Tradition and Modernity in the "Arab Spring"

Asher Susser

Terminology has analytical significance, and word choice is not detached from basic assumptions and even conclusions that could be categorical – some more, others less. Thus the words that researchers, commentators, and observers chose to describe and analyze the revolutionary events that swept the Middle East in the past year reflect a set of cultural contexts, worldviews, expectations, and hopes. In the West, commentators adopted the term "Arab Spring" to describe what the Arabs themselves primarily cast as "revolution" (*thawra*). The use of "spring," whether consciously or not, evokes historical analogies with the "Spring of Nations" in Europe in 1848, or the "Prague Spring" of 1968, or spring 1989 in Europe with the fall of Communism. All these were characterized by national uprisings intended by peoples to shake free of repressive rule, which was to be replaced by secular/liberal/democratic regimes. In 2011, the conceptual premise was that if such was the case in Europe, then such is the case in the Middle East. This expectation was reinforced by the widespread use of the newest symbols of modern communication, the Facebook and Twitter social networks. Their use led to the common adoption of terms such as the "Facebook Revolution," meant to stress the integration of Middle Eastern societies in universal processes of change, e.g., globalization, suggesting a growing emulation of and similarity to the West.

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However this description is a striking case of "false universalism,"[1] due to its remoteness from reality and a flawed vision reflective of the inability, or unwillingness, to recognize the cultural difference of "the other." The deep undercurrents of Middle East political culture differ from those of the liberal/secular Western world, first and foremost because Middle East societies are for the most part not secular. These are societies in which the public ascribes great importance to belief, religious ritual, and religion itself as a central component of collective identity. Paradoxically, in the Western world, where there is unprecedented openness to multiculturalism, there is also an unwillingness to genuinely recognize the political/cultural difference of the other. Between outsiders' expectations at the start of this past year's events in the Middle East – establishment of liberal/secular governments on the ruins of the old regimes – and the Islamist reality that ultimately emerged, there is little resemblance. How can one explain the gaping chasm between the universal expectations and hopes of the commentators (and in their trail, politicians) and the actual results? How could these individuals have formulated assessments so detached from reality?

Terminology and Academic/Intellectual Contextualization

Any attempt to explain this mistaken assessment requires an exploration of the deep processes of change that have occurred in the Western academic and intellectual world in the post-modern era, which began to take shape after the unimaginable horrors of the Second World War. The eclipse of morality during this war, epitomized by the extermination of six million Jews in Europe through a huge, organized scientific/industrial complex of mass murder, and the use of nuclear weapons – the fruit of technological progress of the exact sciences – in order to annihilate vast numbers of Japanese at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, was unprecedented in human history. These events challenged the existence of a value-free science. The recruitment of the exact sciences for blatantly immoral goals called into question the ability to separate between science and values, morals, and even politics.

If the field of exact sciences was so affected, then all the more so were the humanities and social sciences. Following the war, an accelerated process of democratization took place at universities in the West, particularly in the US. Intertwined with the struggle for equal rights, higher

education became accessible to a range of populations and was no longer the exclusive domain of a narrow elite. Along with the democratization of higher education came the demand for democratization of the humanities and social sciences, particularly history. No longer acceptable were histories of the ruling elite written by members of this very sector, in order to preserve the existing balance of power and perpetuate what critics deemed were existing political, social, and economic wrongs. Rather, a history of the masses must be written – of the simple man and of those hitherto excluded from the ruling historical narrative, such as minorities and women – in order to rectify the injustices of the past.

An integral part of this demand to "reform the world" was the argument that one cannot separate between historical research and the ideological, moral, and political inclinations of the writers of history themselves. There is no objective truth, maintains this argument – a contention that challenged the underpinnings of rational thought of the modern enlightenment and instead claimed an infinite number of possible historical narratives. Narrative, according to this school, depends on the political agenda of every author, and accordingly, history ought to be written in order to alter the existing balance of political power. Historical inquiry is supposed to serve political change rather than strive unrealistically for an objective truth that doesn't actually exist. Thus "political correctness" sought to succeed the quest for historical truth.[2]

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This post-modern discourse did not bypass Middle East studies, as was expressed poignantly in Edward Said's frontal assault on modern Middle East theory in his highly influential book *Orientalism*. Said attacked Middle East scholars for having overemphasized the cultural difference of Middle Eastern nations due to the preponderant weight they ascribed to Islam and its culture in the life of those nations. He categorically rejected the "notion that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically 'different' inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture, or racial essence proper to that geographical space."[3]

