

From “Arab Spring” to Jihadist Ice Age: Approaches to the “Complex East”

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In 2011, using the distinctive name of Operation Unified Protector, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) conducted a military intervention in Libya, under the UN mandate; and summer 2013 brought the dismaying spectacle of discord between NATO members and among the wider community regarding the need for “punitive” strikes against the Syrian regime, which was strongly suspected of having crossed a “red line” by using chemical weapons against its own rebellious population.

These two geopolitical conflicts were at the heart of what Europe and other Western nations have seen fit to call the “Arab Spring.” It has been presented as an uprising of oppressed people, in particular the young, who have used the resources of the Internet and social networks against dictatorships—ones that were firmly established—and in favor of freedom and democracy. Even though the start of these events dates back to an act of self-immolation when a young Tunisian man sets himself on fire on December 17, 2010 (not, therefore, during the spring season), this designation is understandable in light of the 1848 “Springtime of Nations,” when a great revolutionary wave spread through most of Europe. It can also be understood as a broader reference to insurrections by oppressed people (e.g., the “Prague Spring” of 1968).

But is this “spring” truly a sign of hope, or does it also contain a threat within it?

The “Arab Spring” or Hopes for the Blossoming of Democracy

In Tunisia, Ben Ali’s dictatorship collapsed in less than a month (December 17, 2010–January 14, 2011). In Egypt, it was only three weeks before President Hosni Mubarak resigned following massive demonstrations in Cairo’s Tahrir Square (January 25–February 2, 2011). In Libya (February 17–October 20, 2011), the uprising of the Benghazi population ended with the violent death of Muammar Gaddafi, even though the dictator had been in place for 42 years. In March 2011 in Syria, the first peaceful demonstrations were brutally repressed in Daraa; these were at the root of the civil war (declaration of June 12, 2012, by the UN under-secretary-general for peacekeeping operations) that would wreak havoc in the country, the string of atrocities it brought in its wake provoking strong media coverage. In February 2011, the first signs of protest were seen in Yemen against President Ali Abdullah Saleh; these led to his resignation and the election of Abd Mansour Hadi on February 21, 2012. The list goes on if we are to include Bahrain, Morocco, and Jordan, although these countries have not experienced any violence.

L’étincelle: Révoltes dans les pays arabes (The Spark: Uprisings in the Arab Countries) is the title of a work published by the great writer Tahar Ben Jelloun. It is echoed in *An 1 des révolutions arabes (Year 1 of the Arab Revolutions)* by Bernard Guetta, a former journalist with *Le Monde* newspaper, who states, “Nothing can stop [the uprising of the] people, especially

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of Arab youth.” The prominent French philosopher and journalist Bernard Henri-Lévy, who arranged the Paris meeting between Sarkozy and the Libyan NTC, leading to France’s recognition of the Libyan rebels ahead of NATO, proclaimed his profound conviction of Arab democratic emancipation. Many intellectuals, journalists, and politicians repeated the same refrain, providing a distant echo, albeit with many reservations, of the American neocon project at the start of the March 2003 Iraq war for a democratic and liberal “greater Middle East” (allied with other factors of course), the major difference now being the action taken by the people themselves.

However, can we not detect “a slight whiff of ethnocentrism . . . of Occident-centrism” (Mathieu Guidère) in this approach that fits so well with European and American history? Professor Guidère points out that, in Arabic, revolt and revolution are synonymous (*thawra*), with negative connotations insofar as they lead to *fitna* (sedition) within the *ummah*, the community of believers. This is why Arabs use the term “awakening” (*nahda*). The main demand of the insurgents was for dignity, together with social justice and an end to corruption—they were not or were hardly at all concerned with democracy. A basic feature of the “Arab Spring” was the absence of leaders and thinkers; it was impossible to perceive clearly defined ideologies and precise programs—hence the arrival of Islamist and Salafist forces to center stage, the only ones to have a structure at organizational and ideological levels.

Should we therefore fear this renewal of political Islam at the heart of the complex—not to say confused—reality of this unprecedented situation?

The Failure of the “Islamist Autumn” and the Beginning of the Jihadist Ice Age

The hope that democratic (if not liberal) political forces would be brought to power was seriously dampened in the light of election results, which undeniably put the Islamist parties in the lead.

