

## Missing key ingredients: Arab awakening and the quest for underlying rationale

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With all this hype about 'great Arab awakening', few things have to be kept in mind. First of all, while it certainly is great, or rather huge, either in terms of the size of population of e.g. Egypt, or in terms of seismic changes it is causing across the Middle East and the world, this "awakening" is nothing more than a long-overdue reaction of frustrated millions caught forever in a combined grip of grinding poverty, rule of absolutist despots, and restrictions imposed by conservative society unable to find an answer to the changing times.

No line of thought could be identified beneath this awakening that would make it truly great. Great revolutions of the past – French, Russian, even American – deserved such epithet not only because they toppled the previous regimes, but because they left lasting imprint on future of the mankind. Sometimes great minds executed revolutions to put their ideas in practice, sometimes the revolutions themselves gave birth to progressive ideas that were embodied in e.g. written constitutions. Long ago, Arabs and Muslims in general were themselves protagonists of successive waves of revolutions changing the political history of the world.

Their legacy, however, belongs entirely to history. Muslims have long ago lost capacity to critically ponder issues of crucial importance for their wellbeing. Decline of Muslim political thought and philosophy is due to many factors, which have been well studied and documented. What is important here is that such stunted intellectual capacity and inability to face the challenges of modernity forced Muslims everywhere to further isolate themselves from the world in the vain hope that the troubles that befell them would come to pass.

In more recent times, Arabs' despotic rulers for decades colluded with their western masters to remove any meaningful alternatives to their rule, which included preventing development of intellectual capacity in political and social sphere. Completely insensitive to their subjects' wellbeing and wider consequences of such policies, they were simply yearning, as all despots do, to remove any trace of credible opposition to their rule. They were also exhilarated to discover that the West, blinded by its fear of Islam as political force, shares the same passion for denying the Arabs any social and political alternative to their current despots' rule.

Such blind passion (as all true passions are blind) for maintaining status quo at any cost had double effect: it basically dumbed down Arab (and Muslim in general) political being. It, however, also made western decision makers dumb to such an extent that apparently no-one ever seriously pondered the fact that their favorite petty despots all over the Middle East are, after all, mortal, and that their rule is limited by a very inconvenient biological fact: one day they *will* die. History is full of examples proving that succession of despots is *always* very messy business, more often than not with very unpredictable consequences. Unfortunately, limits of historical knowledge of today's decision makers are seemingly limited to whatever their staff is able to compile from internet in advance of key meetings. Imperative of blindly ensuring stability at any cost was imposed on the West, as Wikileaks cables have so vividly portrayed, by Israel's equally blind dictum of protecting everything and everyone what serves its own interests in the Middle East.

With biological clock ticking, Arab despots have for some time been on the way out without anyone really noticing, except, that is, for the millions of youth living in desolate slums of Arab capitals. While western 'intelligence' services (probably intelligence as a term should forever be disassociated from these armies of clueless spooks) were ensuring their administrations on the eve of Tahrir that Mubarak's rule is as strong as ever, anyone who has ever been to Cairo could only wonder: why it took the Arabs so long? Uprisings, as many observers were quick to point out, were the result of unbearable life in countries lacking basic freedom, economic opportunity, infrastructure, equality, and rife with poverty, corruption, and police abuse.

Overhyped about the supposed 'greatness' of Arab revolt, or simply excited about the fact that Arabs *finally* stood up in defense of their rights, many were quick to associate these revolts to great revolutions of the past. Undoubtedly, the echo of these revolts will reverberate across the political landscape for years, if not decades. But for these upheavals to *truly* change the rule of the game in the Middle East, they need something more: an essence, political blueprint, of simply a unifying theme (beyond the desire to get rid of the current rulers, that is).

But where these *revolutionary* ideas are to come from? Gone are the Khomeinis, Sayyid Qutbs, or even secular Nassers. Arab (and Muslim world in general) does not have a school of thought trying to address the issues blighting the Muslims. Those supposed heirs of Qutb's thought, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, were watching quietly – very quietly – from the sidelines, while the youth clashed with regimes thugs in the Tahrir Square. Not a squeak was heard from supposedly radical leader of Tunisian El-Nahda 'Islamist' party (living securely in exile in Britain!) until he was invited to come back to the country by the new regime.

Has anyone heard a word recently from 'great' authorities of Islamic learning from that 'great' seat of knowledge called Al-Azhar, located but a few kilometers from the Tahrir Square? An unholy alliance between the despots and 'Ulama in the Arab and much of the Muslim world has long ago reduced the latter to a kind of folklore figures, leading prayers and occasionally issuing fatwas to support the regimes' mundane interests. What a pathetic sight in Cairo – when everything was over – with Sheikh Qaradawi musing over the people's power (not surprisingly, with the struggle now continuing with the remnants of the ancien regime, Qaradawi is once again very quiet – long history of servitude to the powers that be must have taught him a few survival tricks after all).

Have any Arab secular intellectuals, so concerned with the role of Islam in politics as they always are, come forward and try to sell to the masses the idea of home-grown democracy, so that old despots will not simply be replaced by the new? No, because they have for decades been busy playing along the regimes' interests and engaging exclusively in risk-free acts of self-gratification and are now waiting to see what new elites will emerge from chaos so that they can continue serving them.

Have any of the so vocal Muslim thinkers and 'opposition' politicians living securely in European capitals stepped forward to try to finally act what they have for decades preached? Quick scan of the 'Islamist' websites (that western 'intelligence' (again!) services want us to be so afraid

about) will reveal that currently one of the most pressing issues facing the Muslims today is – I am not making this up – evolution. Actually, they would not even debate the evolution as such, but rather whether one of their own imams should be executed for daring to think that evolution in some aspects is compatible with Islamic teachings (a view, ironically, shared by some of the greatest Muslim scientific minds in history – a fact which shows just how ignorant modern day Muslims are).

Quick check of situation in other Muslim countries around the globe would reveal these days the top Islamic authorities are busy firing salvos of fatwas on such pivotal issues such as whether practicing Yoga is permissible for Muslims (apparently not), or whether buying gifts on Valentine's makes its subjects somewhat less Muslim (apparently yes).

Those right wingers in the US and Israel that are so afraid of the potential of current 'revolutions' to mobilize the Muslim masses are rally them (heavens forbid!) around some meaningful causes could sleep well. Arab and Muslim social and political thought is simply non-existent and incapable of addressing even the most pressing issues facing population in their countries today. Witness something rather harmless (in comparison with brevity of political issues that should be debated today). For decades, ever since satellite TV and later internet exposed populations in the Middle East to 'corruptive' modernizing influences, no one has yet dared to open the debate in any of these societies about modernization.

Conservative social norms, which large majority of people came to detest and no one seemingly is happy about, remain in place and not debated in testimony of Muslims' inability to critically address the issues of seminal importance. Witness hundreds of thousands of Arabs milling around summer destinations all over the globe, where East European prostitutes are flown in by planeload to satisfy their – alas – very natural urges. Vacations over, the same Arabs return home to continue playing part in the same hypocritical game of 'traditional societies, based on moral norms and values, etc.' And here we are talking about a minority of lucky ones who can afford such letting out of steam. Think about tens of millions of their compatriots who roam the dusty alleyways of Cairo's slums in the vain hope of finding jobs and marrying – the latter being their only hope of satisfying those same, very natural, urges. One truly wonders what kept them from exploding until now?