According to Said, the old Orientalism, as in other fields of research, seeks to serve a balance of political forces, in this case, the supremacy of Western powers over nations of the Middle East. In ascribing to Islam an unchanging nature, Orientalists, maintained Said, are afflicted by "essentialism" or even racism, intended to serve the vision of the West as eternally preferable and superior to the failing and backward Middle East. Consequently, Said urged Middle East studies to correct its ways, which were the result of arrogance, overconfidence, and isolation from other fields of knowledge. He recommended that it adopt a universal, multidisciplinary approach supported by contemporary human sciences such as anthropology, sociology, political theory, and economic history. This is how "the study of so-called Oriental problems" should be pursued, precisely as any other area of the world.[4]

This article is not intended to object to interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary scholarship, nor is it designed to defend the old Orientalism in its various forms, which are, indeed, not above criticism. However, it is intended to criticize "false universalisms," i.e., those "misconceptions that arise from the tendency to assume" that the Western historical experience with social and political development is "the universal norm and has been identical for the entire world" – whereas in fact, "other religious traditions have had a different historical experience and memory with respect to the role of religion in public life, and it is precisely this memory and experience that shapes contemporary attitudes [in the Muslim world]."[5] Furthermore, the article seeks to criticize the tendency to "explain events as if they were generic phenomena inextricably linked to paradigms of a universal nature.... Such universal paradigms attempt to explain widely divergent historical developments as if differences in culture, time, and place had no vital bearing on historical outcomes."[6]

At the height of the Western academic debate over Orientalism, the well-known American scholar Michael Hudson warned his colleagues "not to throw out the political culture baby with the Orientalist bathwater."[7] For the most part, his call was not heeded, and in the enlightened Western world, developments have reached total absurdity to the point where modern Middle East scholars and observers avoid dealing with political culture almost entirely. "Saidian" pressure has won, a Pyrrhic victory it must be said, by deterring and intimidating people

from dealing with the differences or the political-cultural particularities of Middle Eastern societies, out of fear that they might be denounced and condemned as "Orientalists," "essentialists," or heaven forbid, "racists."

The use of the term "spring" in all its European analogies and the exaggerated focus on the almost magical power of Facebook and Twitter, are intended – whether consciously or not – to foster a sense of similarity between Middle Eastern peoples and their Western counterparts. Technology serves as the perfect representative of the uniformity of a universal and global world, and thus the commentators created the impression that there was no difference between virtual presence and real power in the public space. They could also ignore, reject, or totally deny the importance of the far more profound undercurrents of Egyptian society, and their political-cultural dimensions, as if they were irrelevant.

The media focused on the young people in Tahrir Square, most of whom were representatives of liberal groups. They continually interviewed English speaking, "Oxbridge-style" intellectuals, repeatedly claiming that the revolution was not Islamist, that it did not represent Islamist demands, and that the Islamist political forces were actually a marginal phenomenon. It was as if those hundreds of thousands of people in Tahrir Square, rather than the eighty-five million others who were not there, represented all of Egyptian society (not to mention the fact that in Egypt, the number of illiterate men and women far exceeds the number of those who are connected to the internet). It seems that from all the excitement of witnessing the young secular/liberal generation of the "Facebook Revolution," most Western observers failed to see the full picture that was unfolding before their eyes even in Tahrir Square itself. Members of the Muslim Brotherhood were present amid the crowd, but very wisely took positions on the margins in order to prevent the army from acting against them and/or not to arouse Western anxieties. The Western media greatly admired the exemplary conduct of the demonstrators, who posted guards at the square's entrances so as to maintain security and non-violence. They witnessed an impressive civic spirit as the demonstrators organized the cleanup of the square following the first phase of the struggle against Mubarak. But those same observers did not report, or did not know, that those who posted the guards at the entrances and organized the cleanup operation were members of the Muslim Brotherhood. It was they too who

actually supplied the microphones to the demonstrators. Only they had the necessary organizational capacity for these efforts.

Within Israeli academia, a debate developed regarding the events in Egypt between those academics of the Saidian school and their opponents. The latter maintained that the Middle East was on the verge of an Islamic tidal wave while the former adopted the "politically correct" position of Western academia and media. They argued that a new Middle Eastern democracy was taking shape here and now. In the new world of Facebook and Twitter, an Islamic takeover of Egypt was not expected, they assessed; in the free and democratic space that was filling the void left by the disintegration of Mubarak's National Democratic Party, the Muslim Brotherhood was more likely to decline than to grow. Large segments of the Egyptian public would have political alternatives that were not previously available. New parties would arise and could siphon off some of the Muslim Brotherhood vote. The Brotherhood "would remain an important part of the Egyptian polity, but not the biggest or the most important part."[8] Not a word of this assessment proved correct. There was not a shred of connection between the "politically correct" evaluation of the "Arab Spring" and the facts of life.

