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The Arabic Revolutions in the Light of the History

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From the moment when, contrary to all expectations, the Arab peoples, buoyed by a wave of freedom, took possession of their history, confronted the corrupt and repressive regimes holding them hostage, and rose up to overthrow the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan regimes, the West's understanding of the phenomena taking place has remained opaque and often superficial. Initially staggered, then gripped by the upheavals, the countries of the West were finally induced to react, both out of self-interest and for the sake of geopolitical equilibrium. Yet western thinking still seems hidebound by the prejudices and misinterpretations that it has entertained for decades.

The revolt of the oppressed, young and not so young, has, for the moment at least, overridden social and religious divisions, and the polarisation around the Palestinian tragedy and the issue of Israeli policy. No one was prepared for that. It is certainly worth underlining the role played by new media and communications technology—mobile phones, Facebook, Twitter—and the decisive input from the younger generation, but this does not allow us to understand either the causes of the profound discontent that lies behind these revolutions, nor what is currently at stake, as the obsessive question about modernity's role in culturally Muslim countries is repeated over and over again. Hence it is worthwhile turning to history to put current events in context, in the Maghreb as much as in the Mashriq.

Mashriq and Maghreb

Having started in Tunisia, the Arab revolution spread rapidly to Egypt, which has always occupied the dominant position in the contemporary Arab world, and then to Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria, with tremors in Morocco, Algeria and Jordan. The countries belonging to the Arab grouping running from the Levant to Egypt and North Africa followed various historical paths in the twentieth century. Up until 1918, the countries of the Middle East were still Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, whereas the countries of North Africa were established territories in place since antiquity. Compared with the Arab provinces of the Empire, Algeria and Tunisia's links with the Sublime Porte were less restrictive, and Morocco, the former State of Maghreb, was still independent. As nation states they were subject to a French colonial presence of one form or another. Algeria belonged to France while Morocco and Tunisia were French protectorates.

The changes we are now witnessing are not unaffected by these discrepancies in development and mentality. French cultural and political influence lasted much longer in North Africa¹ than in young countries such

¹ Because of the length of the French presence in Algeria—132 years—the country moved closer to the French mentality and to principles connected with citizenship than the countries of the Middle East, with the exception of the Syro-Lebanese



as Syria and Lebanon, which were placed under guardianship by the mandates of 1920 and 1946 and inherited republican political systems copied from the French model. It was the same story as regards Anglo-Saxon influence in the countries under British mandate after 1920: Palestine/Israel, Iraq and Jordan, as well as Egypt from the end of the nineteenth century.

The formation of the states of the Middle East

With the intervention of the European powers during the First World War and the formation of states at the Paris Peace Conference, the region went from being an imperial political system—in which relations between the majority and minorities were governed by a subtle equilibrium between the central Ottoman state and the communities (or *millet*)—to nation-state systems with democratic ambitions that took no account of family or clan structures, or even the role of Islam. The fact of this impasse poses a question essential to understanding subsequent events.

Would it have been possible to maintain cohesion while passing, without transition, from vertically structured political systems—in which the authority of the head of the family, head of the community and head of state is uncontested—to horizontally structured political systems that make room for the individual, for critical thought and for modernity? The answer is no. Events have proved this in the whole of the Arab world. For if there is one thing that the Maghreb and the Mashriq *do* have in common, it is structures and a mentality that are family-oriented.

In terms of history, as already mentioned, the differences between the Mashriq and the Maghreb are considerable. The Maghreb was not subjected to Ottoman influence in as direct a way as the Arab provinces in the

