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The Arab Spring: A Mythological Journey or a Myth?

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Introduction

The celebration of Ramadan in the Arab World in 2011 has been unlike any other Ramadan in recent memory. For the proceeding five years every night during this holy month of fasting the Arab street was glued to their TV's watching a drama series called Bab El Hara, which loosely translates to 'The Neighborhood Gate.' The show is about local heroes in Damascus defending their ancestral homes against the tyranny of French colonialists. This Ramadan, the highest rated TV viewership is the trial of a tyrant who's not a colonialist but is one of their own, Hosni Mubarak. It seems that in less than a year the entire Arab world has been turned upside down. The long awaited change by the people has begun and has inspired every freedom loving person from all corners of the world to support the Arab youth in their birthright pursuit of self-determination. Peoples' long-awaited dreams of the coming change from Morocco to Bahrain are on the verge of being realized, but is this the change the Arab world needs? Will these revolutions end in democratic regimes that will enable the Arab world to join the world community of Nations without terrorism and with respect for human rights?

It is important at this stage to note that no visible change in how people are governed in the rebellious countries has taken place. A closer examination of the intricate dynamics in the region might uncover a narrative that is not as simple as just ousting the dictator who is in charge. Western leaders, unaware of the memetic structures and historic patterns in the Middle East, might conclude that the outcome of Arab revolutions will resemble that of other revolutions in the world. In Tunisia, where it all started, Zein Al Abedeen abandoned his post in haste and took refuge in Saudi Arabia. Eight months on with a new government in place, demonstrators still crowd the streets demanding real reforms and the bolstering of civil rights while banners that read "Throw Out the Thieves" that ousted Zein Al Abedeen have only

grown in numbers. In Egypt, Mubarak, his cabinet and members of his family were holed up in the Red Sea resort town of Sharm El-Sheikh after his ouster, yet today demonstrators continue to crowd Tahrir Square, and the army's patience with them is wearing thin. In Libya, Yemen, and Syria, daily battles between demonstrators and loyalists to the regimes result in scores of people being killed, yet those leaders show no signs of caving in.

Brief History of the Middle East

Today's dictatorships and autocratic rule in the Arab world are symptomatic of greater hurdles the region must overcome as it seeks to achieve more advanced developmental stages. Indeed, the cultural development map of the Middle East looks vastly different than that of Europe and the West. While Europe fought for religious reformation and the entire West was fully engulfed in the industrial revolution—experimenting with science, building institutions and developing their value systems based on scientific inquiry—the Middle East faded into the background. It seems that somewhere along the line, Arab cultural development was arrested. This is the same culture that gave the world science, numerals, mathematics and astronomy. What were the factors that blocked the continued emergence of this region? And what internal and external conditions contributed to its prolonged entrapment?

There are a number of critical phases of development in the history of the region that should be examined in order to provide a better understanding of how current developments will play out. Prior to the dawn of Islam, tribal conquest was at its pinnacle and warrior kings dominated the vast nomadic deserts. The rise of the Prophet Mohammad ushered in a new religion that imposed order upon these tribes through Godly guidance and a lifestyle adherence to certain rituals that provided a guide to daily living. Science, philosophy and astronomical exploration thrived for a few centuries wherever the values of Islam were present. But, much like Christianity that was adopted by the Romans to impose passive measures on the masses and give the growing religion a cover for conquest, the Ottomans took on the mantle of Islam to quell its growing influence and to prevent its spreading throughout their empire. The ruling style of the Ottomans could be summed up in one sentence; they exploited the people and resources in the region. For close to 600 years there was no national platform that would have concentrated movements towards upward emergence. At its zenith, the Ottoman Empire covered a vast geographic area that spread from the Arabian Gulf to southeastern Europe with influence as far as Spain and North Africa. By the mid 1800s, the Ottoman, unaware of the shortcomings of their patchy and decentralized political platform, could not maintain control over some of their territories. The industrialization of European culture helped them gain military superiority over the Ottomans by adapting technological advancements into modern warfare, while the Ottomans struggled to gain a competitive



This dense wall of separation between the West Bank and Israel has served as a projection screen for the aspirations of Palestinians

technological edge. It took less than 50 years for the Ottomans to lose their vast territory. This hollow and obsolete structure of power came crashing down by the end of WWI, reducing the size of the empire to modern-day Turkey. It left an entire region of tribes, with little skills for modern self-reliance, in the hands of Western Colonialists.

