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The International Dimension of the Arab Spring

Roberto Aliboni

The Arab revolts are one dimension of the strategic change that is affecting the Middle East and Arab world as a consequence of the failure of the West, especially the United States, to shape the region in line with their views during the last decade. They definitely point to the weakening, or perhaps even the end, of a long period in which US and Western objectives in the region were supported by a large coalition of regional powers with conservative interests. The revolts did not come out of the blue and have quite a different nature and significance from the ones that Western official rhetoric and media tend to assign them. To understand the Arab revolts and work out a fresh Western approach toward the region, the West must frame the revolts in the region's evolving strategic context.

The West/Arab moderates coalition and its weakening

In the Middle East's time frame, the divide is not the end of the Cold War, nor 9/11. The divide is the rise of the Islamic Republic in Iran and the shift to the Western camp of Egypt with its peace with Israel, that is 1979–80. These developments opened the way to a multi-faceted and even violent conflict between a strong and widespread anti-Western movement leveraging on nationalism, religion and identity and a 'moderate' Arab camp of broadly conservative regimes and dynasties, pre-eminently concerned with ensuring their own survival and getting Western support for that purpose. In the 1980s, when Egypt was totally isolated and its future moderate companions did not have the courage to join it, a coalition of rejectionists, both nationalists and Islamists, waged the first round of hostilities against the West and what then existed of the moderate Arab camp in an

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asymmetric war which, despite significant changes in leaderships, ideologies and organisational patterns, is still going on.

In the 1990s, the political and military capabilities of what is now broadly called the 'resistance' were significantly narrowed by the US and Western victory over the communist bloc and US leadership in the broad and victorious coalition against Iraq in the war to liberate Kuwait – which in practice was also the framework in which the US–Arab moderate alliance was forged. Thanks to the Israeli–Arab and regional negotiations started up by the Madrid Conference, the Oslo peace accords and the inauguration of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the 1990s – despite the outbreak of the second Palestinian 'intifada' – were a relatively peaceful interlude, in which anti-Western forces appeared greatly weakened and, in contrast, pro-Western ones decidedly gained the upper hand.

Not that region-wide opposition, especially Islamist opposition, was absent. While Iran remained somehow sidelined and isolated in the Gulf, in this decade there were Islamist developments in North Africa, Egypt and, more seriously, Algeria. This opposition was different, though, from the forceful and widespread trend of the 1980s in that it amounted to local developments with no support from the rejectionist states, which the moderate regimes, with support from the West, managed determinedly to suppress in the context of the firm supremacy of pro-Western forces and the West itself. So, in the 1990s, the moderate Arab camp enlarged and strengthened and the coalition between Arab moderates and the West became an important and decisive factor in the regional strategic equation.

This coalition and the West's Arab allies were, however, greatly weakened by US policies after 9/11. The outcome of the war in Iraq and the West's inability or unwillingness to find a solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict played into the hands of Iran and the Islamists, reinforced Iran's regional role and altered the Middle East balance between 'resistance' and moderates in favour of the former. Besides weakening moderate governments, US and Western policies revived anti-Western feelings in the Arab public and broadened grass root opposition in the Arab countries to their regimes' alliance with the West. US policy became a factor of domestic and international instability, even while the Arab regimes had no better protection against this instability than Western support. So, they continued with the alliance. At the end of the decade, however, the Arab moderate regimes and their alliance with the West appeared more than ever at odds with their citizens and this, coupled with a distinct worsening in social and economic conditions, put stability at risk even more.

Revolts and the alliance: nationalism, Islamism and democracy

When set in this context, the revolts, in addition to their political, economic and social significance in domestic terms, can be read more in particular as the outcome

of increased public opposition to regimes and as drivers of a strategic change in Arab regional and international relations. As the dust settles, this change could result in a recalibration of alliances with the West – that is, probably a significant downgrading of the coalition with the West with respect to Camp David – or entirely new strategies aimed at tackling both the weakening of Western power and the emergence of a new power constellation in the region, in particular the rise of Turkey as a regional power and its implications. A return to pan-Arab nationalism and pre-Sadat times is highly unlikely. Yet, as confused as the contours of the new foreign policies ensuing from the ‘Arab spring’ may be, nationalism – no matter whether secular or religious – is indubitably going to be an important ingredient of them.

Indubitably, both old and emerging elites need to respond to the broad anti-Western feelings left over from post-9/11 developments. On the other hand, there can be no doubt either that as elections take place, they will generate governments more democratically-based and therefore more sensitive than previous ones to nationalist feelings. This outcome is certain where elections will be won by Islamist parties, as moderate as they may be, or secular-religious coalitions. As for non-Islamist governments or governments that could be subjected to military tutorship, they may prove more prudent and flexible, but will nevertheless have a foreign policy mandate in which Arab ‘dignity’ is bound to rank high. With the situation inherited from the past decade’s policies, more legitimacy cannot help but leverage more nationalism.

The Arab spring is seen in the West essentially as a series of domestic developments affecting different countries in different ways but generally meaning an end to authoritarian rule and the beginning of democratic regimes. This interpretation is only partly right. In fact, it is not framed in the regional/international context just illustrated and, for that reason, does not take into consideration the impact of that context on the Arab public and, consequently, on domestic arenas. Since current Western interpretations do not account for the strong anti-Western feelings that predominate on the Arab stage today (in which even pro-Western opinion has been deeply disappointed by President Obama’s empty rhetoric), they do not grasp the fact that for most Arab constituencies what democracy means today is, besides a less corrupt and fairer economy, more independence from the West and more assertiveness against Israel and, as the case may be, Iran, the Shi’as or the Salafists.

