

The “Arab Spring” : Rebirth or Final Throes of Pan-Arabism?

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Contents

- [Arabist Regimes also under \(...\)](#)
- [Resurgence of Injured National](#)
- [Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya: \(...\)](#)
- [A new Arab Unity of Sentiment?](#)

The he winds of social and democratic revolution currently blowing through the Arab world have spared neither resource-poor countries such as Tunisia and Jordan, nor wealthy, oil-rich states such as Bahrain, Oman and Algeria. It has shaken regimes which have hitherto concealed their authoritarianism beneath a cloak of sham democracy, such as Egypt and Yemen, as well as overtly dictatorial regimes such as Libya. The geopolitical unity of a region reaching “from the Gulf to the Ocean” - to use a ritual pan-Arab catchphrase - has become apparent in the unexpected shape of synchronous struggles for justice and freedom.

The targets of these uprisings are the autocratic rulers who have, in some cases, held power for decades, and whose only plans for renewal are based on the reassuring strictures of family succession: ageing despots eventually ceding their thrones to their own offspring. So it comes as no surprise that this simultaneous eruption of feeling has revived pan-Arabist sentiments. Several national branches of the Ba’ath Party have hailed the ongoing process as a great “Arab revolution” [1]. And while the credibility of that particular pan-Arabist organization was damaged by the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the discrediting of his arch-rival Syria, their enthusiastic proclamations have been echoed by many substantially more influential Arabist intellectuals.

Egyptian Yahia al-Qazzaz, for example, asserts that “what we are now witnessing as revolutionary growth cannot be described as a series of national revolutions. It effectively represents an unprecedented revolution of the Arab nation, which burst into life in Tunisia and then found firm footing in Egypt, reflecting the latter’s position as largest Arab state” [2]. This Arab awakening [3] is presented as a probable precursor to a transnational movement of unification: “The question remains: can [it] can provide the basis for a system of government that functions as a union, federation or confederation [...]. This is what I hope; this is the old dream we all share!”

Other intellectuals share the Arabist convictions expressed by Yahia al-Qazzaz, although they do not ponder, as he does, on the possible “unionist” implications of the Arab intifadas. Jordanian Abdallah al-Naqrash writes: “The fact is that in one form or another [...], Arab revolutions are happening in Tunisia, in Egypt, in Yemen, in Libya ([4] [...].” Similarly, Sudanese writer Taha al-Noaman does not hesitate to group these uprisings together under the heading of “second Arab Revolt [5]”, the first being the Arab Revolt of 1916 when the Arabian peninsula and several countries in the Levant - with the active support of the British - declared war on the Ottoman Empire. “Despite apparent differences in orientation and certain issues on their agendas, these two revolts share key common elements, central to which is liberation of the will of the [Arab] nation.” Another Sudanese author, Ayman Suleiman, draws a finer distinction when he states that “the true great Arab Revolt, working

to achieve genuine independence and unity” is the one which started in Tunisia at the end of 2010, and not “the English revolt of the Sharif of Mecca.” [6]

Arabist Regimes also under Fire

On closer examination, such arguments look more like wishful extrapolations, based on little more than the close proximity of these intifadas in space and time - intifadas which the international press, for the sake of convenience, has bundled under the generic heading of “Arab Spring”. It is relatively easy to counter them with facts that establish the primacy of national feeling behind each of the uprisings. Rulers with Arab nationalist pretensions such as Muammar Gaddafi - and, to a lesser extent, Bashar al-Assad - have not managed to evade the wrath of the people. And linguistic minorities who have developed a distinctly anti-Arabist stance over the past twenty years have nevertheless been involved in the protests: Berber-speaking groups played an active role in Algeria and Libya, while in Morocco, recognition of Berber (Tamazight) as an official language was one of the key demands made during the demonstrations on February 20, 2011, on an equal footing with adoption of a democratic constitution.

As for inter-Arab solidarity, this was expressed less weightily than on previous occasions. Marches certainly took place in Egypt in support of the Tunisians and Libyans, and in Tunisia in support of the Egyptians. Even so, they did not mobilize the tens of millions of Arabs who, in 1990-1991, joined in condemning the Allied military intervention in Iraq for days at a time. While it is true that in Cairo and Tunis people chanted slogans denouncing the Jewish state, and that on the walls of Benghazi you will find graffiti describing Muammar Gaddafi as an “agent of Israel and America”, it is difficult to assert that, in the midst of all this turmoil, the Palestinian cause has maintained its status as the “central cause of Arabs everywhere” (to use a cliché popular in Arabist rhetoric).

