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UNTANGLING THE LEVIATHANS OF THE ARAB SPRING

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WHEN WE SAY THAT THE ‘ARAB SPRING’ TURNED INTO AN ‘ARAB WINTER,’ WE ARE NOT REALLY UNDERSTANDING HERE THE DYNAMICS OF POPULAR UPHEAVALS AND REVOLUTIONARY PROCESSES, NOR THE POLITICAL MAPS AND THE POLITICAL GAMES OF THE ARAB WORLD.” – CONCLUDES PROFESSOR AMAL GHAZAL FROM DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY, SPECIALIZING IN MIDDLE EASTERN HISTORY.

INTERVIEW WITH **AMAL GHAZAL**
BY LASHA MARKOZASHVILI

It takes enormous effort and resources to organize a revolt of the scale of Arab Spring; were there observable early warning signs of preparing the stage for the revolutions [for instance activities of interest groups, foreign impulses etc.]?

We have to differentiate between two phenomena here: the spontaneity that characterized the eruption of the uprisings, collectively known as the ‘Arab Spring,’ and their deep-rooted causes. The warning signs had always been there but those were neither the activities of interest groups nor

foreign impulses. Those had been (and remain) the miserable political and economic conditions in the Arab countries. The uprisings took us by surprise precisely because they had no particular a priori form of organization. Yet this does not mean that we did not immediately understand what they were about. As such, the uprisings are about a chain of events that had been in the making for decades, yet erupted spontaneously; they were ignited by an immediate grievance, yet caused by political repression, rampant corruption, poverty, neo-liberal economic policies and lack of equal economic development, and the collapse of the social contract between the rulers and the ruled.

Let us remember the chain of events called the ‘Arab Spring:’ ‘Thawrat al-Bouazizi’ (the al-Bouazizi’s Revolution), then ‘Thawrat Tunis,’ (Tunisia’s Revolution), then ‘al-Thawrāt al-Arabiyya’ (The Arab Revolutions). If anything, this mirrors the process itself and how the immediate cause embodied in an individual grievance was symptomatic of both national and regional grievances. The efforts to organize followed, rather than preceded, the uprisings. Organization was done at several levels and in stages. First, you had local activists and political parties trying to organize and coordinate efforts on the ground to keep the momentum going, to press for changes, and to prevent a return to the status quo. Organization was more of an ad hoc process, lacking discipline, a clear agenda and any specific hierarchy – all elements that provided the uprisings with a democratic tenor. Then you had the state and its institutions as well as foreign powers also trying to organize counter responses and contain the situation as it quickly unfolded. But once the uprising spread beyond Tunisia, we moved into a different level of organization by all parties involved, and of containment. In terms of the latter, it became not a matter of merely foreign impulses, but foreign direct interference, as well as regional interference, to shape the course and outcome of the uprisings.

Considering the first question, did you expect that the movements would end up with regime changes (at least in some cases)? We have seen many uprisings however without real results, especially in the MENA countries where the anciens régimes have been strong for decades. What made the process itself so successful?

I cannot say I expected regime transitions per se right at the onset of the uprisings, although there was always the hope for regime change.

I expected some ‘change’ though, and I was not sure first in what form or shape it would come. It all depended on the resilience of the protestors; the more they persisted and refused to abandon the squares and the streets, the more a regime change was becoming a possibility to entertain. The first slogan of the protestors in Tunisia was “dégage,” which means “leave.” No doubt Tunisians wanted not just Zayn al-Abidin bin Ali to leave, but also the regime itself that he represented. Given the level of political repression the Arab political regimes have been known for and what was at stake for the Arab regimes threatened by the uprisings, one was worried about the level of brutality with which those regimes could push back to bring the uprisings to an end. The resilience of the Tunisian uprising as well as the neutrality of the Tunisian army turned that hope into an expectation – a cautious one however – for regime change. It was one thing for bin Ali to flee the country, it was another for his regime to just dissipate. The different actors in the Tunisian uprising knew the fight was far from over after Ali’s departure. In an article for the Middle East Research Project, the journalist Graham Usher divided the Tunisian uprisings into two parts, with the second one between January 30, when bin Ali fled to Saudi Arabia and March 4, when the interim Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi called for national elections for a Constituent Assembly. It is during the second that Tunisians were adamant about a regime change and not just cosmetic changes.

