

Policy analysis

Analysis 2/11

Sarajevo, March 2011.

Policy analysis

***Revolt in Arab Countries –
Change or Mere Promises***



**Foreign Policy
Initiative BH**

Table of Contents

Revolt in Arab Countries – Change or Mere Promises	1
Taking to the streets does not solve crucial problems, but raises crucial questions	2
The spreading of illusions as a possible source of new frustrations	2
Causes of revolt – from demography to geopolitics	3
▪ Specific qualities of individual countries	3
▪ Common reasons	4
What are the demands of the protesters?	5
▪ Egypt	5
▪ Libya	6
▪ Jordan	6
Who are the initiators of the protests?	6
Democracy or Islam – a false dichotomy?	7
Which direction could the events take?	9
Conclusion – common denominator is a ‘new spirit of resistance’	10

This Independent analysis has been prepared by the Foreign Policy Initiative BH (FPI BH) with the financial support of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. The views expressed here are those of the Foreign Policy Initiative BH and are not to be understood as in any way reflecting the views of Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Contact: info@vpi.ba www.vpi.ba

With the support of:



Revolt in Arab Countries – Change or Mere Promises

The social and political unrest that began at the start of 2011, involving hundreds of thousands of citizens of Arab countries, is nowhere near an end. It has already brought about limited changes in Egypt and Tunisia, dented the internal stability of Yemen, rocked Bahrain, Jordan, Libya and Algeria to different extents, and also partially shaken Iraq, Kuwait and Morocco. Although they took place outside of the region, the riots in Iran and Albania coincided with these events.

The initial causes of dissatisfaction, primarily in the social sphere¹, sparked protests in which between 500,000 and 700,000 people participated,² according to reliable estimates by various intelligence agencies. The demands of the protestors have been wide and varied: change of government and ruler, fundamental constitutional, political and economic reforms, democratisation, observance of human rights and freedoms and demands for substantial reconsideration of the international political and geostrategic positions of states and governments and the overall concept and methods of realisation of various interests in the region. A secondary demand, without specific details, has been made to reconsider relations with Israel. The issue of the relationship between religion and government has been raised as well, mostly in the media.

There is a conspicuous difference between media reactions to these events (which, after all, cannot have a common denominator and common articulation, considering the demands made, the manner in which they have taken place, and the goals already attained) on the one hand, and the conclusions offered by rational indicators and evident results in reality on the other. Without negating the fact that the degree of expressed indignation and the synchronisation of the protests in almost the entire region are completely at odds with established practice and the passivity and lethargy which have marked the relationship between the people and regimes in all the above-mentioned countries in previous decades, a rational analysis would conclude that the events that have taken place thus far do not justify the epithet of revolution considering the goals attained³. Except in the case of Tunisia, where the downfall of the regime and the flight of the former leader have left complete havoc and disorientation in their wake, the regime has not been brought down in any of the above-mentioned countries. The protests, marked by varying degrees of bloodshed and police and army brutality, are still not having the desired effect. Other than Libya, where the outcome is not on the horizon, the major achievements are merely promises in the cases of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and partially effected changes in Jordan. Compared with the initial demands for complete overhaul of systems and regime change, those which have been achieved can be described as cosmetic rather than revolutionary.

On the other hand, the tumult in all Arab countries has pointed with unprecedented clarity to the real social, political, economic and systemic problems, social injustice and dramatic social fragmentation which are the wellspring of enormous and fast-growing frustration. Future responses to this will have to be found more promptly and efficiently and with clearer results. At the same time, the sentiment amongst the broad masses that the present regimes are not untouchable has materialised as a new force which, in the future, will not be as easy to contain as has hitherto been the case.

¹ Demographic explosion, high unemployment rate (especially among the younger population), soaring food and energy prices and rent, etc.

² Not millions of people, as the media report.

³ Although it does not necessarily have to stay that way, the visible goals at this point are the toppling of the old regimes, ascension of new political formations, fundamental change in the constitutional make-up of the countries where protests are taking place and the defeat of the present structures of power.