Resurgence of Injured National Pride

Thus only low-key pan-Arabist references are made in the slogans of the Arab Spring and the rhetoric of the political parties involved (with the obvious exception of Ba’athists, Nasserites and others who are not, in reality, playing a key role in these events). On the other hand, former symbols of national patriotism have been revived. In Tunisia, once the civil disobedience movement spread beyond its starting point in the westcentral region, the Tunisian national anthem became a major rallying cry. In Egypt, one of the slogans chanted by the millions of protesters in Tahrir Square and elsewhere was the single word “Masr”, which is the country’s Arabic name. In the Egyptian media, comparisons were frequently made between the “Revolution of 25 January” and the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 calling for national independence [7]. In Libya the rebels adopted the old Libyan flag dating from before the Nasser-inspired coup led by Muammar Gaddafi on September 1, 1969. They also revived the memory of Omar Mukhtar, heroic leader of the native resistance to the Italian occupation, fiercely claiming his support against the regime [8]. And in the demonstrations that took place in the Palestinian Territories during February 2011, protesters asserted the need for reunification and denounced the Israeli occupation. Furthermore, it is significant that the Palestinian demonstrations organized at the end of January 2011 in support of the Egyptian uprisings were banned in Gaza (by Hamas) and on the West Bank (by the Palestinian Authority) in case they touched upon the thorny issues of domestic policies.

The Arab Spring has played a significant role in liberating national pride which had previously been stifled or else expressed itself in distorted and even chauvinistic ways, at sporting events, for example [9]. In Egypt, hopes are growing that the state may be able to act independently of the USA

and - above all - of Israel on the region's geopolitical stage. And if opposition speeches (by the Muslim Brotherhood and Nasserites, for example) tend to remind us of the need for the Egyptian authorities to "serve the interests of Arabs rather than those of their adversaries [10]", it is difficult not to discern traces of an over-sensitive patriotism still suffering from the humiliation of Hosni Mubarak's pro-American reign.

Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya: A New Medium for Arab Politics

Demonstrating the primarily national motivation behind each of the Arab uprisings is not the same as asserting that they exerted no influence on each other at all. The Arab dictators are perceived as a league of tyrants, unified [11] by the similarities in their methods of government and their subservience to the major powers - the USA and the European Union. From this perspective, it makes absolute sense that the fall of Ben Ali should pave the way for the fall of Mubarak, and that scenes of jubilation in Morocco, Yemen and Lebanon should greet the victories of Tunisians and Egyptians over their oppressors.

The Arab Spring appears to be redefining relations between Arabs. Never before has the Arab League appeared so clearly in such a harsh light - as a coordinating authority for repressive regimes. Certainly the League attempted to prevent the spread of revolutionary fervor after Ben Ali's flight from power by dedicating the summit meeting on January 19 to "the fight against unemployment and poverty", but the succession of revolts which followed the summit confirmed that the League has reached the end of its historical validity. Unless it is rebuilt on new foundations, the League is doomed to be nothing more than a dusty exhibit in the museum of antediluvian autocracy.

This new Spring is only possible because unifying factors have long been at work in the Arab world at geopolitical level. One of these factors is undoubtedly the massive popular rejection of the foreign military presence in the Middle East, as well as the close collaboration of North African security forces with NATO and the EU. Another factor is the enormous popularity of the pan-Arab media network which competes so vigorously with the various national media, the most influential of them being the satellite television broadcasters such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya [12].

These channels played a key role in the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolts. Without them - given the stringent state control of social networks and even of basic Internet access - the revolutionary slogans could not have spread so far or resonated on such a scale. But long before these two uprisings, the TV channels had already helped to create a transnational milieu for Arab media and politics in which the same debates were raging. Their coverage of events in Iraq and Palestine, and of Israel's wars with Lebanon and Gaza, helped to shape a new, anti-imperialist unity of opinion among Arabs. And by giving a voice to bullied opposition movements and courageous, militant NGOs, they helped to shape a similar, antidespotic unanimity. By enabling populations to share their political experiences "from Gulf to Ocean", they encouraged the emergence of a shared democratic dream - a dream that excluded neither the secular nor the religious, and which embraced the specific concerns of minorities such as Berbers, Kurds and others. By playing this transnational role, the media have also helped to strengthen the unity of the Arabic language. One could even assert that thanks to them, Modern Standard Arabic is now entering its golden age. Never before has the language been so unified. In particular, never before has it so successfully facilitated communication between the elites in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain and other Arab countries - communication that would otherwise have been severely hampered by national dialectal disparities.

A new Arab Unity of Sentiment?