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THERE WAS NO DOUBT THAT THE
ARMY WAS SACRIFICING MUBARAK TO
PRESERVE THE REGIME

However, Egypt was a different case, especially in terms of its army’s position in the country’s politics and economy, and Egypt’s significance in regional and global politics, not the least because of its borders with Israel. Surely, Mubarak’s rule had witnessed the rise of a new economic elite not directly tied to the army, but he nevertheless represented the army rule and interests. When the army’s spokesperson announced the deposition of Mubarak, like many, I was ecstatic. That was not a small achievement for those who dared tanks and bullets, persisted and provided us with one of the most historic moments we had witnessed. Nevertheless, we knew that this was not going to be regime change per se. Despite the sense of victory we had, there was no doubt that the army was sacrificing Mubarak to preserve the regime. We waited to see how that would unfold. Many observers, including myself, doubted the wisdom and the sincerity of the most significant organized power during the uprising, the

Muslim Brotherhood, to lead the transition into a new regime. They surely did not disappoint and mismanaged the transition period.

It had by then become clear that the uprisings had seriously destabilized regional politics and that a firmer pushback from regional and international powers was to be expected. The other sites of popular uprisings were Bahrain, Libya, and Yemen, with Syria gradually becoming one as well. Bahrain became the litmus test for how far regional powers were willing to go to contain and derail the uprisings. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates sent their troops on March 1, 2011, effectively putting an end to any possibility of a regime change. Libya witnessed a regime collapse, not so much change (if by the latter we mean that the prior political regime would be replaced by a new one representing anything of a ‘regime’). International military intervention, due to local, regional and international calls, ensured the regime collapse but also contributed to the difficulty of establishing a new regime. Similarly, regional and international interference in Yemen and Syria have locked horns in a bid to either affect regime change or prevent it. The uprisings by then were no longer local acts of rebellion and revolt. They were used as platforms for civil and proxy wars.

So, what made the process of shaping the results so successful? Military intervention and brute force (Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Yemen), lack of political experience and maturity in the opposition (Libya and Syria), the sectarian scarecrow (Bahrain, Syria and Yemen), the reckless behavior of those who led the transition period (the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as a primary example). While Tunisia is considered a success story in terms of regime change, the process is being seriously undermined by a poor economy and regional instability, with the situation in Libya in particular weighing heavily on Tunisia’s economy and stability.

Do you think that it was a real revolt of the masses? If we evaluate the amount of involvement of elites, can we say that the wave of revolutions was an outcome of grass roots incentives?

I have no doubt that it was a revolt of the masses. Those who filled the streets were students, middle-class professionals, civil-society activists, workers, unemployed and people of all walks of life who were fed up and looked for a better future. While the middle class played a significant role, not much could have been done without the participation of the working class, and the unemployed. Popular

uprisings have their own momentum and their own architecture. Larbi Sadiki, one of the first scholars to analyze them in contemporary Arab societies, has highlighted the key role in popular uprisings of the Khubz-istes, the bread seekers whose livelihood was threatened, and that of the Hit-istes, the unemployed who abandoned quietism during protests. That is exactly what we witnessed during the recent uprisings. Without the Khubz-istes and the Hit-istes, they wouldn't be 'popular' uprisings. Moreover, the uprisings were preceded by protests on a smaller scale in previous years, mainly by disenfranchised workers in Tunisia and Egypt. The works of Joel Beinin and John Chalcraft are most pertinent here in order to understand this genealogy. Yemen too had been witnessing grassroots mobilization for two decades prior to the uprisings. Thus, the uprisings were by the masses and for the masses, before elites stepped in. Whether we are talking about an economic elite, a political one or a religious one, when they got involved, they did so realizing the uprisings either provided opportunities or threatened their status and privileges. Their role was either to make gains from the uprisings, or to co-opt and derail them. They neither caused them nor led them.

What was a general response from the religious leaders [elites] and how did their response portray on political processes?

It was very clear from the very beginning that the uprisings would benefit the religious movements who had played an oppositional role to the state, such as al-Nahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, Syria and Libya, the Houthis and others in Yemen, and the various Shii groups in Bahrain. They had the numbers and the means for mobilization and organization. In both Tunisia and Egypt, they played no role, as parties or political movements, in the initial stage of the uprisings. They were caught by surprise and took some time to assess the situation and decide what steps to take. The Nahda assumed a role after the ousting of bin Ali, and the Muslim Brothers held back their participation during the "Day of Rage" on January 25, 2011 and waited until January 28 – mostly under pressure from the Brotherhood youth – to participate in the demonstrations. As such, none of these two can claim any role in the early stage of the uprisings despite their efforts to rewrite history and change the narrative. This is not meant to deny the importance of their experiences and rhetoric, as active opposition movements, in the collective spirit of state-opposition nor to deny their effective roles in the uprisings once they decided to participate. As for Bahrain, Libya, Syria and