Taking to the streets does not solve crucial problems, but raises crucial questions

Taking to the streets has not solved, and is unlikely to solve, crucial problems in semi-feudal societies and relationships, but the expressed discontent is a fact that will have to be taken into account in future government policies. At the same time, the issues of further realisation of certain global goals, such as the manner of participation in democratisation processes, attainment of human rights and liberties, and right to have particularities independent of 'global standards' based on one worldview, have been put on the agendas of decision-making centres in the global community. A serious dilemma exists as to how to reconcile the need to shape the governments and regimes in the countries in which important geostrategic interests are at stake with the explosively expressed, albeit not fully realised, intention of the people of those countries to choose their own governments.

The current events have exposed the barely concealed disagreements among the countries defending their own interests in the Middle East as to how to adjust to the dramatically expressed demands of the protesters. A great lack of understanding of historical circumstances, the genesis and the causes of revolt as well as the mentality and mood of Arabs has been evident in the West. There has also been some ideological stereotyping in the interpretation of Islam, baseless speculation on the future development of the situation and the consequences of the current events and even synchronised political and media 'threats' in the event that 'the street triumphs'.

Especially striking is the demonization of the preconceived 'victory of Islam over secularism' in the countries where protests are taking place, although an objective reading of the facts relating to the so-called revolutionary events in the streets of Arab cities does not point in any way to a decisive organised presence and role of Islamist organisations and movements. Besides, the regimes in most of the above-mentioned countries have never been secular in the way secularism is understood in the West.

The spreading of illusions as a possible source of new frustrations

In the case of Egypt one may talk about a barely disguised coup d'état with obvious basic elements whereby the situation remains essentially unchanged: the military has preserved the existing system and strengthened its position within it to an unprecedented extent, the President left the Office alive and in good health, the Constitution has been abolished, the Parliament dismissed, and the protesters have dispersed believing they have won and that the military will pave the way to democracy. This remains to be seen. A realistic estimate is that no change will take place that jeopardises the dominant position of the military, and through the military the USA, and, in turn, Israel – all this in exchange for peace in Egypt. The geo-strategy in this crucial case, on which a lot of things in the neighbouring countries depend, has not been changed. Many elements and nuances will not remain the same, but the essence will.

Although still on-going, the events thus far have revealed significant partiality in the interpretation of the developments in the Arab world, especially under pressure from political propaganda and the media in the West. There is an imposed fear of Islam and, in this context, the establishment of a false dichotomy: uncertain democracy with Islam or certain peace with the totalitarians. In addition, there has been a shortage of analyses which point out that in fact there was no democracy to speak of and that the organisational and operational capacities and even the ambitions of the so-called Islamists were neither sufficient for, nor directed towards, reaching the top positions in a formal government. It is also clear that the existing model of 'Totalitarianism Defending Secularism' is no longer sufficient to maintain peace and preserve global interests as was perhaps the case until now.

The pronounced euphoria which marks uncritical judgments passed on the actual achievements of the current protests is not conducive to the illumination of these events. This spreading of illusions about the results the people would achieve in the streets overnight may soon become a source of significant frustration over unattained goals. The belief that the fundamental geostrategic interests of global power centres, the defence of which had formed the basis of the entire architecture of Arab regimes and relations in the Middle East in bygone decades, would be drastically redefined due to the current events is unrealistic and thus detrimental to sober reflections on the future of a region which evidently demands change. What is already apparent is that there will have to be changes in the strategic, political, institutional and economic spheres, in the manner of governing and in the establishment of different standards in the area of democracy and human rights and liberties. This is a process which will take a long time and which is directly contingent on, amongst other things, global developments related to demography, food, energy and so on.

Causes of revolt – from demography to geopolitics

An analysis of crucial previous developments on which the politico-social reality in the Arab world was built must take into consideration many more elements than everyday pragmatic conclusions allow. Numerous 'spectacle- and street-friendly' TV cameras are not enough here, as they do not acknowledge well-founded analyses of sources, scopes, limits, reality, prejudices and interests. None of the things that have occurred thus far came suddenly or independently of a long-lasting process. As such they cannot be fully articulated before certain unquestionable facts are clarified and accepted as relevant information pertaining to the real and diverse causes, interests, strengths and goals of this popular movement heading in different directions. They also depend on the power and the actual relevance of all the players involved, both domestic and foreign.

