in the region and the weapon trade mongroms.

The promise: for the first time in the Arab world we have a **revolution that is so peaceful.** What happened in Tunisia and in Egypt was very much like what happened in Leipzig in Germany, when candles brought down the walls. Yet, Libya, Syria and maybe other countries, is **very bloody.** To conclude this point, the revolution should not be **underestimated**, but at the same time it should not also be **overestimated.** As someone who believes more in process than in revolution, the promise of this revolution can only be if it is to be at the **beginning of the process**; the revolution is just the beginning, and the process is yet to deliver. The work is not behind us, it has just started.

Where Are We Heading?

It is very difficult to predict where we are heading; it is perhaps easier to say where we should be heading. For the promise to yield fruit, we need to remember where we came from and what still needs to be done. Therefore, I see that there are four things that need to be done:

1. For the revolution to yield fruit, **we need a new legislation and modern constitutions.** When Moses was able to get rid of Pharaoh, what came immediately after going through the Red Sea? The law; the Ten Commandments. A new constitution was needed, and everyone was under the rule of law, **including Moses.** This is why Moses was not able to enter the

Promised Land, because he was also under the law; it is called **accountability** today.

2. For the revolution to yield fruit, the region has to move from a one-party system that has been the norm in the Arab world into **a multi-party system** where the Islamists are also included. There are few, very important questions that need to be dealt with in this regards. One of them is the **relationship between religion and state**. Also, whatever the solution is or the formula, there is no way but through **a civil society based on citizenship**. In fact, if we wonder why the revolution in Egypt was so peaceful compared with Libya, the answer is that there is a strong civil society in Egypt while there is almost no civil society in Libya. And if we ask why annahda Islamic party in Tunisia is more progresive than the one in Libya, the answer is in the civil society. Therefore, the work that was carried out through the many non-governmental organizations over the last twenty years was important although people were not able to see it at that time. Also the notion of **citizenship** is important because it provides the **unity throughout all the diversities** we have in the Middle East, including religious, ethnic, national, etc.
3. For the revolution to yield fruit, we need to **solve the Palestinian question**. Without solving this conflict there will be no possibility for the Middle East to focus on development. We cannot focus on development, we cannot focus on economy, we **cannot focus on the future** unless this conflict is set aside once and for all; otherwise, it **will pull down again the whole region**.
4. And last but not least, for the revolution to yield fruit, it **has to meet the expectations** of the young people. What are their expectations? They need education with an **illiteracy rate of 35.6% in the Arab world (compared to 18% globally)**. They need jobs in a region with the **world's lowest employment rate** and where **in the coming ten years over 50 million new jobs** need to be created. Who can do that? They want a **job**; they want **space** to move freely, to be able to express themselves without fearing the security state; they want to have **life** and to have it abundantly. All of this is not possible without a new unifying vision fir the region at large and for each country separately. The people of the middle east have to take responsibility for building their future together.
5. So this is the direction; these are the issues we have to solve if the revolution is to be a real revolution and not an illusion. And by the way, **no one is a spectator, we are all actors: the Arab people** are actors, they have proven that; **the governments in the Middle East** are actors so what they do is important; the **USA** is an actor; **Europe** is an actor; and **Turkey, Iran &**

Israel are actors. However, we feel there are conflicting interests between **the values** the actors say they believe in, such as democracy, human rights, development etc..., and the **“real politics”** of oil, weapon trades and markets. The interests of the western countries in oil (libya already 30% for france and 20% for england), the support they have been giving over decades to all the dictators as long as they are in power, and the sudden turn against them once they start to tremble, are just signs of this real politics of oil, weapon, and markets and has little to do with human rights or democracy. This real politics makes it difficult for the region to move forward.

So when we look at the revolutions, we continue to be torn between the promise and the illusion. Yet the only option we have is to assume responsibility and to become even more active towards a real process of change from within.