

## The Arab Spring at One - A Year of Living Dangerously

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Throughout 2011, a rhythmic chant echoed across the Arab lands: “The people want to topple the regime.” It skipped borders with ease, carried in newspapers and magazines, on Twitter and Facebook, on the airwaves of al Jazeera and al Arabiya. Arab nationalism had been written off, but here, in full bloom, was what certainly looked like a pan-Arab awakening. Young people in search of political freedom and economic opportunity, weary of waking up to the same tedium day after day, rose up against their sclerotic masters.

It came as a surprise. For almost two generations, waves of democracy had swept over other regions, from southern and eastern Europe to Latin America, from East Asia to Africa. But not the Middle East. There, tyrants had closed up the political world, become owners of their countries in all but name. It was a bleak landscape: terrible rulers, sullen populations, a terrorist fringe that hurled itself in frustration at an order bereft of any legitimacy. Arabs had started to feel they were cursed, doomed to despotism. The region’s exceptionalism was becoming not just a human disaster but a moral embarrassment.

Outside powers had winked at this reality, silently thinking this was the best the Arabs could do. In a sudden burst of Wilsonianism in Iraq and after, the United States had put its power behind liberty. Saddam Hussein was flushed out of a spider hole, the Syrian brigades of terror and extortion were pushed out of Lebanon, and the despotism of Hosni Mubarak, long a pillar of Pax Americana, seemed to lose some of its mastery. But post-Saddam Iraq held out mixed messages: there was democracy, but also blood in the streets and sectarianism. The autocracies hunkered down and did their best to thwart the new Iraqi project. Iraq was set ablaze, and the Arab autocrats could point to it as a cautionary tale of the folly of unseating even the worst of despots. Moreover, Iraq carried a double burden of humiliation for Sunni Arabs: the bearer of liberty there was the United States, and the war had empowered the Shiite stepchildren of the Arab world. The result was a standoff: the Arabs could not snuff out or ignore the flicker of freedom, but nor did the Iraqi example prove the subversive beacon of hope its proponents had expected.

It was said by Arabs themselves that George W. Bush had unleashed a tsunami on the region. True, but the Arabs were good at waiting out storms, and before long, the Americans themselves lost heart and abandoned the quest. An election in 2006 in the Palestinian territories went the way of Hamas, and a new disillusionment with democracy’s verdict overtook the Bush administration. The “surge” in Iraq rescued the American war there just in time, but the more ambitious vision of reforming the Arab world was given up. The autocracies had survived the brief moment of American assertiveness. And soon, a new standard-bearer of American power, Barack Obama, came with a reassuring message: the United States was done with change; it would make its peace with the status quo, renewing its partnership with friendly autocrats even as it engaged the hostile regimes in Damascus and Tehran. The United States was to remain on the Kabul hook for a while longer, but the greater Middle East would be left to its Furies.

When a revolt erupted in Iran against the theocrats in the first summer of his presidency, Obama was caught flatfooted by the turmoil. Determined to conciliate the rulers, he could not find the language to speak to the rebels. Meanwhile, the Syrian regime, which had given up its dominion in Lebanon under duress, was now keen to retrieve it. A stealth campaign of terror and assassinations, the power of Hezbollah on the ground, and the subsidies of Iran all but snuffed out the “Cedar Revolution” that had been the pride of Bush’s diplomacy.

Observers looking at the balance of forces in the region in late 2010 would have been smart to bet on a perpetuation of autocracy. Beholding Bashar al-Assad in Damascus, they would have been forgiven the conclusion that a similar fate awaited Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, and the large Egyptian state that had been the trendsetter in Arab political and cultural life. Yet beneath the surface stability, there was political misery and sterility. Arabs did not need a “human development report” to tell them of their desolation. Consent had drained out of public life; the only glue between ruler and ruled was suspicion and fear. There was no public project to bequeath to a generation coming into its own – and this the largest and youngest population yet.

And then it happened. In December, a despairing Tunisian fruit vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi took one way out, setting himself on fire to protest the injustices of the status quo. Soon, millions of his unnamed fellows took another, pouring into the streets. Suddenly, the despots, seemingly secure in their dominion, deities in all but name, were on the run. For its part, the United States scurried to catch up with the upheaval. "In too many places, in too many ways, the region's foundations are sinking into the sand," U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proclaimed in Qatar in mid-January 2011, as the storm was breaking out. The Arab landscape lent her remarks ample confirmation; what she omitted was that generations of American diplomacy would be buried, too.