Specific qualities of individual countries

The demonstrations in the streets of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, Algeria, Bahrain, Libya and Kuwait were precipitated by the increasingly difficult living conditions, unemployment, enormous hikes in prices, especially of food and energy and rent increases. However, immediately after the first demonstrations in the streets of Tunisia which brought about an almost instantaneous disintegration of the regime, the reactions provoked in other countries, especially Egypt, show specific qualities which vary from country to country. Many formal demands of the risen people are the same, but the circumstances, causes of frustration, composition and motives of certain groups, the circumstances of the unrest, the manner in which the governments reacted and the wider context are different. It is true that as the protesters articulated their demands; Jordan (social and political), Yemen (change of government, separatism of the south), then in Algeria (human rights, jobs, but also rivalry at the top in the struggle for power), Bahrain (the relations between the Shi'ite majority and the power-holding Sunni minority) and Libya (autocracy, social and political demands) it became clear that the reasons for discontent were significant and manifold and that they had been building up for a long time and affecting the entire system in which the Arab world is languishing. They have caused explosive frustration to mount and the aim now is substantial, fundamental and long-term change in society.

Common reasons

The following reasons, which have led to fundamental discontent and frustration turning into rage, are the most conspicuous:

Demography: The population of Egypt has increased by one third (from 50 million in 1985 to 83 million in 2010) over the last 25 years. In addition, the average age in the country is 24 and those

in this age group, although by definition the best educated, are socially most endangered.

Unemployment- first and foremost among youth: The unemployment rate in this group is between 25% and 30% in most countries, and in Libya it is as high as 40-45%. In such circumstances, the feeling that prospects are bleak is a strong motive for discontent.

Prices of victuals and rent: As populations rise in Arab countries resources drop in inverse proportion. Countries without ordered economies do not have the means to renew their resources. The food crisis and the soaring prices of food are affected by the accelerating and ever more apparent climate changes which, according to scientists, increasingly affect the 'drought line' which runs from the horn of Africa, across Red Sea, Yemen, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Autocratic systems of government: Having gained unlimited authority on the domestic front and strong support of Western countries, the local rulers strengthened autocratic systems brutally eliminating any political, especially liberal, opposition. Thus they struck at the root of the emergence of the bourgeois middle class without which democratisation of society does not stand a chance. In accordance with their own interests these leaders have gradually changed legislation, the most conspicuous example being abolition of the limit on the number of terms a person may serve as the Head of State. Elections became a formality and a farce; the rulers who have served four or five terms openly prepared their children or closest relatives to succeed them even in systems which were not monarchies.

Corruption and amassing of wealth: The models of enrichment of family oligarchies in such regimes are known. Natural and state resources were looted and arrogated through different mechanisms, corruption became a way of life and a mode of functioning, and government officials acted like monarchs even in countries which formally were not monarchies. In contrast, poverty among the population increased at the same rate as the wealth of the leadership. The fast pace of social stratification is equally evident in Jordan, a kingdom without economic or natural resources, and in Egypt and Libya which have oil and other valuable resources such as the Suez Channel and tourism (Egypt).

Military and police: These structures, heavily financed, maintained, developed and schooled in America, Britain and France, became the cornerstone of the authorities and were supported by secret police apparatus, the *mukhabarats* that answered only to the power-holders. Political rights were turning into a farce and domestic policies, enforced by the military and police, were dictated primarily by the interests of the outside forces and geostrategic interests which maintained that system.

Double standards: 'The substance of democracy' in the Middle East was determined on the basis of double standards. Many authors point out that Arabs have never truly been in a position to make decisions about their own destiny, in accordance with purported standards in the world. Here, democratic principles primarily depended on whether or not they coincided with the interests of the international 'patrons'. In this context, the case of Hezbollah in Lebanon is often highlighted. Although Hezbollah were elected in free and fair elections held in accordance with all Western standards, influential Western countries never acknowledged their political and electoral legitimacy. This is not a lone example.

