

THE ARAB SPRING

The Middle East continues to be convulsed by the social unrest collectively known as the Arab spring. This collection of revolutionary movements throughout the Arab world had its ostensible beginnings with the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, an unfortunate young street vendor confronted by official corruption, hostility and discrimination. The video of this act, broadcast on the Al-Jazeera network, spread like wildfire. The extraordinary capabilities of modern mass media made certain that this gruesome event in a provincial city would have wide distribution. Within a remarkably short time this became the stimulus for a popular uprising that toppled the long-serving autocratic ruler of Tunisia, Zine Ben Ali and his associated family and supporting elite.

In retrospect, this was almost too easy—Tunisians had been oppressed by a regime that stole from everyone, including even some foreign visitors. In spite of a framework of supposedly representative institutions, the regime had no popular support and, most importantly, was not backed by the armed forces. It was, therefore, a remarkably non-disruptive change in government. It took only five weeks for President Ben-Ali to be deposed. Interestingly, he and his family took refuge in Saudi Arabia. Tunisia has long had the reputation of being a modernized country with relatively liberal social standards and practicing a more moderate form of Islam. So it is perhaps not surprising that things have turned out reasonably well there.

Soon after this extraordinary series of events, the phenomenon of widespread civil disobedience in opposition to an autocratic regime spread to Egypt, with consequences the results of which are still unclear and which are still working themselves out.

But before we go further with Egypt and the other Middle Eastern countries that are experiencing upheavals, it may be instructive to review some of the history of this part of the world. One major question begs to be answered—where does all the public anger come from? As we look at the antecedents of today's Middle East, the picture should become clearer.

For centuries the Islamic world consisted mainly of the Ottoman Empire. The other major Islamic empires, the Mughals in India and the Shiites in Persia are peripheral to the areas we are discussing today.

2

Beginning in the 12th or 13th century with roving bands of raiders, the Ottoman Empire extended its reach through most of the Middle East and with the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 marked the end of the Byzantine Empire. By that time, the Ottoman Empire included almost all of the Arabic-speaking countries, excluding the Sudan, Morocco and parts of the Arabian peninsula. By 1600 the population of the Ottoman Empire was around 25 million.

For the next several centuries, with borders changing somewhat [especially after the defeat and retreat at Vienna] the Ottoman Empire continued as the administrative center for a vast area, with many disparate subject peoples. Many of the officials in these areas were selected from the local population, but the governors were primarily from the ruling classes in Istanbul.

Two major points need to be emphasized here – first that the major provinces of the Empire were organized along ethnic and religious lines. The second point is that all non-Muslim citizens were allowed freedom and property rights within their own areas but were precluded from major office in either the civilian or the military hierarchy of the Empire. They were thus effectively second-class citizens. All the various religious minorities were tolerated within the Empire, which was in itself a big step, but their rights were definitely limited.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, things began to change. The Europeans, propelled by a substantial military and organizational superiority, began to move in. Napoleon occupied Egypt in 1798 and following this was a great wave of colonization through invasion and military occupation. France took over Algeria in 1830 and then Tunisia in 1881. Great Britain annexed Aden on the Gulf in 1839 and then invaded Egypt in 1882. Spain invaded Morocco in 1860. In the meantime, the Russians were encroaching on the Empire from their southern borders.

The Treaty of Paris in 1856 led to the progressive loss of the European provinces of the Empire , namely the Balkan states, Bulgaria and Crete. There were also indigenous revolts, leading to the independence of Serbia in 1830 and to the establishment of an independent Greek monarchy in 1833.

Although the Turks were among the few Middle Eastern countries to embrace the use of gunpowder and firearms in warfare, they were rapidly outpaced by the industrial and commercial development of the Europeans. There was essentially no technological progress during the long existence of the Ottoman Empire and a great deal of scientific knowledge was lost in this static society. Consequently the tremendous advances in mathematics, astronomy, chemistry etc. which led to the Industrial Revolution produced enormous changes in commercial and military functioning which they could not match. Having dominated trade and transportation for so long, they were at a loss to compete with the new European abilities. Following these trends to their logical conclusion, the Middle East had become primarily a source of raw materials and a buyer of finished products from the West.

The end of the Ottoman Empire followed soon after World War I . Having chosen to enter the war on the side of the Germans, the Ottomans were effectively excluded from any influence on the final peace treaty , with only a few exceptions. When the dust settled, the Ottoman empire was essentially dismantled and a new set of countries inhabited the Middle East.