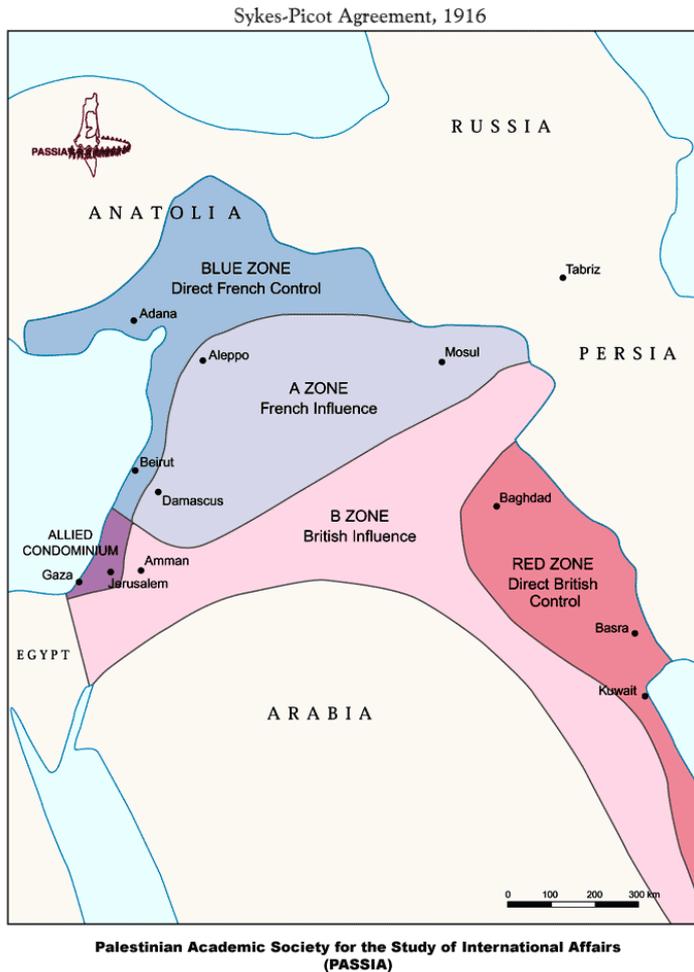
nationalists at the time of the Arab Renaissance—the *Nahda*—at the end of the nineteenth century. This was also the case in Tunisia and Morocco because of the length of the French protectorate.

Mashriq.² On the other, the Maghreb suffered to a greater extent from the effects of being colonised and administered by the French. In the Mashriq, it was more a case of the repercussions of French and British colonialism making themselves felt for a quarter of a century and beyond. Another historical fact can be added to these discrepancies in the development of the two regions of the Arab world, both subject to an imperial politics of divide and rule: the heart of Arab nationalism always beat in Damascus, Baghdad or in Cairo before Algiers, Tunis or Rabat.

New states and relations between the majority and minorities

The change in geopolitical equilibrium after the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1920 and the formation of the Middle East states was the starting point for upheavals in relations between the majority and the minorities in the region. The Ottoman Empire certainly wasn't a golden age, but it did permit a certain stability to be established and maintained. Relations went from the strong to the weak, from the Sunni majority in power, represented by the sultan/caliph, to the minorities. The latter included those that benefited

² "In the provinces of the Maghreb (Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli), the tendencies towards autonomy that had made themselves felt in the provinces of the Middle East ended in quasi-independence in the eighteenth century; attachment to the Empire was no longer marked by anything other than external signs and Ottoman domination was reduced to a sovereignty that did not have repercussions for the holders of power. The reasons for this development seem fairly obvious. The Maghreb's distance from the centre of the Empire made it difficult for the imperial government to intervene; having achieved a conquest that had sometimes required a powerful military engagement, the Porte would have needed to put into play means no longer at its disposal from the sixteenth century onwards, when its main effort was oriented towards the defence of its European and Asiatic possessions, threatened by the Christian powers and the Safavid dynasty, in order to control this part of the Empire." André Raymond, *Les provinces arabes (XVII^e siècle-XVIII^e siècle)*, in: Robert Mantran (ed.), *Histoire de l'Empire ottoman*, Paris, Payard, 1989, p. 404.



from the status of *Dhimmi*, "People of the Book" protected by Islam and granted a personal statute. The Christian minorities could also count on the protection of the western powers, who used them, according to circumstances, to strengthen their hand and their interests in the Ottoman Empire. Thanks to this and to the development of education by missionary institutions, mainly French but also Anglo-Saxon, these minorities were "westernised"—albeit superficially and while remaining attached to the family and clan structures that they had in common with the majority.