'Conditional democracy': In numerous analyses it is often repeated that 'Arabs have, until now, only had conditional human, civil and national rights, not those which everywhere in the world are called universal, basic and inalienable human rights'. There is now a widespread euphoria and the sense that people have started to win, for the first time in Arab history, real, universal and inalienable rights. Few are willing to give out, or listen to, warnings to the effect that such an assessment should wait until concrete results are seen. The reality in which only that which serves the interests of foreign and domestic rulers is deemed to be 'democratic' is believed to be a thing of the past. This presumption can barely be suppressed at the moment although there is as yet no solid evidence that it will become reality in the long run.

Palestine: The feeling of complete injustice stems, amongst other things, from the drama which has for decades been refusing to end and can simply be called 'Palestine'. Even Israel, from the point of view of its interests – believed to be jeopardised by the Arab rebellions – is now forced to include new elements in its consideration of the fact called Palestine by acknowledging the new possible consequences and counter-productivity of not solving this issue. While Mubarak, the head of the Arab state 'without which there can neither be war nor peace in the Middle East' controlled 'the Arab wrath' over Palestine, Israel was able, through manoeuvres aimed to maintain the eternal status quo and gradual appropriation of occupied territories, to move closer to the ultimate goal of its hardliners – the final fragmentation of occupied territories and appropriation of the whole 'historical biblical homeland'. Thus the sixty years old story of the creation of the Palestinian state would be put to an end.

The Israeli-Palestinian problem has two dominant devastating aspects which are influencing the present radicalisation of the Arab masses. One is that there are five million disenfranchised Palestinians living in Middle Eastern countries who carry in themselves a bitter indignation at the fact that they have been driven off their own land, and they spread this sentiment in various ways in the places where they live. The other aspect stems from the widespread conviction in the Arab world that the so-called 'justice for all', defined according to international standards, is not applicable to Arabs, Muslims, and especially Palestinians, except where it suits the West and Israel. There is a widespread conviction in the West that the security of Israel can be defended in the long run through refusal to acknowledge the right to have an independent state and constant attempts to maintain the existing situation by force and trampling on the basic human rights of Palestinians who, like the great majority of people in the world, do not deny Israel's right to exist and be safe. The awareness of 'rights for some, injustice for others' has deep roots in the Middle East and is an important source of frustrations which are now being expressed through widespread protests.

What are the demands of the protesters?

After the initial demands, mostly social in nature, substantial demands which were supposed to have a 'revolutionary character' crystallised as well. These ranged from a change in the system of rule through complete democratisation of life and relations in the country, to a re-definition of general rights, personal and collective freedoms, a new electoral system, fundamental political and economic reforms, rethinking of the international position, international relations and treaties, and, finally, to specific local issues pertaining to employment status, privatisation, permits, prohibitions and so on. Until now these demands were being met in ways and at speeds that depended on the previous power structure in the country. They depended more on the strength of the regime under attack than on the strength of the protests and the organisers of the demonstrations. The regime in Tunisia, for example, fell apart instantly and the President fled the country immediately after the demonstrations started. The response of the law enforcement bodies was especially brutal in Libya, in keeping with the harshness of the regime, but also in Bahrain, where America has an important strategic interest in defending the border of the region and likewise in Iran, which is why the American Fifth Fleet is stationed there.