THE RACE TO CLAIM RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY CONTINUES

Yemen, each has its different story, with Bahrain, Syria and Yemen's uprisings containing sectarian dimensions that have further enabled their manipulation. Whatever the case is, the significant role religious movements have played since the uprisings and the appeal they have had as movements able to lead political processes and transition periods – regardless of their degree of success – have added fuel to an ongoing debate about who can claim and represent religious authority, and how to conceive the relationship between Islam and politics. The contenders are many, not just movements with a broad popular base, but also smaller ones, in addition to the state itself, and its religious institutions, such as al-Azhar in Egypt. As a pushback against the uprisings and their ripples across the region, and as a tool of both domestic and foreign policies, some Arab states have been actively seeking to present Islam as a 'quietist' religion that should be uncoupled from political activism. In this case, protest is presented as akin to fitna (discord), that leads to disorder and chaos. Islam's role here is to maintain the status quo, not to challenge it; to delegitimize protest, not be one of its vehicles. Such efforts have been led by the governments of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that have far-reaching media to articulate such definitions of Islam.

Will they be successful? Not really. The uprisings are by their very nature very politicized events that articulate economic and political grievances. Only temporarily and only among few would this whole rhetoric of fitna work. Much money needs to be spent addressing the underlying grievances for a "quietist" Islam to make a significant difference. While Qatar's role during the uprisings was to provide platforms and support for religious movements endorsing the uprisings, namely the Muslim Brothers, its goal did not differ much from that of Saudi Arabia and the UAE: to co-opt and contain the uprisings. The battle to define the relationship between Islam and politics and the race to claim religious authority continues. The emergence of ISIS has made the battles fiercer and more urgent.

How do you assess the reaction of the international community to developments of the Arab Spring?

The reaction was what one expected. Stability has always been the rule of the game when it comes to the international powers. Stability secures the international powers' access to resources and markets, as

well as the rules of the political games they have sponsored, including the stability of Israel's borders. To be sure, we are not here talking about the broad meaning of stability, one that concerns the livelihood and safety of the citizens of Arab countries. Citizens are invisible for international powers, as long as they do not threaten the stability of the regimes who are the custodians of foreign interests. Thus, the uprisings set the alarms and set international powers on a race to try and determine or contain the immediate outcomes. They did so in collusion with both local regimes and regional powers. Syria serves as the ultimate example here. The Syrian case also illustrates how the responses to the uprisings provided an opportunity for new international power brokers, such as Russia, to not only have an influence on local and regional developments but also to make Syria a site of international competition reminiscent of the Cold War.

“ THE UPRISINGS WERE EVENTS THAT PUNCTURED A LONG WINTER OF POLITICAL OPPRESSION AND ECONOMIC CRISES, RATHER THAN A SPRING THAT FOLLOWED A WINTER

While we should not think of the international powers' interests in isolation from local regimes and regional powers, we should not think of regional powers as having no interests of their own. For example, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, all allies of the USA, played a significant role in determining the outcome of the uprisings, not necessarily in coordination with the USA. These are stakeholders and competitors for regional influence and dominance. They have their own sponsored actors and own agendas. Thus, the international powers' meddling in the uprisings is not to be seen in isolation of regional meddling and the latter is not to be seen as merely a surrogate of the international one.

What is your general evaluation of the outcome? What can we expect in five-ten years from now?

The Arab uprisings have been called the 'Arab Spring' to capture collective euphoric moments in contemporary Arab politics, and to point to the hope in positive change that fueled the uprisings and to the strong will of the people to bring about that change. However, to equate political upheaval, social unrest and economic hardship with a 'Spring' and to employ 'Spring' as a metaphor imposes certain

expectations and overburdens the actors seeking change. Given that it was Western media that described the uprisings as the 'Arab Spring,' I wonder if Arabs themselves, whose conditions engendered the uprisings, would have ever conceived their uprisings as such, knowing well what challenges, risks, threats and dangers their uprisings posed. Many were aware that what lay ahead was no less challenging than the conditions they sought to change. We should not forget that the masses had no particular leadership or hierarchy and had no specific strategy. Thus, there was no roadmap and no detailed plan to follow that would determine what would come next. They knew they wanted change, better economic conditions, more freedom and less repression. They demanded those. Answering their demands was not something that fell on their shoulders, or on their shoulders alone. Their agency had its limits. Moreover, when we say that the 'Arab Spring' turned into an 'Arab Winter,' we are not really understanding here the dynamics of popular upheavals and revolutionary processes, nor the political maps and the political games of the Arab world. If anything, the uprisings were events that punctured a long Winter of political oppression and economic crises, rather than a Spring that followed a Winter. The uprisings, cannot, alone, usher in a spring.