The Arab Awakening, Then and Now

Another term used in describing the shockwaves in the Middle East that was more appropriate and compatible with reality, less charged and evoking fewer unrealistic expectations, was the "Arab awakening." Here, however, an historical remark is in order, along with a distinction as to what is happening today. "Arab awakening" is not a new term; its origins are found in the beginning of the previous century. It was used by the Arabs themselves (*nahda*) to describe the beginnings of Arab nationalism, which became most pervasive in the Middle East in the first half of the twentieth century. One of its better known manifestations was the Arab revolt led by the Hashemites against the Turks in the First World War, followed by Arab struggles to achieve national independence and unity. At the same time, it is important to point out just how and to what extent that period was different from the current phase.

For most of the twentieth century, Arab nationalism was the ideological platform for secular politics in the Middle East. Arab nationalism, at least in theory, is basically a secular ideology. The unifying factor of the Arab

collective is the Arabic language and not the Islamic religion. Therefore, Arabism unites Muslims and Christians equally. Indeed, the leading ideologues of modern Arab nationalism included no small number of Christians. Moreover, Arab nationalism, as a secular foundation, created new opportunities for the integration of minorities into Arab politics. A good example of this was the ascent to power of the Alawis in Syria; they and other minorities took over the Ba'ath party, among whose founding fathers was the Christian Michel Aflaq.

But in recent generations, we have been witness to an entirely different phenomenon, which was highlighted in the "Arab Spring": the collapse of Arabism and with it a retreat of the secularization process in the Arab world. Secular politics declined in tandem with the defeat of Arabism, and it is this retreat that is at the foundation of the vast difference between the "Arab awakening" of the previous century and that of our time.

Many factors have combined to produce this retreat of the secularization process. The "Arab awakening" in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries was a national awakening of a secular nature. It was part of a broader process of modernization, dominated by an attempt to imitate and adopt Western ways. Westernization was a means for the Arab world to confront the West as an equal, through a process of emulation. At that time, the Western powers were at the peak of their economic, political, cultural, and ideological expansion; naturally, they were a model for emulation. On the other hand, in the post-modern age, the West is much more restrained, less sure of itself, and consumed with doubt and self-criticism. Furthermore, the Western world in recent years is in regression. That same West – secular, democratic, liberal, of economically huge proportions – is now undergoing one of the deepest economic-political and historical crises ever. As an ideal model for emulation, it lost its appeal long ago.

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Another source of modernizing inspiration following the Second World War was the Soviet model. The Soviet Union, which in a single generation transformed czarist Russia from one of the backward

countries of Europe to a superpower that only the US could rival, was a paragon for regimes and movements across the Arab world. They viewed the Soviet model as a fast track to national, military, and political power. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, nothing of this model remains, and overall, the external secular models, once a shining source of inspiration in the modern Middle East, are no more.

Yet even more important is the failure of Arabism, and in its wake, the decline of the Arabs and the collapse of their secular political platform. The political void that emerged in the wake of Arab weakness is being filled by non-Arab powers, Iran and Turkey, but they too are not secular models of emulation. Turkey is located at one end of the spectrum of Islamist models, and Iran is on the other. Turkey is a more moderate model that still has a strong secular dimension; at the other end of the spectrum is Iran of the ayatollahs. Neither state is a secular model of emulation, the likes of which young Arab officers such as Gamal Abdel Nasser and his generation admired and sought to imitate. The Turkish Republic of Kemal Ataturk is no more, and Prime Minister Erdoğan is leading Turkey in another direction, a far cry from the purist Kemalism of the past.

From a geopolitical standpoint, contemporary Turkey and Iran are reconstructing the borders of old between the Ottoman Empire and Persia. Iraq is reemerging as the border state between the region of Turkish influence in northern Iraq and the region of Iranian influence among the Shiites of the country. Thus the borders between Sunna and Shia are being redrawn. The countries of the region no longer distinguish between themselves based on their regimes, republics against monarchies, or the old Cold War divisions of pro-American countries versus their pro-Soviet counterparts. These distinctions are way out of date. In the spirit of the secular retreat, inter-state relations are presently governed by the religious sectarian fault line of Sunnis versus Shiites: Turkey and the Sunni Arabs are in one camp, and Iran, with the Shiites of Iraq and Shiite Hizbollah in Lebanon, are in the other. Syria, in which the Alawis (supported by the Shiite camp) are fighting a desperate and bloody civil war with the Sunnis, finds itself at the heart of a regional struggle of the rival sectarian camps, fighting between themselves for their domestic sectarian allies: Iran and its Shiite allies in favor of Bashar

al-Assad, pitted against the Sunnis, backed by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab League.