Egypt

In Egypt, Mubarak withstood the pressure of the protesters for almost three weeks, just enough time for invisible yet well-organised counter-forces to neutralise the protesters. Even after his departure from the office of the Head of State, the power was not seized by the 'people', but by the strongest state structure – the military. A month after the unrest started, the issue of succession turned out to be the main trigger of destabilisation. The military was startled at the idea that for the first time in recent history the candidate for the office of the Head of State was not a soldier, but Mubarak's son Gamal (47), a civilian who had no connections to the military. The

military, as the eternal backbone of the state, including generals of Mubarak's age as well as younger ones, could not accept this knowing that it would mark the beginning of the end of the dominance in the country of the strongest and most important structure of the state. Ironic as it may sound, the protesters who rushed to the streets in the aftermath of the events in Tunisia, identifying all their demands with the uncompromising demand for Mubarak's departure did the main work for the generals. Of course in the case of Egypt one should not neglect the evident involvement of the Western intelligence services which made sure that the overall disintegration of the former regime did not jeopardize their strategic interests in the country. For this reason, Egypt now has the clearest situation: Mubarak is gone, the rule of the generals remains and Western interests are preserved. Everything else is a mere promise. Which direction the promised processes of democratisation will take remains to be seen.

Libya

The situation in Libya which has escalated to bloody clashes is clearly illustrated by the fact that the attempts to organise 'Days of Wrath' are handled by the opposition in exile, lacking realism about its own capacities and the situation in the country. Libya is distinct in that the Western (especially European) interests, bound up with oil and investments, are so vast that the EU's pressure on Gaddafi, although formally intense, will in fact be measured against these interests. Judging by the developments from early March the outcome in Libya will be bloody and 'Somaliasation', chaos, lawlessness and tribal divisions may be in the country's future. Gaddafi will not surrender easily. It is conspicuous that Western countries, especially the USA, purport to stand against violent interventions of the military and the police in solving the problems with protesters, but yet the response in Yemen, Algeria, Bahrain, Libya and Iran has been brutal, and has even involved the firing of live rounds in addition to the use of tear-gas, truncheons and other usual props.

Jordan

Jordan is the only country in which, for now, there exists a certain discrepancy between the actual power of the military and the police on the one hand, and the speed with which the regime responded to the demands of the protesters, including the Muslim Brotherhood. The top echelons of the opposition interpreted the King's understanding of their demands as a sign of weakness, rather than a willingness to meet the demands of the protesters. This is illustrated by the unusually rude attack on the Queen by the conservatives, unprecedented in the history of the Monarchy. After this, the protesters and the new Justice Minister demanded clemency for the soldier who had killed seven Israeli pupils on the bank of the border River Jordan without any reason. This was, in turn, followed by demands to shut down night clubs and bars as the protests continue every Friday and the numbers of those protesting rises continually.

In spite of everyday efforts to present the situation in the country as stable and calm, it is clear that the 'Islamists' and conservatives of all provenances are attempting to use the so-called 'revolutionary moment' to establish themselves in the country on a long-term basis, in a way that has not been possible before. In that sense they act in subtle way, assuming that they have a significant foothold in the electorate, which they only have to 'formalise' through a new Elections Act, the adoption of which they have been insisting on, and by calling new elections, although the previous ones were held less than five months ago.

Who are the initiators of the protests?

The answer to this question is crucial for an understanding of the background, causes and consequences of the protests, but it is impossible to generalise for two reasons. The first is that the driving forces behind the 'popular revolt' are not the same in all countries in terms of their

original professional, social or political characteristics. The second is that it is still not entirely clear in all of these countries who the protesters are, and whether they were co-ordinated and had a common programme. The answer is not uniform in terms of the true motives of the protest organisers nor in terms of possible power centres from which the initiators, otherwise potentially known to the public, act. It can be observed at the scene of demonstrations that protestors themselves are not unified in terms of ways and methods of expressing discontent. It is difficult to identify the nuclei from which 'legitimate representatives' of the protesters could be subsequently recruited for negotiations with the authorities. Although it is clear that the issue of the representatives' capacities and negotiating legitimacy is one of the issues with crucial significance for the outcome of potential negotiations with the authorities, it has proved to be one of the weakest links in the entire concept of attempting to effect radical changes in the countries in which protests have broken out.

An exception in the initial stage was again Yemen, where union representatives surfaced during peaceful gatherings as the initiators and leaders of the protests along with the Muslim Brotherhood, i.e. its political wing, the legal parliamentary party Islamic Action Front (IAF). The King received them shortly after the first demonstrations and accepted many of their demands. Interestingly enough, on 18 February, when violence first broke out between various factions among the protesters, neither the authorities nor the media knew who the instigators were.