Certainly, Western public and governments have been deceived by the circumstances in which the uprising jump started in Tunisia and Egypt and, to some extent, Yemen. In fact, in these countries revolts were driven by aspirations for freedom rather than the unsolved Palestinian issue or the alliance with the West. Indeed, at the outset Islamists and Israel were both conspicuously absent and there was sympathy for the West. However, the early revolutionaries proved to be only

vanguards without mass resonance in society or political proficiency. Vanguards, unless led by Bolshevik-style professional revolutionaries or by structured political organisations, are bound to be supplanted by other political actors or vanguards sooner rather than later. The early vanguards act as Engels' 'midwives of history', that is they pave the way for what history is actually destined to bring.

Nine months after the beginning of the ongoing turmoil, the urban, well educated, technologically conscious and politically liberal vanguards of the Arab spring have been unceremoniously sidelined by nationalists, conservatives and various brands of Islamists, not to mention the impending and pervasive manipulation of the military, especially in the most important case, Egypt. The liberals and democrats are now asking for elections to be delayed in order to be able to organise themselves. But, apart from a number of existing NGOs, no liberal-democratic political organisations are in place. On the contrary, the liberals and democrats are sometimes so deeply divided and fragmented that no organisation is in sight. In any case, a political organisation cannot be improvised. At the same time, delay is also an opportunity for the others. So, today's political processes are guided by constituencies that are aiming at democracy less to usher in freedom and civil rights than to assert identity, national values and independence from the West. This is not to say that they will not be democracies, however they will not be democracies necessarily or smoothly converging with Western ones. In one form or another, the Hamas dilemma will re-emerge.

Ongoing strategic change

While the coming developments of the Arab spring will continue to shape change in the regional strategic picture, change is already on the march. The most striking feature is the decision of the American leadership to abstain from direct intervention. The entrenched American idea that the US has to shape and lead has received a blow from the Obama administration, which is acting *cum juicio* and 'from behind' rather than from the front. In Libya, the US supported a NATO intervention, but did not want to lead it. In Yemen, it is employing limited covert means. In Syria, no one is intervening, but the US looks even shier than the Europeans. This is widely seen in the US debate as evidence of weakness and has been criticised from left and right alike.

Yet, the US administration's policy very aptly reflects the lessons learned from the past decade (and the worsening economic situation of the US and the West as a whole). In fact, the administration's abstention corresponds to the growing and diffuse Arab-Muslim opposition to American intervention in the region and, in keeping with President Obama's two statements to the Middle East peoples in Cairo and Washington, it is the premise for a shift toward dialogue, mutual respect

and cooperation between the US and the region. In the delicate evolution of the Arab spring, President Obama's policy makes sense and is likely to pay off.

However, President Obama's attempt to acknowledge Arab and Muslim feelings and aspirations, so as to reach some kind of working cooperation between the West and the Middle East, unfortunately lacks an adequate Israeli–Palestinian dimension. This may be an obstacle to the more detached relationship with the Middle East that President Obama is presumably seeking and could hinder chances for dialogue and cooperation, perpetuating conflict instead. The Middle East perceives US policy towards the Israeli–Palestinian issue as weak and ambiguous. The American approach to the Palestinian request to become a full member of the United Nations, whatever the outcome, is confirming Arab perceptions and the potential inadequacy of US strategy. That will weigh heavily on the Arab spring's drive toward the more assertive regional and international policy illustrated in the previous paragraphs and could make it the source of a new clash rather than a new beginning.

While the US and Western presence in the Middle East is fatally declining, regional powers are already protagonists of a changing regional balance in which the West is unusually absent. The most striking case, in this case, is Turkey. Still at the beginning of 2011, Turkey's independent strategic course of action in the Middle East was regarded by the West as risky, yet consistent with Western interests and to some extent even helpful, Turkey being able to do things that Western countries could hardly do. However, the direction Turkey has undertaken since the 'Mavi' flotilla incident clearly suggests that Ankara has noticed the nationalist strategic change underway and wants to be a leading factor in it, with a view to acquiring a dominant position in the regional scramble along with Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

The Arab spring is a transition away from the long alliance between the West and the moderate Arab states, as well as a transition of these states from being more or less passive clients of the US and the West to more or less vibrant democracies with an assertive agenda in the region. The Western countries, while in principle welcoming the possibility of new democracies emerging in the region, reaped enormous advantage from their association with the previous regimes and do not seem prepared to deal with the new democracies' more assertive agenda. But, as Western countries will be unable and unwilling to oppose this agenda, they should proceed with reshuffling their international objectives and policies to make a dialogue with these new democracies possible. In this perspective, an important stumbling block could be the Palestinian issue and the role of a growing chauvinist Israel in the region. Ironically, Western countries have done less than nothing in the past years to solve the problem and still look unprepared to take action. They have spoken of the ongoing crisis in the Middle East and North Africa as an opportunity. But, in reality, things are more complicated. If they do not change their course, the Arab spring could become not only a lost opportunity, but also a source of new tensions.