GUEST EDITOR’S NOTE

PERSPECTIVES ON THE ARAB UPRISINGS

Tareq Y. Ismael

This special issue of *Arab Studies Quarterly* has its origins in the 10th Conference of the International Center of Contemporary Middle Eastern Studies, held at Eastern Mediterranean University, December 12-14, 2011. Many of the articles published were selected from the conference proceedings, and revised and updated for inclusion in this issue.

The wave of protests that overtook the Middle East beginning in late 2010 were both shocking and celebrated. They were “shocking” in the sense that the Middle East, owing to its geostrategic placement and relationship vis-à-vis the major powers, has long been a byword for dictatorship. While the underlying corruption and misrule of the Arab state system was widely noted by area scholars and government analysts, the speed of the unraveling left many experts unprepared.¹ Over the course of 2011, anti-government protestors forced the exile of Ben Ali of Tunisia, the resignation and later conviction of Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and in Yemen, President Ali Abdullah Saleh was forced to resign his Presidential office (while remaining influential as head of the General People’s Congress, Yemen’s ruling political party). In a different context, armed opponents of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, with the substantial aid of a NATO bombing campaign, captured and killed the long-time President and initiated a political transition thereafter.

The speed of political developments through 2011, and the self-sacrifice and “youthfulness” of the movement—embodied in the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia and the gathering of protesters in Egypt’s Tahrir Square—inspired much international excitement, as to many observers, the decrepit political order of the region appeared to have passed, giving rise to a new spirit of democracy and human rights. And indeed, the mere success of the political revolts in forcing the end of multiple “stable” dictatorships broke the regional psychology of fear, suggesting that an alternative was in fact possible.

Yet, as momentous as developments in the Arab world have been, prospects have subsequently dimmed, with fearful specters taking form: militarized sectarianism; counter-revolution; and the ongoing machinations of the great powers and its regional clients (chiefly, Saudi Arabia). In Syria, these forces have coalesced in terrible fashion, as the country has been plunged into outright civil war, with deaths in the
tens of thousands (in early 2013, the UN General Assembly President estimated that over 80,000 had been killed). Moreover, the politicized and militarized sectarianism that was earlier presaged by the terrible violence in neighboring Iraq, now colors the struggle in Syria, the Alawi-dominated government facing an opposition that has been increasingly associated with a Sunni Islamist orientation. The FSA’s attempt to present itself as a non-confessional nationalist resistance saw it appoint George Sabra, a Christian social-democrat, as its President, before replacing him days later with a former imam from the Umayyad mosque of Damascus. Since the onset of the civil war, reports of explicitly sectarian violence against Alawites and Christians (the religious minorities generally allied with the regime for reasons of desperate survival) have been frequent.

The sectarian nature of the conflict in Syria has amplified with the regionalization of the conflict, with Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah allied with the Syrian government, and the Sunni monarchical regimes allied with the opposition (including suggestions of arms transfers). Likewise, (nominally) non-state actors including Islamist militiamen from neighboring Iraq, both Sunni and Shi’i—battle hardened from the sectarian battles in Iraq—have been reported crossing the border in Syria to join the battle on their respective sides. Ultimately, this “regionalization” of the struggle has had the effect of amplifying sectarian tension both within Syria as well as across the region generally, reinforcing the fears of Sunni regimes of Iranian regional influence. Sectarian strife in Syria, and beyond, represents an atavistic tendency at complete odds with the more high-minded aspirations of the Arab Spring’s infancy.

Developments throughout the region, finally, have not proceeded without the continued omnipresence of the United States and other major powers. Notwithstanding the standard American claim of favoring democratization throughout the Middle East, its historical record, both prior to and following the Arab Spring has never been quite so liberal-minded. Following the Camp David Accords of 1978, Egypt was the recipient of billions of dollars’ worth of American military aid annually, with the United States recognizing the Sadat/Mubarak autocracy as the linchpin of Arab-Israeli normalization and stability, contrary to the popular will of the Egyptian people. In the post-Mubarak era, the United States and Israel have worked to maintain this unpopular status, whether through influence imposed on Egypt’s Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) or on its elected government headed by Mohammad Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. Across the broader region, the United States’ mixed reaction to the popular uprisings has been telling, supporting the anti-Gaddafi forces in Libya and diplomatically supporting the opposition forces in Syria. Conversely, the United States has found itself in quite a different position when popular protests have challenged its regional clients, turning a blind eye to repression in Bahrain—who host the United States Fifth Fleet, the naval core of CENTCOM—and likewise acquiescing (at minimum) the
Saudi military intervention to put down opposition from Bahrain’s Shi’i majority. Likewise, the United States’ purported human rights concerns are muted in the instance of the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia itself.