In Tunisia, the movement started spontaneously, literally in the streets, and it soon became apparent that there was neither a consistent plan for long-term change nor an organised nucleus to define goals clearly and precisely, which brought the country to a state of permanent chaos and disorganisation which many are avoiding by fleeing the country.

In Egypt it was certain, soon after the demonstrations started, that some former liberal opposition structures, along with the Muslim Brotherhood and other religious and social groups and organisations, including Coptic Christians, would succeed to an extent in articulating the goals of the uprising. However, it transpired that focusing entirely on Mubarak's departure put the protesters off course, because the elimination of a regime leader does not necessarily mean regime change. It seems that resistance leaders did not completely understand that the military did not refrain from attacking them out of consideration or for sentimental reasons, but simply because the protesters completed the most important task for the military – the toppling of Mubarak, who had fallen out of favour with the armed forces.

In Iran the vanguard in the streets comprised students and intellectuals, in Bahrain members of the Shiite majority protesting against the oppressive Sunni minority regime, in Yemen students and separatists from the South united against the Government and the ruler who had been in power for 32 years. In Libya, the organisers are mostly expatriates. The tone of the unrest in Algeria is set by the organisations "Rally for Culture and Democracy", "National Coordination for Change and Democracy", and the "Human Rights League". Islamic Salvation Front, the banned party whose number two leader Ali Belhadj was arrested on 11 February, also answered the call to protest. Consciously or not, all of these actors are involved, to varying degrees, in the internal struggle for future power between the President Abdel Aziz Bouteflika (73) and his supporters, and the younger head of the Department of Intelligence and Security General Mohamed 'Toufik' Mediene.

Democracy or Islam – a false dichotomy?

Constructed artificially and intentionally, and forced onto the global public in the light of the recent events, is the 'Democracy or Islam' dilemma. It had long been in circulation even before these events, and it comes as no surprise that it is presently being aggressively imposed. In recent history, France was the first country to face this dilemma during the elections in Algeria in December 1991. Islamic Salvation Front won the first round. France, following the above-mentioned logic, strongly supported the subsequent coup d'état. Similar logic triumphed later,

after the elections in Lebanon where Hezbollah entered the Parliament and Government in accordance with all the standards of Western democracy, but the label of 'terrorist organisation' remained. In recent months Lebanon has been seriously destabilised by the story about the findings of the UN Tribunal on the murder of Rafiq Hariri. The same formula is being applied to the election of Hamas in Gaza.

Another dilemma arises from said choice: a secular police-military state or the 'Islamists'. Put simply: Mubarak or the Muslim Brotherhood! Dr. Ian Buruma, Professor of Democracy and Human Rights at Bard College in New York, notes that the above-mentioned message "was persuasive enough for Western governments, especially the United States, to continue to lavish money and arms on Mubarak and other Arab 'allies'". A black-and-white conclusion was drawn, and few took issue with it: Islam is a threat to democracy. Hence the question: is democracy acceptable if it brings Islamists to power on the basis of generally accepted mechanisms and standards?

Of course, the reality is that once religious organisations, institutions and parties take over political power, there is not much space or opportunity for democracy. History has shown that clericalism of any provenance tends to dictatorship, but this is not an exclusive property of Islam. This does not necessarily mean that political parties whose programmes are based on religious principles cannot be democratic and participate in government constructively. Christian-Democratic parties in Europe did not pose a threat to democracy, just as the Turkish Justice and Development party does not.

All of the above lends additional weight to the established fact that in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain and even Algeria, Islamist parties did not lead the uprising, as well as to the fact that in none of these countries did a figure comparable to Khomeini come to prominence. The great majority of the protesters in the Arab world are indeed inspired by religion and faith, but this does not mean that they are ready to radicalise the mechanisms of future systems on the basis of clericalism.