Unless we understand the uprisings as being part of an ongoing process, and what has followed as an interregnum with "morbid symptoms," to use Gilbert Achcar's analytical framework, we can't serve them justice. The uprisings functioned as earthquakes that upset the status quo and that brought all the problems, crises and malaise of the Arab countries to the surface. For example, when assessing the outcomes, instead of lamenting how the collapse of the Gadhafi regime led to the break-up of the Libyan state, we should rather look at how such regimes had destroyed civil society, failed to invest in civil citizenship, and impoverished the population, both economically and intellectually, providing them with no tools to effectively manage political upheaval. The same applies to Syria. Although it has not witnessed regime change, it is in the worst shape. What the Syrian case reveals – among other things – is the extent to which the regime is willing, with help from regional and international powers, to destroy the country and the future of its citizens for the sake of survival. The regime's supporters say that it is a bulwark against an Islamist takeover, but what are those feared Islamists but the products of Arab regimes' policies?

Thus, I would not link the outcomes of the uprisings – in terms of wars, chaos and instability – to the uprisings themselves. The outcomes we witness today have historical roots that moments of upheaval could not remedy but have tried to dislodge. The outcomes have mostly depended on other actors, those with power in its different forms

and shapes, and at the local, regional and international levels. When Saudi Arabia and the UAE decided to send troops to Bahrain, this was not the protestors' fault. When Yemen and Syria turned into proxy-wars, you do not blame the protestors who asked for better living conditions and more political freedom. When al-Sisi took over, the blame is on the system itself that has made the Egyptian military what it is, and on the Muslim Brotherhood for gambling with the fate of the country while in the transition period, out of short-sightedness and misplaced self-confidence. Whatever the case is, today's outcomes are not the definitive or the ultimate ones. This is a phase of brutal backlash to the uprisings, but it is not the end of the story.

So what do I expect 5-10 years from now? Not much in terms of stability and institution building. Egypt is heading towards a disaster, most likely towards another popular uprising that will be characterized by chaos and violence, and most likely the next one will be completely headless. Tunisia, considered a success story, is seriously threatened by a dire economic situation, by the impact of environmental changes on already impoverished regions, by the persistence of corruption and by the violence and chaos in Libya. What the near future holds for Algeria will also leave its huge imprint on Tunisia and may throw the whole situation in North Africa off balance. Unless we see changes in Saudi Arabia's regional policies and in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran, no significant progress will be made in Bahrain, Syria or Yemen. What international powers decide remains the determining factor. And there is the Palestinian question that has been a casualty of the aftermath of the uprisings. Given the general tumult in the region, it has been relegated to the backburner although it has its central place in the genealogy of Arab popular uprisings. How things eventually unfold in Gaza and the West Bank and how they connect to the regional situation is something to be kept in mind.

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POLITICAL ISLAM NEEDS TO BE UNCOUPLED FROM THE UTOPIAN VISION TO WHICH IT HAS ATTACHED ITSELF, AND WHICH IS GROUNDED IN NEITHER HISTORY NOR REALITY

Thus, any discussion of expectations in the next 5-10 years is fraught with risk. There is much unpredictability given the many parties involved and the dependency of any major developments on regional and international factors and actors. Whatever happens, the long-term disasters in Syria and Yemen are regional challenges that may overshadow or undermine any future positive developments. Their devastating humanitarian situation will cast a dark shadow

for a long time. At another level, there is one outcome worth taking into consideration. This pertains to what we call political Islam, represented by the various movements and parties advocating the rule of the Sharia and the Islamization of politics. Of whatever stripes and colors they are, they have (ab)used people's grievances to promote themselves as alternatives to the status quo with the "Islam is the solution" mantra. As the uprisings and their aftermath have revealed that there is an appetite by a good majority of people to give this a try, defining the relationship between Islam and politics, the religion's role in state institutions and state policies, and who claims religious authority over whom, are questions that will shape the future. If unaddressed and unresolved, they have the potential to continuously undermine stability and state building in the region. However this settles, it needs to be uncoupled from the utopian vision to which it has attached itself, and which is grounded in neither history nor reality.

Regardless of the outcomes, and regardless of the future, we had every right to celebrate the popular uprisings. As Arabs of the generations post-1967, the uprisings changed our collective political psyche. Along with the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, they were events that provided us with precious moments of enormous hope and pride, and restored faith in our collective will and in a better future. The aftermath brought us back to a bitter reality but the uprisings have already taught us that changing reality is always a possibility.

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