This issue of *Arab Studies Quarterly* begins with Jacqueline and Shereen Ismael’s “The Arab Spring and the Uncivil State,” which examines the ongoing Arab Spring uprisings, characterizing the movement as a fundamental challenge to the postcolonial political order of the Arab world. The “uncivil state” of the Arab world is constituted as the postcolonial Arab state that inherited the oppressive apparatuses of the colonial regimes, optimizing its repressive techniques; the challenge to this order is examined in its regional and international dimensions, as well as a consideration of the role of Islamists in the political transition.

Ibrahim Aoudé’s “Egypt: Revolutionary Process and Global Capitalist Crisis” argues that capitalist globalization and its recent economic and financial crisis were main causes of the uprising. Mubarak’s neoliberal policies have exacerbated the domestic political and economic situation. The Islamists who took over the reins of government made the situation even worse. Even after the removal of President Mubarak, the situation remains in flux and unpredictable.

Gamal Selim’s “The United States and the Arab Spring: The Dynamics of Political Engineering” assesses the role of the United States in the outbreak of the Arab Spring and the course of its subsequent paths. It argues that the Arab Spring represented a strategic surprise to the United States, as the regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, and, to a lesser degree, Libya were working to satisfy US regional interests. This article argues that as the Arab Spring unfolded, over time the United States increased its involvement in the movement, attempting to steer political developments in a direction favorable to its regional interests.

Reinoud Leenders’ “Social Movement Theory and the Onset of the Popular Uprising in Syria” examines the region’s unprecedented popular mobilization with the use of social movement theory (SMT). He does so by dissecting the dynamics of Syria’s “early risers,” who brought about heretofore unseen levels of mass mobilization, thereby collectively posing the most serious challenge against Ba’thist authoritarian rule. Leenders explains how “opportunities” emanating from the Arab uprisings came to be interpreted as a momentum for change by those residing in Syria’s provincial towns including Dar’a; why regime repression failed to quell early mobilization; how protestors managed to compensate for the dearth of a solid “repertoire of contention”; and how protests spread so quickly. The author demonstrates that dense social networks characteristic of the country’s deprived regions and activists’ strenuous efforts of “framing” and “revolutionary bricolage” played an essential role in these processes before the Syrian uprising mutated into the bloody conflict—driven by violence, raw sectarianism and external meddling—that we are witnessing today.

www.plutojournals.com/asq/
Robbert Woltering’s “Unusual Suspects: ‘Ultras’ as Political Actors in the Egyptian Revolution” examines Egypt’s steadfast football (soccer) culture, commonly known as the Ultras, and evaluates reports about their involvement in the Egyptian uprising. On a more theoretical level, Woltering applies social movement theory and Bayat’s notion of street politics, and concludes that the Ultras may best be termed a revolutionary social movement.

Finally, S. Gülden Ayman’s “The Arab Upheavals and the Turkish Perception vis-à-vis the West” analyzes how the Arab uprisings have affected the way Ankara approaches its relations with the West by focusing on a comparison between the Turkish government’s reaction to the Libyan and Syrian crisis. The article asserts that in the minds of the Turkish ruling elite the Arab uprisings contributed to the compartmentalization of the West into two distinct categories, the US and Europe.

The 2011 high tide of the Arab Spring, which saw the removal of seemingly entrenched dictators, partly retreated as the internal politics of the new regimes struggled with: the continuing influence of the deep state (as with SCAF in Egypt); newly elected political parties demonstrating a mixed commitment to democratic values; efforts by the United States to lock the region in a political status quo if not status quo ante (maintaining the Arab-Israeli accommodation, protecting its regional clients against popular unrest, restraining Iranian regional influence); and the ever-present air of sectarian tension amplified by the unfolding disaster in Syria. A “conspiracy” of forces is in effect to seize political developments in the region and prevent the emergence of a new politics, one that could chart the region in a fiercely independent direction out of the political periphery. The course of the Arab Spring, hence, remains in flux and undefined.

Notes