It is clear that the Muslim Brotherhood is very influential. However, it is equally certain that its influence is exerted primarily in the social sphere and that the totalitarian state, by neglecting vital issues affecting its citizens, left the Muslim Brotherhood ample room to acquire this influence. The Muslim Brotherhood is quite certainly not Al Qaeda which considers every non-Muslim an enemy. It does presently want its share of power, but not all power. The reason for this lies in the fact that the Brotherhood does not have the infrastructure, capacity or organisational and human resources to take over power in countries like Egypt or Jordan, for such a takeover would leave them responsible for fundamental economic, political and democratic reforms which the protesters demand. Similarly, the Brotherhood is realistic enough to realise that if it were to take office it would face many closed doors abroad, especially in the West whose support it would need to create long term economic stability.

On the other hand, denying its right to participate in the Government, if the results of a 'free and fair election' were to justify such a course, would mean the denial of reality and renunciation of principles. This would lead to the inevitable use of force to prevent such a development and would only trigger a new, more severe eruption of discontent with drastic consequences for 'non-Arab interests' in the Arab world. For a number of reasons, such a government perhaps would not be democratic by Western standards, especially because it would not blindly defend the interests of other systems and countries and their models and doctrines. However, there are no rational arguments for an 'a priori' claim that it would be any less democratic or devoted to human rights than a present or previous government. The 1992 coup in Algeria removed the Islamists from power but it led to a civil war in which 200,000 people died.

At this stage, protesters are not demanding the establishment of Islamic states but rather democratisation of states and societies, more freedoms, transparent elections, human rights and so forth. Radical suppression of these movements and their demands may result in a renewed 'understanding' for all kinds of extremism, including of the religious variety.

Which direction could the events take?

All the developments in the streets of Arab cities are occurring for a reason, thus they were not unexpected. However, it is evident that the explosion of the feeling that the reality can be changed by mere rioting in the streets has drastically broadened the palette of goals which the protesters wish to attain. Despite distinct differences, resignation of those in power is a common demand in almost all the countries in which protests are underway. Furthermore, the issue of the direction in which substantial institutional and constitutional reforms should head has scarcely been raised, if at all. Admittedly, the protesters have not obtained the consent of the power-holders to start talks on this issue, except formally in Egypt and institutionally in Jordan. Such consent will be hard to obtain, yet in the Arab political mentality the ultimate solution is a ruler, a strongman at the head of the state, which in practice means either a monarch or an 'absolutist' in a so-called presidential system. Is this model the one best-suited for the democratic aspirations of the protesters? There is, for example, very little reflection or debate on the parliamentary system. 'The Pharaoh Syndrome', as this phenomenon has been dubbed in Egypt's liberal opposition circles, could easily lead to a renewed focus on a single figurehead rather than the desired broadening of democratic rights and vesting of authority into institutions which would help avoid a 'repetition of history'.

Another evident problem in Egypt and Tunisia is the plan to have the transitional Government start drafting amendments to the existing constitution before calling elections, instead of organising democratic elections on the basis of which the elected Parliament would start the process of making changes to the constitution and other legislation.

A palliative factor in the resolving of the situation brought about by the riots could be the prospect of a speedier resolution to the issue of Palestine, for which there is now a clearer motive among the political and social forces in Israel who have soberly assessed the possibility of maintaining peace as in their strategic interests. Unfortunately, decisions like the latest US veto in the UN Security Council and the conclusion of the present Israeli leadership that the maintenance of military rule in Egypt guarantees a status quo in Israel's position could turn out to be decisive obstacles to finding a solution to the Palestinian problem. It is obvious that things must move from the current deadlock in the Israel-Palestine issue as anything else could exacerbate Israel's security position in the region, in the long run if not immediately. It is also obvious that the circumstances under which this will be negotiated in the future will be more complex for the USA, for Israel and for the Palestinian political forces prepared to negotiate.