## THE FIRE THIS TIME

The revolt was a settlement of accounts between the powers that be and populations determined to be done with despots. It erupted in a small country on the margins of the Arab political experience, more educated and prosperous and linked to Europe than the norm. As the rebellion made its way eastward, it skipped Libya and arrived in Cairo, "the mother of the world." There, it found a stage worthy of its ambitions.

Often written off as the quintessential land of political submission, Egypt has actually known ferocious rebellions. It had been Mubarak's good fortune that the land tolerated him for three decades. The designated successor to Anwar al-Sadat, Mubarak had been a cautious man, but his reign had sprouted dynastic ambitions. For 18 magical days in January and February, Egyptians of all walks of life came together in Tahrir Square demanding to be rid of him. The senior commanders of the armed forces cast him aside, and he joined his fellow despot, Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who had fallen a month earlier.

From Cairo, the awakening became a pan-Arab affair, catching fire in Yemen and Bahrain. As a monarchy, the latter was a rare exception, since in this season it was chiefly the republics of strongmen that were seized with unrest. But where most monarchies had a fit between ruler and ruled, Bahrain was riven by a fault line between its Sunni rulers and its Shiite majority. So it was vulnerable, and it was in the nature of things that an eruption there would turn into a sectarian feud. Yemen, meanwhile, was the poorest of the Arab states, with secessionist movements raging in its north and south and a polarizing leader, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had no skills save the art of political survival. The feuds of Yemen were obscure, the quarrels of tribes and warlords. The wider Arab tumult gave Yemenis eager to be rid of their ruler the heart to challenge him.

Then, the revolt doubled back to Libya. This was the kingdom of silence, the realm of the deranged, self-proclaimed "dean of Arab rulers," Muammar al-Qaddafi. For four tormenting decades, Libyans had been at the mercy of this prison warden, part tyrant, part buffoon. Qaddafi had eviscerated his country, the richest in Africa yet with an abysmally impoverished population. In the interwar years, Libya had known savage colonial rule under the Italians. It gained a brief respite under an ascetic ruler, King Idris, but in the late 1960s was gripped by a revolutionary fever. Iblis wa la Idris, went the maxim of the time, "Better the devil than Idris." And the country got what it wanted. Oil sustained the madness; European leaders and American intellectuals alike came courting. Now, in 2011, Benghazi, at some remove from the capital, rose up, and history gave the Libyans a chance.

The Egyptian rulers had said that their country was not Tunisia. Qaddafi said that his republic was not Tunisia or Egypt. Eventually, Assad was saying that Syria was not Tunisia, Egypt, or Libya. Assad was young, not old; his regime had more legitimacy because it had confronted Israel rather than collaborated with it. He spoke too soon: in mid-March, it was Syria's turn.

Syria was where Islam had made its home after it outgrew the Arabian Peninsula and before it slipped out of the hands of the Arabs into those of the Persians and the Turks. Yet decades earlier, Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez - a man of supreme cunning and political skill -- had ridden the military and the Baath Party to absolute power, creating a regime in which power rested with the country's Alawite minority. The marriage of despotism and sectarianism begat the most fearsome state in the Arab east.

When the rebellion broke out there in 2011, it had a distinct geography, as the French political scientist Fabrice Balanche has shown, based in the territories and urban quarters of the country's Sunni Arabs. It erupted in Dara'a, a remote provincial town in the south, then spread to Hamah, Homs, Jisr al-Shughour, Rastan, Idlib, and Dayr az Zawr -- skipping over Kurdish and Druze areas and the mountain villages and coastal towns that make up the Alawite strongholds. The violence in the Syrian uprising has been most pronounced in Homs, the country's third-largest city, because of its explosive demographics -- two-thirds Sunni, one-quarter Alawite, one-tenth Christian.

Sectarianism was not all, of course. Syria has had one of the highest birthrates in the region, with its population having almost quadrupled since Hafez seized power in 1970. The arteries of the regime had hardened, with a military-merchant complex dominating political and economic life. There was not much patronage left for the state

to dispose of, since under the banner of privatization in recent years, the state had pulled off a disappearing act. The revolt fused a sense of economic disinheritance and the wrath of a Sunni majority determined to rid itself of the rule of a godless lot.