For present purposes, Islamism is taken to mean an ideology that aims to restore the *dawla*, or Islamic state, as idealized by those who sing its praises; it therefore implies the winning of political power. Modernity is put to use by the Islamists, for whom in reality “revelation is at the service of revolution” (Olivier Roy). The Muslim Brotherhood movement (*ikhwanis*), founded by the emblematic figure of Hassan al-Banna in Egypt in 1928, is the mold for the Islamist movements that have spread throughout Islam.

Hamas in Palestine, the Libyan Party of Justice and Construction, the Egyptian Freedom and Justice Party, the Ennahda Movement in Tunisia, the Moroccan Party of Justice and Development: all are branches of the Muslim Brotherhood, having preserved more or less close links with the head office in Egypt. They agree to play the democratic game, even if they have resorted to violence during the course of their history (Hamas). With their active community networks, they reach deep into Arab society, and their actions have naturally borne some fruit. Despite this, they have not been able to match up to the hopes they embodied, and have therefore reaped the bitter harvest of popular disillusion.

The Ennahda Movement in Tunisia received 40% of votes at the Constituent Assembly election on November 14, 2011, and its leader Jebali was appointed prime

minister. In Morocco, the Justice and Development Party acquired 27% of votes in the House of Representatives in 2011 and its leader was also appointed prime minister by King Mohammed VI. It is interesting to note that these two parties formed a coalition with other political powers of different tendencies (such as the left-wing Ettakatol party in Tunisia).

Egypt witnessed the triumph of the Muslim Brotherhood, which obtained a relative majority in the Constituent Assembly but, most importantly, saw one of its members become president: in June 2012 Mohammed Morsi won out, with almost 52% of votes in the second round, against Ahmed Chafik, the unofficial army candidate.

It is true to say, on the other hand, that the Islamist surge did not reach Libya: the 21.3% votes for the Justice and Construction Party placed it far behind the (so-called "liberal") National Forces Alliance with its 48.8% at the poll on July 7, 2012, for the National General Congress. Moreover the case of Yemen has very little connection to the "Arab Spring," since it involved a leadership tussle for power arbitrated by the Saudi Kingdom and the United States, causing President Saleh to vacate his position, thanks to a prepared "election," in favor of his "friend" and vice president, Mansour Hadi.

The electoral victory of the Islamists gave rise to mistrust, not to say doubt, in the West, even if some wanted to believe in the possibility of a democratic Islam.

In Morocco, the PJD recognizes royal authority and coexists with the *makhzen* (the royal system for controlling the country). Its intentions to date have been peaceful and conservative: after all, is not the monarch the commander of believers and a direct descendant of the Prophet?

In Tunisia, Ennahda claims to follow the Turkish example, meaning that of the (Islamist) Justice and Development Party that has held power for years, and it does not question the foundations of the secular state; at the same time it "Islamizes" legislation when this is possible. Nevertheless, the leader of the Ennahda parliamentary group proposed in February 2012 that the system of Islamic values should be one of the main benchmarks of the future constitution, which should not contain provisions that were contrary to the Koran. Moreover, a bill has been tabled that aims to sanction attacks on sacred values. Prime Minister Jebali himself has not hesitated to speak of a sixth caliphate.

This ambiguity is also apparent in the Egyptian Freedom and Justice Party. The younger party members proclaim "essential democracy," kinship with Christian Copts, and the need of equal status for women. President Morsi has declared that he would not question the peace treaty with Israel, and did not hesitate to react firmly against the commando attacks in Sinai on August 5, 2012. However, a quite considerable proportion of the brothers do not identify with the modernism of the young, often Western-trained cadres, but more with the historic slogan "God is our objective. The prophet Mohammed is our leader. The Qur'an is our law."

The key role played by the Syrian Brothers at the heart of the revolt similarly disturbs Western decision makers, even while the leaders of the Free Syrian Army are affirming their desire for a Syria that respects multiconfessionalism. But it is above all the existence of violent Salafist groups that poses a problem, and indeed the "Arab Spring" was an unhoped-for opportunity for Salafism to return to the fore.

Salafism's intention is to return to the idealized Islam of pious ancestors or *salafs*, making the *Sunnah* and therefore the practice of the Prophet paramount. Ibn Taymiyyah in

the twelfth century and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (founder of Saudi Wahhabism) in the eighteenth century are its models, having advocated and implemented a rigorist if not Puritan Islam.