If such are relations between states in the region, then all the more so are political relations within the various Arab states. Against the backdrop of the retreat of the secularization process, we are witnessing the revival of traditional or neo-traditional political forces in all the Arab states without exception. Political Islam, sectarianism, and tribalism once again dominate the politics of all Arab countries. In Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, Libya, and Yemen the dominant political players are neither the secular-liberal groups nor the Facebook and Twitter stars of the Western media and its satellites, but the more traditional forces.

Egypt is the most conspicuous example of the clear victory of political Islam. Events there became clear in extremely short order. On February 18, 2011, one week after the fall of Mubarak, the "demonstration of the million" gathered in Tahrir Square to celebrate the victory. Following Friday prayers, addressing the crowd was none other than the spiritual father of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and one of the most popular preachers in the entire Arab world, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Scheduled to speak after him was the darling of the Western media, the young Egyptian hi-tech specialist Wa'il Ghunayyim, a Google employee who became famous for his part in organizing the first demonstrations in Egypt. Ghunayyim, however, did not speak. Upon approaching the speaker's podium he was forcefully removed by men of the Muslim Brotherhood.[9] If in the beginning the Brotherhood acted cautiously in the back seat, they were now in the driver's seat and in assault mode; they were unwilling to allow Ghunayyim and his like not only to steal the show but even to participate in it.

About a month later, on March 19, a referendum was held in order to approve amendments to the Egyptian constitution and thus pave the way to new elections. The Islamist forces supported approval of the amendments while the liberal secularists and the Coptic minority opted to reject them. They wanted to gain time to organize politically and face what began to look like a clear advantage of the Muslim Brotherhood and the radical Salafis. In the referendum the liberal secularists were resoundingly defeated. The percentage voting in favor of the amendments, i.e., the desired position of the Islamists, amounted to no

less than 77.2 percent. The die was cast, and it was utterly clear where the wind was blowing.

The elections for the two houses of parliament in late 2011 and early 2012 were the proverbial *coup de grace*. In the lower house, the Muslim Brotherhood took 46 percent of the seats while the Salafis gained another 24 percent; combined they thus controlled 70 percent of the house. Their achievements in the elections to the upper house were even more impressive. In the upper house, the Muslim Brotherhood alone took 58 percent of the elected seats[10] while the Salafis took another 25 percent, i.e., more than 80 percent combined. The extremely radical Salafis are neither convenient nor natural partners for the Brotherhood, who are more pragmatic. But this does not alter the fact behind the numbers themselves, namely, that the secular/liberal forces are – at least for the meantime – nothing more than a minor addendum in Egyptian politics. All this lies in total contradiction to almost everything written and said by most analysts and opinion makers in the West in the early days of the "Arab Spring."

Moreover, the elections in Egypt are not exceptional or limited to the "Arab Spring." In all free and relatively fair elections in the Middle East since 1989, Islamist forces have almost invariably gained more votes than any other party or grouping. Such was the case in Jordan in 1989, Algeria in 1991, Turkey in every election (except for one) since 1995, the West Bank and Gaza in 2006, Tunisia and Morocco in 2011, and Kuwait in early 2012. In elections in Tunisia and Morocco following the "Arab Spring," Islamic parties took the lion's share of seats and became the leading parties in both countries (42 percent in Tunisia and 27 percent in Morocco).

In Iraq and Syria, the revival of traditional forces is reflected within their political systems, which are both entirely sectarian. The toppling of the Ba'ath regime in Iraq was in fact the deposal of the Sunni Arab minority from its height of power and the enthronement of the Shiite majority in its stead. Iraq's present-day instability and lack of security stems first and foremost from Sunni unwillingness to come to terms with its newly inferior status, as Shiites fight to preserve their freshly won political superiority. In Iraq, with the removal of the Ba'ath from power, the Americans talked about "de-Ba'athification," reminiscent in tone and content of the "de-Nazification" of Germany after the Second World War. However, this analogy is totally baseless.

In Iraq, the removal of the Ba'ath as an Arab, socialist secular party was not the real issue. The truly important point in Iraq's transformation lies in the sectarian significance of the toppling of the Ba'ath as a mechanism for control by the Sunni Arab minority over the Shiite majority in Iraq. This ties in with the Ba'ath in Syria having become a mechanism of control of the Alawis and other minorities over the Sunni majority. In Syria, the elevated Alawite minority has held tightly to the reins of power (supported by the Christians and a portion of the Sunni mercantile elite), opposing the Sunni majority dispossessed by the Alawis half a century ago. Thus a seemingly absurd situation has arisen in which the anti-Ba'ath government in Iraq supports Ba'athi rule in Syria. But in truth, this is not at all absurd. What is genuinely important in these relations is not the Ba'ath party and its secular ideology, rather the fact that the Shiites in Iraq are supporting their Alawi allies in Syria in their joint struggle against their Sunni enemies.