The secret Sykes–Picot treaty of 1916 divided up the Middle east into spheres of influence between France and Great Britain. The peace treaty following World war I and the subsequent treaty of Sevres with the

Ottoman empire, regularized the division of the Middle East. Subsequently the League of Nations gave its imprimatur to this arrangement. Great Britain assumed the mandate for Palestine, Iraq, Egypt and the Gulf Coast. France was responsible for Syria and Lebanon.

These new countries were formed from the provinces of the old Ottoman Empire, with very little regard for ethnic, tribal or religious boundaries. These had been quasi-independent parts of the Empire, governed from afar by the Ottomans and were now assembled as entities administered for the benefit of the occupying colonial powers.

Revolutionary events in the Middle East

As George has discussed, there is a similarity among all the recent unrest in the Middle East – the common denomination of a repressive, autocratic regime with widespread corruption, nepotism and injustice coupled with a large and unbridgeable gap between rich and poor. Additionally several more explosive factors have been at work – rising food prices, rapidly increasing population, especially of young people and high levels of unemployment.

In each of the countries we are discussing, the government has consisted of a small ruling elite which in one way or another controls the political system. There are, however, important differences among these systems that explain the different courses the revolutionary unrest has taken and offer clues to the possible US response.

Analysts have discussed some of these rulers as presidential monarch or sultanistic dictators. Their only goal is the maintenance of personal authority – they do not develop independent governmental institutions and so regimes are thus remarkably fragile. There may be the trappings of representative government – a national assembly, a constitution,

political parties, etc., but all dissent and/or opposition parties is ruthlessly suppressed.

The populations are usually given subsidized good and services to keep them compliant. The underlying injustice and inequity eventually well up.

In Egypt, a broad-band segment of the population, including all socioeconomic groups began a demonstration which escalated quickly to demands for removal of Mubarak. The combination of a lack of military support for Mubarak and no international support led to his ouster in the space of only 18 days. The level of corruption was breathtaking. Mubarak is said to have built up a fortune of \$40 - 50 billion, and other members of the ruling elite.

Sources of discontent

Enormous increase in young population have occurred throughout the Arab world - young adults aged 15-29 goes from 38% in Bahrain and Tunisia to 50% in Yemen.

Number is 26%.

There has been a high level of education in countries like Egypt and Tunisia, but without access to good jobs. During the past 60 years or so Egypt has needed to reduce its public payroll and there are consequently many more unemployed educated people.

There have been numerous local protests and strikes for many years against state and police corruption and low wages. And in fact the turmoil

in the Arab world goes way back – there were widespread revolts in 1919, brought on by the corrupt and autocratic government in Tunisia and Egypt. All had in common the quest for personal dignity, social justice and a competent and fair administration of government. Very little has changed since those days – in 1919 these revolutions were suppressed by the colonial powers. The revolutions of 2011 were more profound and wide spread.

Prospects for the future – and how should the US respond to the upheavals in the Middle East

In Tunisia, with a strong tradition of effective labor unions and a general societal cohesion, the situation appears relatively more stable. The country elected with a plurality a moderate Islamist party, led by Rachid Al-Ghannouchi, a capable leader who returned from many years in exile with a populist and conciliatory agenda. His party governs as a coalition with two secular parties.

Egypt remains a work in progress. The largest country in the Middle East, with a relatively large educated population, may yet set the standard for the region. The Muslim Brotherhood, a group founded in 1928 with a strongly Islamist and Sharia law-based program was suppressed by the state for many years.

It emerged from its underground position fairly recently as the only well-organized political party in the country. The Brotherhood having sent out mixed signals with regard to its participation in the political process, nonetheless fielded a full slate of candidates, and won a significant majority in the new Egyptian parliament.

Recently the Egyptian Supreme Court has disqualified, on technical grounds, ten of the twenty-odd candidates for president. Two were members of the Muslim Brotherhood, of which one was a radical Islamist; the third was Omar Suleiman, the former vice-president closely connected with Mubarak and the military. If this stands, the election will be contested by individuals with a more moderate, secularist approach.

These three forces, the Army, the Muslim Brotherhood and the broad array of liberal and secular movements will need to contend with the financial and economic chaos now present in Egypt. Foreign exchange reserves have been almost cut in half and tourism has all but disappeared. There are no major resources to bring prosperity and Egypt

must depend on the good will of the United States for its economic survival.

The Muslim Brotherhood has formed a coalition with several other parties. Its foreign policy is likely not to coincide with US interests.

Recent prosecution of NGS's is worrisome – they represent a threat to the now near monopoly possessed by the MB in providing social services to the public outside of the Egyptian government.