Salafism most often manifests itself in a quietist manner without a political project, and it is concerned above all that the believer should follow Koranic precepts to the letter. But there are wide gaps between this version and Jihadism, or the recourse to violence in the name of Jihad; this is sometimes called a “holy war” (a purely Christian term!), whether it be local (Chechnya, Afghanistan) or global (al-Qaeda). “All jihadists are by definition Salafists, but all Salafists are not necessarily jihadists” (Malek Chebel).

It was in Egypt that the Salafists achieved a significant electoral breakthrough, with almost 25% of votes in the Constituent Assembly elections for the Al-Nour (Light) party. This party promotes a society in which sharia will be applied without concession, particularly with regard to women’s status; they are thus in direct competition with the Muslim Brothers, who by comparison are undeniably modernist reformers.

The situation is somewhat similar in Tunisia, where Salafist pressure is very strong. The movement did not put forward a candidate at the 2011 elections, and the most that can be said is that in September 2012 an openly Salafist Tunisian Prosperity Party was set up, appealing for the restoration of bigamy. The Salafists prefer to use the weapon of street demonstrations, even if they are sometimes violent.

This has been true of Tunisia, where recurring riots have broken out. In June 2012 the pretext for them was an exhibition of paintings judged to be anti-Islamic; in October 2011, the premises belonging to a television channel were attacked after it had broadcast a “blasphemous” film; and in April 2012 Salafist students provoked violent incidents at the Manouba Faculty of Letters, demanding (to no avail) that female students should wear the *niqab*. The pressure on Ennahda is evident, and certain more conservative elements of the party are quite susceptible.

President of the Republic Moncef Marzouki, a lay person who emerged from the Congress for the Republic, considers that “it is . . . a strident, pernicious phenomenon . . . but in the end it presents very little danger for society, which massively rejects it. It is a rejection shared by the state authorities . . . including Ennahda.”

These soothing remarks were belied by two murders committed in 2013: the assassinations of the lawyer Chokri Belaïd and the National Constituent Assembly member Mohamed Brahmi were attributed to the Jihadists, and there followed sporadic confrontations with the army. These murders caused anger in the opposition, whose two main movements are the Popular Front (a coalition of 11 left-wing parties) and Nidaa Tounes (center right), and they also provoked the anger of the General Union of Tunisian Workers, a powerful trade union.

A major political crisis broke out, leading to the resignation of the prime minister, who was replaced by another Ennahda member, Ali Laarayedh. The work of the Constituent Assembly was blocked between August 2013 and early 2014, with the opposition clamoring for the government’s resignation, and the government demanding an agreement on the constitution, the timetable, and electoral law before it did so. The Islamists were reproached for their indulgence toward the most violent Salafists, in particular those belonging to Ansar al-Sharia, a militant group that has carried out numerous acts of terrorism and has pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda; they were also blamed for their failure on the social and economic front.

They finally agreed to make way for a government of technocrats in January 2014, but lost the parliamentary elections on October 26 to Nidaa Tounes, whose candidate for the presidential election, Caid Essebsi, was elected on December 2 with 55.7% of the votes.

Although Egypt had become familiar at election time with sectarian Salafism, it also had to face Jihadist Salafism. After all, was not the new head of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian? Although Jemaah Islamiyah, an important terrorist group, was dismantled after the terrible Luxor attack in 1997, terrorist acts still continued. Between 2004 and 2006, 130 people died during a series of attacks in Sinai beach resorts, and in 2011 a commando killed eight Israelis in this same region. The group al-Tawhid wal-Jihad claimed responsibility.

On August 5, 2012, another commando slaughtered 16 Egyptian soldiers before attempting in vain to enter Israel; this brought about an immediate reaction by President Morsi, who ordered air strikes with the agreement of his neighbor. Consequently, for the last few years Sinai has become the haunt of Jihadists. Al-Qaeda has established itself there, arousing fears of it joining forces with Jund Ansar Allah, an important Palestinian group in the Gaza Strip.

On September 17, 2012, an imam, Fouad Ashoush, issued a fatwa on Jihadist Internet sites that condemned the crew of the film *The Innocence of Muslims* to death.