#### WHERE THINGS STAND

There has, of course, been no uniform script for the Arab regimes in play. Tunisia, an old state with a defined national identity, settled its affairs with relative ease. It elected a constituent assembly in which al Nahda, an Islamist party, secured a plurality. Al Nahda's leader, Rachid al-Ghannouchi, was a shrewd man; years in exile had taught him caution, and his party formed a coalition government with two secular partners.

In Libya, foreign intervention helped the rebels topple the regime. Qaddafi was pulled out of a drainage pipe and beaten and murdered, and so was one of his sons. These were the hatreds and the wrath that the ruler himself had planted; he reaped what he had sown. But wealth, a sparse population, and foreign attention should see Libya through. No history in the making there could be as deadly to Libyans, and others, as the Qaddafi years.

The shadows of Iran and Saudi Arabia hover over Bahrain. There is no mass terror, but the political order is not pretty. There is sectarian discrimination and the oddness of a ruling dynasty, the House of Khalifa, that conquered the area in the late years of the eighteenth century but has still not made peace with the population. Outsiders man the security forces, and true stability seems a long way off.

As for Yemen, it is the quintessential failed state. The footprint of the government is light, the rulers offer no redemption, but there is no draconian terror. The country is running out of water; jihadists on the run from the Hindu Kush have found a home: it is Afghanistan with a coastline. The men and women who went out into the streets of Sanaa in 2011 sought the rehabilitation of their country, a more dignified politics than they have been getting from the cynical acrobat at the helm for more than three decades. Whether they will get it is unclear.

Syria remains in chaos. Hamas left Damascus in December because it feared being left on the wrong side of the mounting Arab consensus against the Syrian regime. "No Iran, no Hezbollah; we want rulers who fear Allah," has been one of the more meaningful chants of the protesters. Alawite rule has been an anomaly, and the regime, through its brutal response to the uprising, with security forces desecrating mosques, firing at worshipers, and ordering hapless captives to proclaim, "There is no God but Bashar," has written its own regional banishment. Hafez committed cruelties of his own, but he always managed to remain within the Arab fold. Bashar is different -- reckless -- and has prompted even the Arab League, which has a history of overlooking the follies of its members, to suspend Damascus' membership.

The fight still rages, Aleppo and Damascus have not risen, and the embattled ruler appears convinced that he can resist the laws of gravity. Unlike in Libya, no foreign rescue mission is on the horizon. But with all the uncertainties, this much can be said: the fearsome security state that Hafez, the Baath Party, and the Alawite soldiers and intelligence barons built is gone for good. When consent and popular enthusiasm fell away, the state rested on fear, and fear was defeated. In Syria, the bonds between the holders of power and the population have been irreparably broken.

#### WHAT FOLLOWS PHARAOH

Egypt, meanwhile, may have lost the luster of old, but this Arab time shall be judged by what eventually happens there. In the scenarios of catastrophe, the revolution will spawn an Islamic republic: the Copts will flee, tourism revenues be lost for good, and Egyptians will yearn for the iron grip of a pharaoh. The strong performance of the Muslim Brotherhood and of an even more extremist Salafi party in recent parliamentary elections, together with the splintering of the secular, liberal vote, appears to justify concern about the country's direction. But Egyptians have proud memories of liberal periods in their history. Six decades of military rule robbed them of the experience of open politics, and they are unlikely to give it up now without a struggle.

The elections were transparent and clarifying. Liberal and secular forces were not ready for the contest, whereas the Brotherhood had been waiting for such a historic moment for decades and seized its opportunity. No sooner had the Salafists come out of the catacombs than they began to unnerve the population, and so they pulled back somewhat from their extreme positions. The events in Tahrir Square transfixed the world, but as the young Egyptian intellectual Samuel Tadros has put it, "Egypt is not Cairo and Cairo is not Tahrir Square." When the dust settles, three forces will contest Egypt's future -- the army, the Brotherhood, and a broad liberal and secular coalition of those who want a civil polity, the separation of religion and politics, and the saving graces of a normal political life.

The Brotherhood brings to the struggle its time-honored mix of political cunning and an essential commitment to imposing a political order shaped by Islam. Its founder, Hasan al-Banna, was struck down by an assassin in 1949 but still stalks the politics of the Muslim world. A ceaseless plotter, he talked of God's rule, but in the shadows, he struck deals with the palace against the dominant political party of his day, the Wafd. He played the political game as he put together a formidable paramilitary force, seeking to penetrate the officer corps -- something his inheritors have pined for ever since. He would doubtless look with admiration on the tactical skills of his successors as they maneuver between the liberals and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, partaking of the tumult of Tahrir Square but stepping back from the exuberance to underline their commitment to sobriety and public order.