With the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire on the basis of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and the creation by Great Britain and France of nation states under their mandate, this equilibrium was

broken. The great powers' policy of that time was to not acknowledge nascent Arab nationalism, to weaken its supporters and then to put minorities in power—in Lebanon as much as in Palestine or Iraq. For a brief moment, Clemenceau nearly succeeded with a different kind of policy consisting of harmonising support for the Faisal I of Iraq, a Sunni and son of the Sharif of Mecca, representing Arab nationalism, with the protection of the Maronites of Mount Lebanon. Clemenceau's intention was to transform France's *grande politique ottomane* into a *grande politique arabe*, associated with the traditional sub-policy of supporting the Lebanese Christians and protecting holy sites. The weakness of Faisal, who refrained from honouring his commitments towards France, and colonial circles' opposition to Clemenceau were due to this policy, which nonetheless represented a continuation of the policy established by Francis I in the sixteenth century in the context of the Ottoman Empire. Robert Caix, an eminent representative

of the French colonial party and the inspiration behind France's policy in 1920, opposed majority Arab nationalism and Clemenceau's attempt to pursue traditional French policy. He was a decisive factor in the decision to promote the minorities, both Christian and Muslim, which he compared to the constituent parts "of a stained glass window where the lead is French".

Placed centre-stage, the minorities were privileged in the short term and endangered in the long term. Their new status in Lebanon irritated the country's traditional Sunni majority. In Egypt, under the influence of the British, the Coptic community occupied a special place at the forefront of the political scene. In Iraq, the Sunni minority dominated the Shiite majority. This imbalance between the majority and the minorities fostered the



beginnings of Muslim extremism, above all the birth of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928. Indeed, the precarious situation of the minorities, especially the Eastern Christians, can be said to have been linked to the rise of Islamic extremism for more than a century—and that is without even mentioning Israeli policy, which has ceaselessly reinforced the split.

To put it another way, the "minoritisation" of the Sunni majority in Lebanon made the Eastern Christian minorities vulnerable in the long term by increasing the risk of "revenge". Of course, it is impossible to know what a unitary Sunni power would have been like, or to guarantee that it would have been a stabilising factor in the region, espousing democratic politics and equal treatment of citizens regardless of religion. One may nevertheless suppose that a majority whose rights were respected would have had no interest in endangering its power and the stability of society by authorising intolerance and extremism.

Birth of a "minority" state

Israel's declaration of independence in 1948 dealt a fatal blow to the dispossessed Sunni majority in Lebanon. From that moment on, it was not a minority but a "minority state" that became all powerful, joining a group of Arab states where the balance of power did not lie with the majority. Successive Arab-Israeli wars, Israel's military pre-eminence and Arab resentments meant that national movements with secular tendencies failed, and with their failure came the rise of Islamic extremism. Thus, instead of an Arab identity emerging that was shared by the majority and the minorities, it was possible to observe a progressive retreat into religious identities, be they Muslim or Christian. It was the same in Israel where, for reasons peculiar to that country, religion never ceased to nibble away at secular territory. Furthermore, it is worth noting that "Muslim" frustration increased with the political and demographic growth of the Lebanese Shiite community in the 1980s. Long neglected, the Shiite community took steps to defend and overcome its position both internally and ex-

ternally, working against the internal "imbalance" and against Israel. Adding to these tensions was the endemic violence in the Middle East, which has constantly prevented and invalidated political, economic and social progress in the Arab countries and done a huge amount to foster the rise of malcontents. In North Africa, on the other hand, violence has been concentrated in Algeria at the level of internal rivalries.

The Arab armies' first defeat to the Israeli army in 1948-49 sounded the death knell for those Arab regimes that were slowly opening up to democracy and paved the way for the establishment of military and authoritarian regimes on a lasting basis. These became the norm in the Middle East and endured up until 2011, when the Arab revolutionaries began challenging them and demanding their abolition.

Arab nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism

With a Sunni majority in power and a Coptic minority that was respected but greatly under-represented in parliament, Nasser's Egypt set itself up as the champion of Arab nationalism, galvanising the masses not only across the Middle East but also North Africa. Initially open to an alliance with the West, Nasser tired of waiting for a guarantor and turned towards the Soviet bloc. From then on, western policy was to fight him tooth and nail and invalidate his unitary approach. This policy of opposition culminated in the Suez adventure of 1956, which prompted the strengthening of a new Muslim power in Saudi Arabia characterised by a rigid and retrograde enforcement of Islam and a wealth as overblown as it was unevenly distributed.