A threat often mentioned in the West is that the 'new regimes' would renounce the Camp David Accords, which would allegedly pave the way for new wars with Israel. There are many reasons to believe that there is nothing behind this threat. The Camp David Accords are the pillar of American and Western geo-strategy in the Middle East. Egypt is neither inclined nor able to undermine this. It has no particular pressing reason or national interest at stake (territory, borders, energy, water) to wage war with Israel again. It is extremely unlikely that some future Egyptian Government, even an 'Islamist' one, could motivate Egyptians to go to war and shed their blood for a fifth time for the 'Arab cause' while the majority of other regimes stood by and watched. Above all is the fact that peace with Israel is in Egypt's strategic interest just as much as peace with Egypt is in Israel's. Egyptian generals and other military officers in this generation will not go to war against Israel because, amongst other things, they have long been part of the American military structure which finances, equips, trains and arms them. Pragmatically speaking, a war with Israel under present circumstances is doomed to failure because, crucially, the entire Egyptian war machine depends on America. Aside from this, in the present pattern of relations, it is questionable if Egypt will still be able to co-operate with the Israeli intelligence apparatus as closely as before, continue to participate in the blockade of Gaza as uncompromisingly and without reserve and participate in the alliance against Iran together with America, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Finally, it is also questionable if it will be able to continue to sell natural gas to Israel far below the world price, at the expense of its starving population.

As for Israel, where all these elements are carefully analysed, everything can be questioned except for one fact: Arabs can lose ten more wars to Israel in the future, and things will still go on. Israel must not lose a single one, because nothing would ever be the same if it did.

Conclusion – common denominator is a ‘new spirit of resistance’

At the time of writing, no one can make reliable projections as to the scope of the clearly significant wave of discontent in Arab countries. Regardless of the fact that a domino effect is in play here, it is clear that the protest movements vary across countries in terms of size, organisation, circumstances under which they operate and distribution of power between the protesters and regnant regimes. Their common denominator is a ‘new spirit of resistance’ to the existing regimes, present way of life and the sense of subordination and lack of freedom. A fundamentally new aspect is the growing sense of victory and the feeling that the days of silence are over and that taking to the streets in protest can no longer be prevented by anyone. Protesters in Arab cities today have different occasion to take to the streets. Protests are organised by trade unions, students, farmers, Bedouins, artisans, lawyers, airport employees... The street has become the place to spread democracy, and this new spirit is not likely to be pacified any time soon. It is in great part the result of a sense of liberation from the shackles of the regime, but also of the lack of institutions and the practice of influencing the system in a democratic fashion. All of this says something about the tasks which lay ahead of those who are to deal with the content of the democratic reforms, and also points to the fact that the institutions of the state, ill-prepared for and unaccustomed to reactions triggered from the outside as they may be, will be able to meet the latest challenges articulated, not particularly convincingly, in innumerable demonstrations.

A discernible new liberty, partially won already, concerns the media in some of the countries in which ‘popular uprising’ has taken place. Some dailies in Jordan have been running pieces that were practically inconceivable a month ago. The journalists accuse in a most direct way an abstracted regime (not yet the King himself) for ‘collaboration with America and Israel’, raise issues of the course of foreign policies, manner of constructing of domestic policies and so on.

A new development in Egypt, Jordan and some other countries (Tunisia, Algeria) is the emergence of Islamist organisations and movements from the underground. Their participation in public and political life used to be limited to say the least and their activities were concealed from media attention. It is, however, conspicuous how little attention is paid to this fact in Arab countries. Almost all Western analyses of the current events in the Arab world attach more importance to it, and regard it as a ‘great development’. Formally speaking, the unanimous demands for democratisation are not compatible with support for the idea of strengthening the influence of conservative forces. Time will show how these forces will come to terms with this, if at all.

To conclude with a question: is the West at present ready, willing and able and is it structured politically and economically as to be able to start reassessing the artificial yet widespread ‘democracy or security’ dilemma pertaining to ‘the rest of the world’? There are many reasons to believe that this is where the key to securing a more prosperous future for everyone in the Middle East is to be found. It is obvious that a new framework is also required for the present principle which served as the basis for systems for the safeguarding of partial interests through brutal sacrificing of democratic principles and human rights of those who were required to respect those interests.