The plain truth of it is that Egypt lacks the economic wherewithal to build a successful modern Islamic order, whatever that might mean. The Islamic Republic of Iran rests on oil, and even the moderate ascendancy of the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, in Turkey is secured by prosperity stemming from the "devout bourgeoisie" in the Anatolian hill towns. Egypt lies at the crossroads of the world, living off tourism, the Suez Canal, infusions of foreign aid, and remittances from Egyptians abroad. Virtue must bow to necessity: in the last year, the country's foreign reserves dwindled from \$36 billion to \$20 billion. Inflation hammers at the door, the price of imported wheat is high, and the bills have to be paid. Four finance ministers have come and gone since Mubarak's fall. A desire for stability now balances the heady satisfaction that a despot was brought down.

There are monumental problems staring Egypt's leaders in the face, and the reluctance of both the Brotherhood and the armed forces to assume power is telling. Good sense and pragmatism might yet prevail. A plausible division of spoils and responsibility might give the Brotherhood the domains of governance dearest to it -- education, social welfare, and the judiciary -- with the military getting defense, intelligence, the peace with Israel, the military ties to the United States, and a retention of the officer corps' economic prerogatives. Liberal secularists would have large numbers, a say in the rhythm of daily life in a country so hard to regiment and organize, and the chance to field a compelling potential leader in a future presidential election.

For two centuries now, Egypt has been engaged in a Sisyphean struggle for modernity and a place among the nations worthy of its ambitions. It has not fared well, yet it continues to try. Last August, a scene played out that could give Egyptians a measure of solace. The country's last pharaoh -- may it be so -- came to court on a gurney. "Sir, I am present," the former ruler said to the presiding judge. Mubarak was not pulled out of a drainage pipe and slaughtered, as was Qaddafi, nor did he hunker down with his family and murder his own people at will, as has Assad. The Egyptians have always had, in E. M. Forster's words, the ability to harmonize contending assertions, and they may do so once again.

### THE THIRD GREAT AWAKENING

This tumult, this awakening, is the third of its kind in modern Arab history. The first, a political-cultural renaissance born of a desire to join the modern world, came in the late 1800s. Led by scribes and lawyers, would-be parliamentarians and Christian intellectuals, it sought to reform political life, separate religion from politics, emancipate women, and move past the debris of the Ottoman Empire. Fittingly enough, that great movement, with Beirut and Cairo at the head of the pack, found its chronicler in George Antonius, a Christian writer of Lebanese birth, Alexandrian youth, a Cambridge education, and service in the British administration in Palestine. His 1938 book, *The Arab Awakening*, remains the principal manifesto of Arab nationalism.

The second awakening came in the 1950s and gathered force in the decade following. This was the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia, and the early leaders of the Baath Party in Iraq and Syria. No democrats, the leaders of that time were intensely political men engaged in the great issues of the day. They came from the middle class or even lower and had dreams of power, of industrialization, of ridding their people of the sense of inferiority instilled by Ottoman and then colonial rule. No simple audit can do these men justice: they had monumental accomplishments, but then, explosive demographics and their own authoritarian proclivities and shortcomings undid most of their work. When they faltered, police states and political Islam filled the void.

This third awakening came in the nick of time. The Arab world had grown morose and menacing. Its populations loathed their rulers and those leaders' foreign patrons. Bands of jihadists, forged in the cruel prisons of dreadful regimes, were scattered about everywhere looking to kill and be killed. Mohamed Bouazizi summoned his fellows to a new history, and across the region, millions have heeded his call. Last June, the Algerian author Boualem Sansal wrote Bouazizi an open letter. "Dear Brother," it said,

I write these few lines to let you know we're doing well, on the whole, though it varies from day to day: sometimes the wind changes, it rains lead, life bleeds from every pore. . . .

But let's take the long view for a moment. Can he who does not know where to go find the way? Is driving the dictator out the end? From where you are, Mohamed, next to God, you can tell that not all roads lead to Rome; ousting a tyrant doesn't lead to freedom. Prisoners like trading one prison for another, for a change of scenery and the chance to gain a little something along the way.

"The best day after a bad emperor is the first," the Roman historian Tacitus once memorably observed. This third Arab awakening is in the scales of history. It has in it both peril and promise, the possibility of prison but also the possibility of freedom.

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**Section:** *Essays, Reviews & Responses*

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