The cumulative result was the end of the Arab nationalist dream. A good number of the instigators and thinkers of the *Nahda* or Arab Renaissance were Arab Christians. When the Renaissance movement failed, they opted either to withdraw into their communities or go into exile. It is not an exaggeration to say that western policy fostered the consolidation of a purist Islam by seeking to oppose by all possible means an



Arab nationalism with secular tendencies suspected of seeking an alliance with the Soviet Union. It is nonetheless the case that Nasser brought about a democratic decline in Egypt and introduced an authoritarian police state. He bears responsibility for grave errors, including the outbreak of the Six Day War in June 1967, which was a disaster for the Arabs and signalled his end. Ultimately, everything converged in a sense of resentment: down the years the Muslim world has shown an increasingly marked rejection of western policy, which is seen as synonymous with unconditional support for Israel and for the minorities suspected of being western accomplices.

The denial of Palestine

The systematic negation of Palestinian rights perpetuated the policy of unconditional support to the point of absurdity. One notable effect was to strengthen the radical Islamic tendency within the resistance. The Israeli state's abandonment of all policies of integration in the region and its choice, in order simply to exist, of permanent confrontation endangered the entire region and at the same time Israel's own security. Rather than dealing in a constructive manner with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), the Israelis did everything they could to weaken and fragment it. They encouraged and supported the rise of Hamas, the political movement they are fighting today in Gaza. The Manichaeism of the Israelis and the West, advocating of division to establish hegemony, has been a decisive cause of the region's political shipwreck.

The fact remains that the West's geopolitical and oil-related interests have been preserved up until the present day by the policy of splitting up the Arab world, cantonising it at the community and ethnic levels. The same is true for those who defend the permanence of Israel in its existing form, even if their bet on the eternal rejection of a Palestinian state is suicidal in the long term, and indeed the medium term. Did not Oded Yinon³, a former member of the Israeli ministry

³ Oded Yinon is a journalist and a former functionary at the Israeli ministry for foreign

for foreign affairs, advocate, in a report from February 1982, accentuating religious and ethnic division in the region in order to ensure Israel's survival and to allow it to achieve the status of imperial power? He was thus continuing the policy of "divide and rule" favoured by the great powers at the beginning of the twentieth century. This division was not destined only for the Middle East: let's recall that the French adopted the same strategy with the Arabs and Berber in North Africa at the political and linguistic levels. Yinon's ideas were reprised by the America of Bush, father and son, under the influence of the neo-conservatives and the Israeli lobby: the most obvious result of the two Iraq wars of 1991 and 2003 was the splintering of communities in Iraq and an upsurge in extremism. The effects of this policy are also visible today in Christian South Sudan, which has obtained independence, and in the temptation among the Egyptian Copts to hope for autonomy in upper Egypt. Was not western intervention in Libya, beyond being a "flight to the aid" of insurgents against a bloody tyrant, part of this same philosophy of divide and rule, playing on tribal splits under the cover of a sham federalism? If Bashar al-Assad's regime ends up collapsing, will the Americans and Israelis be tempted to encourage the creation of mini-states in Syria for the Alawis, Sunni and Druse? The question is legitimate.

The hopes created by President Obama's Cairo speech did not survive Israel's refusal to give up her settlements. Mahmoud Abbas' demand at the United Nations for the recognition of a Palestinian state is the symptomatic result of Israel's political obduracy and immeasurable power to apply pressure on Americans. This demand is surely more an expression of despair than the beginnings of a solution.

Arabs and power in the twentieth century

affairs. His paper, "The Zionist Plan for the Middle East", first appeared in *Kivunim* (Directions), 14 February 1982, then was translated by Israël Shahak and published by the *Revue des Etudes palestiniennes* in 1982.



There is one central piece that remains in the jigsaw of this shipwreck. In the twentieth century, Arab leaders have been incapable of joining forces and uniting against western policy. Faisal, who benefited from the support of Clemenceau in 1920, and Nasser, who, thanks to Eisenhower, transformed his military defeat in 1956 into a political victory for the Arabs, missed historic opportunities to strengthen their power and reinforce independence. They allowed themselves to be overwhelmed by the intransigence of their supporters, and this caused division and lack of political realism. Faisal was not able to achieve his Arab kingdom of Syria, and Nasser lost everything with his defeat in 1967. Arab leaders bear most of the responsibility for the misfortunes of their people and their countries. Of course, a fundamental distinction needs to be drawn between these two major figures and a good many of the autocratic and short-sighted heads of state, some of them bloodthirsty, who have held sway during the last decades. Furthermore, it is an understatement to say that Arab leaders in the oil monarchies, vassals of America that they are, have failed to work out how to use their oil as an asset in their dealings with the West, as a negotiating tool to settle conflicts in the Arab world (with the exception of Opec's short interlude in 1973), or as way to promote, at last, Arab unity. As I have written elsewhere,