The West, primarily England and France, placed the region under colonial mandates for a few decades and assumed that once a few charismatic leaders had an understanding of how Western democracies operated, the region would be in good hands. Accordingly, the Middle East was carved into arbitrary countries with artificial boundaries that did not align to tribal or clannish allegiances, but favored the colonialists' self-interest. These newly formed countries were recognized by The League of Nations and later the UN. Subsequently, the territories were left to their own devices, after a relatively short period of administrative guardianship, ignoring thousands of years of tribal and ancestral history in the process. Initially, Western powers appointed kings, thought to have historic ties to the land, to set the region on the road to progress. When these mandates ended, kingdoms started to crop up all over the Middle East. Tunisia had King Mohammad VIII, Libya had King Muhammad Idris as-Senussi, Egypt had King Farouk, and the pattern of arbitrary kingdom-ships spread through the rest of the region including Syria, Iraq and Alhijaz, which is now Saudi Arabia.

To the tribal masses in the region, the imposition of monarchies by the West was paramount to a return to Ottoman rule. The monarchs simply were not in step with the changing needs of their subjects. In the 1940s and 50s, a new meme was sweeping through the tribal and feudal masses on the Arab street. They were becoming spellbound by the Arab intellectual elite who preached Stalin-style Marxism and the powerful effect it had on toppling monarchies. Several charismatic leaders, making false promises to improve lives, were able to capture the hearts and minds of the people, and in very short order overthrew the monarchs. The result was the absolute dictatorships of Saddam Hussein, Hafez Assad, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Zein al Abeddine and Moamar Al Ghaddafi.

The discovery of oil before the development of institutions and the creation of economic policies that would have properly distributed the wealth from oil revenues, further arrested the emergence of the region. Comparing a less developed culture of

an oil-rich country in the Middle East to an oil-rich country with developed institutions, like Norway, one can see the vast difference in how money is perceived through the prism of their value systems. In the former, the money goes to extended royal circles—the merchant class, dictators and their cronies, while in the latter, no more than 6% of oil revenue is put into the economy and the rest is invested in a National wealth fund to support future generations of Norwegians. It was only recently that a visionary ruler like King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia took on the mantle of creating a long-term vision for a national development program that goes beyond the age of oil.

Manifesto of a Dictator

In order to understand how effective the current revolutions will be, it is paramount to assess the damage and the impressions that these decades of dictatorships left on the collective psyche of the Arab masses. The Modus Operandi of a Middle Eastern dictator went something like this:

First: Convince the people that the primary reason for their misery is the presence of the State of Israel and build a regional political alliance that confirms the myth.

This belief was pounded into the psyche of every man, woman and child on the Arab street for more than five decades. Projecting the collective misery on the 'evil enemy' worked well as a relief valve through which pent up anger was channeled. This ideology was spread further by firebrand Imams who, with the help of their leaders, propagated the US as the greatest evil, adding to their repression by blindly supporting Israel. It is worth noting that the Arabs collectively have abused the Palestinian cause and used it for political and monetary gain more than anyone else. Palestinian refugees were kept in dire conditions in camps by their own leaders and also by Arab politicians. As this ideology festered into a pathology, every extremist wanting to start an Al-Qaeda-like chapter from Detroit to the Philippines invoked the Palestinian cause.

Second: Suspend most if not all civil liberties and impose emergency laws under the guise that in order for the government to ensure peace it must be able to deny any right to due process.

These controls instilled horror into any free thinker who dared to speak against the regimes, many of whom were hauled off to



above. Our focus is the future generation of the Middle East; left. Meeting with Daraa Governor in 2007, the 2nd highest official in the Baath Party, left me wondering why Assad would appoint him to this remote area. Now we know; the uprising started in Daraa

prison never to be heard from again. The governments made sure that everyone knew about the fate of these so-called infidels. The fear of speaking out spread at a systemic pace.