However, and paradoxically, it was the Muslim Brotherhood that was to be the target of popular fury, relayed by the army. President Morsi had his constitution plan adopted by referendum on December 15 and 22, 2012 (63.8% of the votes were in favor, but only 32.9% of the people voted, and the campaign was marred by serious acts of violence). It was undeniably Islamist and considered by the opposition, which had regrouped within the National Salvation Front, to be dangerous for the rights of women and minorities, including the Copts.

However, he came up against the obstacle of the law (the Constitutional Court invalidated the Senate and the Constitution Panel, both composed mainly of Islamists, on June 2, 2013) and had to face increasingly widespread dissent, which reproached him for his authoritarianism and inability to improve the social and economic situation. The campaign launched by the Tamarod (Rebellion) civil movement gathered more than 22 million signatures for an early presidential election in June 2013.

Following huge demonstrations (estimated to be around 17 million people), the army stripped the president of his functions and installed Adly Mansour, president of the Constitutional Court, in an interim capacity. Meanwhile, there were bloody clashes between the police and the Muslim Brothers, who ended up retreating after more than 1,400 of their members had died and 15,000 others had been arrested. But the brotherhood has a long history of underground operations.

Field Marshal Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was elected head of state on May 28, 2014. His firm policies were supported by the majority of the population, who were weary of political disorder and economic blunders. For all this, Jihadist terrorism did not wane, particularly in Sinai (where in 2014 there were almost 500 deaths in one year), but also in Cairo and in the Nile Delta region. The shadow of DAESH (the Arabic acronym for Islamic State in Iraq and the Middle East) then began to hover over Egypt.

Although in post-Gaddafi Libya there have been no significant electoral protests by the Salafists, this movement is nevertheless active through its deployment of weapons. Within the space of a few months, there have been attacks against foreigners and foreign delegations from Britain, America, and France. These reached their peak (if one might call it that) with the commando attack against Ambassador Stevens in Benghazi. The Libyan

authorities accused the Salafist group Ansar al-Sharia of being the perpetrators, although this group denies it. A certain Libya Shield Force might also be suspects.

Since then, anarchy has reigned in the country, which has experienced regular Jihadist attacks. Neither the legal and legitimate parliament elected on June 25, 2014, nor the government of Abdullah al-Thani control the territory, and they have even had to retreat to Tobruk. The coalition Fajr Libya, made up of an alliance of Islamist-backed militias, controls the official capital, while the city of Derna has fallen into the hands of Islamic State, which sees itself as a direct rival to Fajr Libya. Meanwhile, the Islamic Maghreb in the south of the country provides a refuge for al-Qaeda.

The most worrying problem is obviously the wars raging simultaneously in Syria and Iraq. At the start of the civil war, the armed opposition in Syria numbered Jihadist fighters in its ranks who were affiliated to various movements. Among these were the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, the al-Nusra Front (by far the most important and the most combative), and the al-Baraa Ibn Malik Martyrdom Brigade, not to mention al-Qaeda itself, operating under the name of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. However, in 2013 Islamic State and the al-Nusra Front came into conflict with one another, which meant the latter benefited from the al-Qaeda support that had been withdrawn from the Islamic State.

This marked the beginning of DAESH's (Islamic State's) spectacular rise. From summer 2014 onwards, it established a puritan, terrorist regime straddling the two states of eastern Syria and western Iraq, an area of eight million inhabitants. Its successes gained it the allegiance of a few groups previously linked to al-Qaeda or dissidents of al-Qaeda, such as Ansar Beit al-Maqdis in Egypt, Jund al-Khilafah in Algeria, and the Derna branch in Libya. The regional threat was such that a Western-Arab coalition was set up and has been regularly bombing DAESH since the summer of 2014.

It is impossible at this stage, while intense shockwaves are still shaking part of the Arab-Muslim world, to predict what will come of all these developments. Even the Justice and Development Party in Turkey has been seriously called into question since the spring of 2013, leaving a sense of doubt about the Turkish "model" on which Ennahda liked to base itself—a doubt that is all the stronger since the Turkish attitude towards DAESH is suspect, to say the least. Egyptian Muslims, and to a lesser degree the Tunisians, disappointed the world when power was returned to them after a spring that was not of their making: the Jihadists now have an increasing presence and pose a growing threat. Is it really so certain that nations have experienced an awakening and that they will no longer give up their right to choose who governs them? The iron law of the balance of power may cause us to have doubts about the matter.