Men and states have had an unfortunate tendency to wait for others to provide the solutions to their problems because they were incapable of confronting defeat and loss. Instead of facing facts and accepting the compromises that would have allowed them to rebuild and get stronger, they opted for excess, demagoguery and bloody-minded perseverance. Imprisoned by a mythical past and a present imposed from outside, they allowed themselves to be subsumed by inertia and "magical thinking", reacting instead of acting, dreaming instead of seeing or foreseeing. In this way, they kept their feelings of humiliation and shame alive, with the unfounded and indeed infantile hope, constantly renewed, that they would be

saved, restored by the great western Other.⁴

With a few exceptions, Arab intellectuals and other potential opposition forces progressively demobilised. Simultaneously confronted by two enemies, one internal, one external—western policies and the regimes in their own countries—they were crushed. This defeat, which was multi-faceted, is still to be studied.

Factors blocking the Arab countries

The two most important factors blocking the Arab countries—the western-Israeli policy of dividing the Arab world and internal blockages in Arab societies due to family and clan structures—are still present, if not omnipresent. Without a profound change in western and Israeli policy, a change that takes account of the attitudes of mind, the traumas and the sympathies—positive and negative—that flow from it, the western powers will continue to foster Islamic extremism and further weaken Eastern Christianity. Will the Arab revolutions—and also the Green Movement in Iran—succeed in breaking the yoke of vertical family structures that paralyse individuals, enslave women and prohibit critical thinking? The influence of families and their subconscious pull—religious and social—is considerable. As long as individuals are subject to the law of the father, relaying God's law here on Earth, and as long as they are prey to internal divisions, often due to rivalries between brothers for maternal love and recognition, it must be feared that they will struggle to assert the kind of independent identity needed to engage in critical thought and to become good citizens. Imprisoned as they are by internal divisions, the collection of individuals that constitutes these peoples will struggle to elude and overcome divisions imposed on them from outside.

Will the new Arab leaders that have emerged from these revolutions know how to take on board the lessons of the past,

⁴ Gérard D. Khoudry, *Une tutelle coloniale. Ecrits politiques de Robert de Caix*, Paris (Belin), 2006, p. 122-123.



make a profound break with the practices of their predecessors, take charge of their own destiny, and lessen or indeed counteract western control in the mutual interest of both parties? Or will corrupt and authoritarian regimes manage to delay the Arab countries' liberation by again resorting to repression, sustained by a complicit and pernicious silence on the part of the western powers?

The popular uprisings of 2011

The peaceful revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt have broken with the past and opened the door to change in neighboring countries. They do not owe their existence to an ideology or political manipulation. This fact alone constitutes an unprecedented chapter not just in Arab history but in history full stop. No one is currently in a position to foresee what the future will bring. A number of issues are on hold: social and economic challenges yet to make themselves felt (in Egypt in particular); the danger of a return to corruption and old police practices; the weakness of the replacement of political structures; but also opportunities in future foreign policy, from all countries involved worldwide, in respect of

these newly liberated peoples.

Westerners fear of Islamists will hijack the revolutions or seize power. Many of the people who rose up fear this too, proving that such a seizure can be avoided. This is not a guarantee; it is a hope. After all, what should be feared most is the eroding of democracy by the powers it establishes.

Is it not high time for the western powers to change their policy in the Arab countries and give up creating divisions? Preserving western interests is not incompatible with a humane political partnership based on an egalitarian approach. For the West as for the Arab world, the future will mean putting a certain past to rest. What western political figure will be capable of starting anew, possessing the kind of vision Clemenceau showed when he attempted to extend France's Ottoman policy into a genuine exchange across the Mediterranean, into an Arab policy worthy of the name? Presented with the courage of the people who risked their lives to go out on the street, one begins to dream. Presented with the meanderings of history, the historian must sometimes double up as a utopian.