Third: *Feed the masses carefully selected propaganda and inject it into an antiquated educational system that serves to praise the leader for preserving Arab dignity and safety and that warns against the adoption of Western values.*

Of all the dictatorial policies, this was the most damaging to the development of long term capacities of Arab culture. Education and the expansion of the mind was a dangerous thing in the eyes of the dictator. The UNDP reported in 2006 that the region suffers from rates of illiteracy that are as high as 80%. On average the entire Arab world produces less than one tenth of the scientific papers per capita compared to developed countries. The basic institutions that build human capacities simply do not exist here.

Fourth: *Build a military and a ruling class whose primary goal is to keep the dictator in power.*

This was a common and very pervasive policy that insured the anchoring of the regime, especially if a country was rich in natural resources or received foreign aid. In most cases, absent a national development plan, working for the regime was the only opportunity to earn a good living. The knowledge that this privilege could be taken away at the first sign of dissent kept many people loyal to the regime for many generations and created an internal division that might prolong the demise of a dictator when such time comes. This was seen in Tahrir Square and is being repeatedly played out daily on the streets of Damascus, Tripoli, Yemen and Bahrain.

Anatomy of the Arab Spring

The lack of awareness for the need to innovate was one of the biggest flaws in a Middle Eastern dictator's platform. The tapping of phone lines and eavesdropping on conversations were things the young generations easily outsmarted. These young men and women—children of Google, Facebook, Skype and Yahoo!—were communicating with people all over the world, exchanging love songs and freedom-filled ideas and dreams. The barrier of fear that their parents experienced with dictators had disappeared with Gen Y and the Millennia generation as they were able to witness and experience freedom over cyberspace. The news of

young Abu Azizi setting himself on fire in Tunisia created the perfect storm that mobilized young people from Tunisia and Egypt and on to Yemen, Syria, Bahrain and Iraq.

Political experts and analysts, without having the deep understanding of the underlying cultural tectonic plates that are at play, have offered several trajectories on how the Arab Spring will evolve. Essential factors that are rarely considered by Western governments and political advisers

are the memetic profiles [core values] of the Arabs that are rising in these cultures, having been shaped by the chaotic, repressive and passive history of the region. Based on many years of research and experience in global hot spots, Dr. Don E. Beck, a renowned developmental theorist, points out that the next natural step after a revolution is the disintegration of a culture. As events unfold, Beck's views are increasingly confirmed. Yes, indeed the short-term future of the region might not look as bright and euphoric as Tahrir Square looked on the day Mubarak stepped down, but a few decades from now elements of uniquely Arab democratic institutions will be emerging.

Today, the Libyan rebels are unified against Ghaddafi, but no unified singular voice has emerged to put Libya on the road to democracy. Western military involvement is always viewed with suspicion and many commentators in the Arab world are viewing NATO's involvement as the new oil colonization by the West. It does not escape anyone in the region that NATO's power is behind the rebels' successful efforts to enter Tripoli. Are these rebels capable or ready to produce a democratic Constitution that will replace the Green book, Ghaddafi's bible? Although Ghaddafi's ouster will be a good start, the path to organizing and structuring Libyan society, which is now centered in tribal and exploitative value-systems, remains a formidable task. Since cultures cannot skip a developmental stage they have to go through the pangs of nation building in order to evolve to a place where everyone is equal under the law.

For Syria the patterns of emergence are becoming even more violent than in Libya, especially since NATO does not want to meddle with Syria's protector and benefactor, Iran. Military interference could lead to a regional conflict between Shias and Sunnis since Syria, Iran and Hezbollah form the Shia Crescent in the region. Assad, the current president of Syria, so far has followed in the same butcher footsteps of his father and shows no signs of relinquishing power. The collapse of the Syrian regime will have dire ramifications on Lebanon, Jordan and Israel; the only organized movement that can fill the power vacuum is the Muslim Brotherhood; in Syria, the Brotherhood is far more radicalized than it is in Egypt.

In Iraq a natural disintegration took place a few years after the coalition's invasion. The Kurds in the north have formed their semi-autonomous state with oil revenues coming to the coffers of

the tribal government of the two main tribes, the Talibanis and Barazanis. Baghdad and its surrounding areas are becoming the stronghold for Sunnis, while the south, including Basra and the two main Shia holy cities of Najaf and Karbalaa, is very much influenced by Iran as it becomes a Shia stronghold.