The Arab Spring is tracing the outlines of a new, pan-Arab unity of sentiment, based less on ethnic or racial considerations than on a broadly political stance: rejection of foreign domination, aspiration to freedom, belief in the possibility of change. This new sentiment – forged in the crucible of bloody battles against despotism and in pursuit of social justice – has little in common with the attitudes that flourished during the hey-day of Arab nationalism which, while anti-imperialist in nature, were also inimical to human and democratic rights. It would be more accurate, perhaps, to compare it to the “Latin American experience”, cemented by resounding victories against unpopular and often pro-American regimes.

Traditional Arabism, which sacrifices the imperatives of equality and freedom at the altar of an illusory unity, has had its day. It no longer acts as a barrier between the Arab peoples and their dignity. It is likely that another kind of Arabism is about to emerge into the light. If it is strongly anti-imperialist, this will not be solely because of the military powers occupying Iraq, but also because of their ongoing support for the autocratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa. And if it is secular, this is because the uprisings of the Arab Spring are the work neither of Islamists nor of Arabists who, no matter how secular they may be, still believe that religion has an important place in any definition of a common Arab identity [13].

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P.S.

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<http://boell-meo.org/web/52-579.html>

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Footnotes

[1] In a statement by the executive body of the Ba’ath-party in Tunisia, dated February 11, 2011 (on the organization’s Facebook page), we find: “The revolution of proud Egypt, carrying on the Tunisian Arab revolution, is a bright milestone on the road to global Arab revolution, with the aim of defeating the corrupt and despotic regimes which have sanctioned the fragmentation [Arab] nation.” In another statement by the Arab Socialist Avantgarde Party in Lebanon dated February 1, 2011 – also a Ba’athist organization with a Facebook page entitled “Al-uruba al-jadida” (New Arabism), we find: “Although the revolutions of the Tunisian and Egyptian peoples have, in their demands for bread and work, expressed themselves as an aspect of class, they also wear another, Arab nationalist face.”

[2] This article was published on February 22, 2011 on many Arab nationalist websites such as “al-Ba’s al-arabi” (Arab strength) and “Zaman al-arab” (the time of the Arabs).

[3] As evidence of the reality of this Arab awakening, the author highlights a statement made by former Chief of General Staff of the Israel Defence Forces Gabi Ashkenazi who, while commenting on the Egyptian uprising on January 25, 2011, advocated “greater humility in our judgements on the Arab world”. This statement was reported in the 15.2.2011 edition of Egyptian newspaper Al-Badil (<http://www.elbadil.net>).

[4] Article entitled “Lessons of the current Arab revolution”, published on March 2, 2011 on the website of Jordanian press agency AmmonNews (<http://ammonnews.net>).

[5] Article entitled “The second great Arab Revolt”, published in the March 1, 2011 edition of Sudanese newspaper Akher Lahza (<http://www.akhirlahza.sd>).

[6] Article entitled “The true and the false great Arab Revolt”, published on February 23, 2011 in Sudanese online newspaper Sudanile (<http://www.sudanile.com>).

[7] Many press articles established this analogy between the Egyptian intifada of January 25, 2011 and the Egyptian revolution of 1919. We will confine ourselves to citing the article by Imad al-Din Shahin entitled “The Revolution of 25 January and the new Egyptian renaissance”, published on March 7, 2011 on the Egyptian website Onislam (<http://www.onislam.net>), and the article by Talaat al-Maghribi entitled “The Revolution of 1919 and the Revolution of 2011”, published on March 4, 2011 on the website of Al-Wafd, the main publication of Egypt’s New Wafd Party (<http://www.alwafd.org>).

[8] Appeals by organizers of the uprising were addressed to the “grandsons of Omar Mukhtar”.

[9] This was certainly the case in Egypt and Algeria in November- December 2009 during the qualifying rounds for the 2010 Football World Cup, and again in Egypt and Tunisia in October 2010 during the Africa Cup of Nations football championship.

[10] Article by Yahia al-Qazzaz cited above (cf. Endnote 2).

[11] This solidarity is symbolized by, among other things, the coordination apparent between Interior Ministers of the various states in the Arab League.

[12] Encouraged by the popularity of Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, European broadcasters have recently launched Arabic-language TV channels (France 24 Arabe in 2007, BBC Arabic in 2008).

[13] Let us quote, for example, Michel Aflaq, one of the founders of the Ba’ath Party: “So long as there remains a close correlation between Arabism and Islam, so long as we regard Arabism as a body the soul of which is Islam, there is no reason to fear that the Arabs will overstep the limits of their nationalism, which will never be affected by the spirit of injustice and imperialism.” Speech entitled “To the memory of the Arab Prophet” delivered in the amphitheater of the former Syrian University – now the University of Damascus – on 5.4.1943 (cited on <http://albaath.online>).