In Bahrain, the "Arab Spring" erupted in February 2011, in a fierce popular uprising against oppressive monarchic rule. However, in Bahrain too it was clearly a sectarian struggle of the Shiite majority against the rule of the Sunni minority, headed by the al-Khalifa family that had ruled over them for generations. The regime in Bahrain had a hard time controlling the situation. Thus, in March 2011, a military force from Saudi Arabia and its Sunni allies in the Gulf invaded the island and crushed the Shiite rebellion. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are so close to one another that a causeway spanning no more than 25 kilometers connects them. In the eyes of the Saudis and their allies, the fall of Bahrain to the Shiite majority would mean that the neighboring island could become an Iranian outpost. Thence Iran might act to exert its subversive influence in the Arabian Peninsula – and under no circumstances could the Saudis afford to accept such a situation. This is especially true since a Saudi Shiite minority (some 10 percent of the population) resides entirely in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, where the country's main oil deposits are located.

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Observers and commentators in the West, surprised by the force of the Islamist victory in the Arab upheavals, have offered a series of explanations, or excuses, for this phenomenon, all in order to continue to deny the obvious: that in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries society tends to be religious and pious to one degree or another. The peoples in these countries trust in the authentic Islamic messages delivered by those who speak in the name of faith, which is familiar and readily understood by all. The needy who suffer all sorts of deprivation also believe that with the help of those parties, as well as the Almighty, they will be delivered from their unbearable economic distress. The Islamist parties have great attraction and are widely accepted by the general public that genuinely identifies with them.

Periodically we hear the repeated mantra of other explanations, whereby the broad public supports the Islamists almost against their will and with no real alternative, rather than out of genuine identification. The Islamist parties, we are told, are very well organized and have existed as parties for a long time. Thus they enjoy an unmistakable organizational advantage over the secular/liberal parties that have just emerged. Yet this explanation is hardly adequate. If it were correct and comprehensive, then how does one explain the impressive achievement of the Salafis, who just like other new parties lack any previous political experience and organizational know-how? Another explanation, from the field of political economy, tells us that the impoverished masses vote for whoever has helped and continues to help them with welfare. In this regard the Brotherhood is known for having an extensive network of support for the needy. This doubtlessly explains part of the phenomenon. However, this explanation would hardly account for the fact that the major professional associations, of doctors or lawyers and others too, largely composed of middle and even upper middle class members are all also controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood. Similarly, is one to believe that in Kuwait, one of the richest countries on earth, the Brotherhood won the recent elections because of its alms for the poor?

Islam and Modernity in the "Arab Spring": The Bottom Line

The revolutionaries in the Arab world set out in their struggle for the universal values of liberty, justice, dignity, and economic prosperity. Before our eyes we are witnessing the building of societies that comprise

many of the characteristics of modern politics. These are societies that are becoming less autocratic and more pluralistic, enjoy more civic involvement, and sport a public opinion that is more alert and influential. All this is accompanied by the cutting edge of modern communication as an integral part of the new politics.

However, within these modern states, the political forces on the playing field are all deeply rooted in traditional politics, such as political Islam, sectarianism, and tribalism (Libya and Yemen are striking examples of tribalism in action). This does not necessarily mean that democracy will not develop in these societies sooner or later. However this is not the most likely eventuality, and certainly not an inevitable outcome.

Notes

1 This term is taken from Nader Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
2 This discussion is to a large extent based on Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994).
3 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 322.
4 Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 326-27.
5 Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism and Liberal Democracy,* p. 177.
6 Jacob Lassner and Ilan Troen, *Jews and Muslims in the Arab World: Haunted by Pasts Real and Imagined* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), p. xi.
7 Michael Hudson, "The Political Culture Approach to Arab Democratization: The Case for Bringing it Back in, Carefully," in Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany, and Paul Noble, eds., *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World*, vol. 1: *Theoretical Perspectives* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1995), p. 65.
8 "There Goes the Neighborhood," *The Jerusalem Report*, February 28, 2011.
9 Hasan Abu Talib, "Al-ikhwan wa-thawrat al-shabab," *al-Ahram*, February 23, 2011.
10 In the Egyptian upper house, *Majlis al-Shura*, 180 out of 270 members are elected; the rest are to be appointed by the as-yet unelected president.