It is fair to say that the whole region is in search of a new identity. It will take time to forge a coherent platform. The collective, much like the individual search for identity, must go through the 'dark night of the soul' and that will be a long and painful process.

An Emergence-Prone Manifesto

Fortunately, this is all happening during the age of the Internet where access to knowledge and the help of integrally informed political allies can speed things along the road to establishing viable and productive Arab states. In light of these realities and in designing for that profound shift that must take place, we at the Center for Human Emergence Middle East would outline the following plan of action:

Build a Viable Palestinian State. First and foremost, the issue of Israel/Palestine is of critical importance as it occupies a deep place in the collective Arab psyche. When most of these nations were gaining their independence, they viewed Israel as the entity that deprived Palestinians of nationhood. Right or wrong, this is how Israel is viewed in the Arab world. The elements of a Palestine Design Conference on our website outlines a development plan that will put Palestine on the road to independence.

Pursue A Stratified Approach to Arab Democracy. Accomplish this by pursuing the following three objectives:

1. *Conduct a region-wide study of the profiles of the citizens in the country seeking democracy.* This step starts by assessing each individual country's history, religion, topography and cultural evolution. Who are the Egyptians, the Tunisians, the Libyans and the Syrians, etc.? How have the historic events mentioned in this article shaped their cultural evolution? What is their psychological makeup?

2. *Identify each country's zones of synergy.* These are the respective sources of national wealth, be it natural resources or human capital, active or dormant. This will form the basis for a viable private sector that can provide jobs that fit the landscape and various capacities of the citizens—from building cement factories and designing sustainable agricultural models for laborers to creating the most advanced hi-tech research and development companies.

3. *Design Forms of Governance that work.* This will be a painstaking process that will take years to evolve into a coherent platform for governance. Now we can talk about what form of democracy fits the citizens who live in such dynamic landscapes and what form of institutions are needed. Would a centralized form of democracy for this stage of development fit better than a multi-party democracy? Would a monarchy like that of Saudi Arabia with varying degrees of openness be a transitional fit for a few decades? All this should happen with an enlightened co-leadership that can create an overarching goal for a patriotic national cause that brings forth the state into the community of

nations and one that Shia, Sunni and Christian within that nation can rally behind.

Alter US Foreign Policy and Base it on Natural Design. A bold declaration in new US foreign policy should be made that balances America's values and strategic and economic interests in the region. Sadly, we are faced with a tradition of mistrust towards the United States by the Arab world. It's often seen protecting the two things closest to it; oil and Israel. Some of that mistrust and anger is justified and some stems from the Arab street projecting their own aggression onto the West.

Align With and Empower Regional Nations of Influence. The US and NATO should call on the major power brokers in the region like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Morocco and now Egypt to help facilitate their playing a more assertive role in brokering political deals in return for security guarantees. This type of regional leadership should be encouraged, especially when it comes from another Muslim country in which enemy projections are not made.

Pursue a Systemic Approach to Economic Development. The West should team up with Arab Gulf States to help in the economic development of emerging Arab democracies. Along with the IMF, the World Bank and the respective countries that are being rebuilt, the leaders in charge of these development plans should have an 'ecosystem' approach to development that addresses the causes of corrupt business practices. The Arab Spring is signaling the birth of Industrial Age values that were postponed under the Ottomans, but are now emerging simultaneously with the information and knowledge age. This must be promoted through responsible corporate practices and matched by transparency in governments that believe in their people as their ultimate national strength. To affect real and lasting change, a plan similar to the Marshall Plan in its ambition must be undertaken and tailored to fit the tribal and feudal mindsets that are prevalent in the region.

The Start of the Journey

The road to cultural emergence in the Middle East is filled with many false starts, initiated by leaders who used their charisma and iron fists to overcompensate for the lack of complexity or the lack of a developmental roadmap for their countries. Today, the long-awaited battle for self-determination has begun. This revolution is led by a globalized Arab youth who have answered the call while being fully aware of the consequences. Thus, the Hero sets out on a path filled with hope and all the perils that a culture has to experience on such a mythological journey.

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