



Socio-Cultural Dimensions of the Arab Transition: Observations of a Concerned Man

Raed H. Charafeddine, First Vice-Governor, Banque du Liban

Eastern Michigan University
March 14, 2012 | Ypsilanti, MI, United States

Table of Contents

I. Introduction	2
II. Unexpected but inevitable	2
III. The Arab Transition: The Spring is yet to come.	4
III. Conclusion.....	5

I. Introduction

The quality of the available statistics and the dearth of the empirical data that show what is really happening in the region are major handicaps which hinder scholars from producing reliable and comprehensive readings. We are not aware that there are any experienced and scientific tool has been used to sense and track perceptions, beliefs and attitudes whereas the field is volatile, and unexpected occurrences may erupt leaving no space for researchers to measure and describe the ongoing development, let alone their trends.

On the onset, a couple of remarks are in order:

- 22 Arab nations are members in the Arab League. There are specific factors (historical, economic, standpoints, interests and policy orientations) in diverse national settings, each of which has developed in the very different expressions from democratic transition to systematic suppression to civil war. Those facts are important to keep in mind and avoid over generalization or a "unified" profiling.
- The exhausting and exhausted interpretation of the relationship between Islam and politics has squeezed our analytical capacities at the expense of a closer look at societal and cultural phenomena. This is usually coupled with the wide prototype to single out Arab culture as an obstacle to democratic processes. *"Neither Arab culture and Islam nor international politics can serve as sufficient analytical framework of reference. On the contrary, we must get red of these grand narratives to try and better understand the region as a whole"*ⁱⁱ.

This paper navigates on how the current Arab Transition, would relate to ideology, social class, nationality, ethnicity, gender, family, religion, education, economy and employment. In generic terms, the navigation will fly over the socio-cultural and economic implications of the Arab Transition. No journey in anthropology is offered here. This wasn't my intention nor did I pretend conducting a thorough survey and analysis. These are observations of a concerned man.

II. Unexpected but inevitable

Societies are subjected all the time to continuous change, whether through internal factors such as despotism and corruption or through the influence of external factors such as foreign invasion. The Bouazizi's wildfire moved from one country to the next because the entire region was triggered by severe economic conditions and a socio-cultural crisis deeply rooted in the fabric and the context of the Arab societies. The political tyranny is the top of an iceberg of a deeper crisis in the socio-cultural sphere. The cultural, political and social recession prevailed for years, and was occasionally disturbed by civil conflicts, invasions and country divisions, while the real social change of sound impacts never occurred. This is why it is difficult to establish a transition towards democracy without custodian culture...ⁱⁱ

How this scene looked like on the eve of the uprisings.ⁱⁱⁱ

- 1- A monopoly of power and wealth, lack of freedom and violations of rights. When measured with respect to its political systems, the region seemed to be a universal exception characterized by political stagnation which reigned here and there regardless the form of the system, the size or the specific history of any given country in the region;
- 2- The Arab people share the massive rage as a result of the false promises of the Arab systems versus pan-national concerns such as the issue of Palestine, or versus the people's aspirations for development, employment, economic and social security. These systems have been responsible for creating the social conditions that promoted terrorism and political violence in the first place;
- 3- Important to international economic concern, the rich-oil countries achieved huge financial rents at the globalized market. Though protected by this umbrella, they did not seek to establish effective representative political institutions. In many countries of the region, clear, though opaque distinction, has been established between rulers and people, between state and society;
- 4- For decades the adopted economic models had drained the resources of the societies and excluded the educated young from economic life. Even worse, personal relations dominate merits and the individual success is achieved due to personal ties rather than their productive and innovative competitiveness;
- 5- Throughout the 20th century, The Arab region was characterized by consecutive rounds of violence that strengthened people's primary allegiances. The ever-intensified feeling of succumbing to their religious, political or local division gave rise to obeying leaders as well as cocooning within their own groups. As a result, the era witnessed the collapse of bonds of trust and channels of communication, and the deterioration of economies, which led to a rise in poverty and thus further reliance on "service providers".
- 6- Ancient tribal and religious relationships still prevail, coupled with more recent corrosion of social relationships (such as familial disintegration, women's abuse, and vertical social divisions). Some of these parameters are attributed to the invading market economy and globalization, which together obliterated the existent struggle between those abused and those abusing. In this respect, the vicious cycles of wars and conflicts among sects and tribes went on for ages, thus leaving no room for groups that call for peace and reconciliation. In most cases, the long-awaited salvation took the form of silence in an attempt to avoid oppression. However, the latter approach proved to fail since it is the innocent and the poor who usually pay the price.

III. The Arab Transition: The Spring is yet to come.

With the onset of 2011, the Arab region witnessed several rebellious waves, which brought new terms to the media vocabulary: “Arab revolutions”, “Arab spring” and “Arab Uprisings”. I personally believe that this “optimistic Tsunami” holds a huge risk that may not only jeopardize the credibility of its pioneers, but also lead to a future of frustration among its users. This is only a warning that repressive and corruptive networks are still prevalent, despite the sincere intentions of the youth who sparked and led the uprising.

Most observations derived from Arab countries intersect at several levels:

- The Arab revolutions broke the deadlock and repositioned their societies. It is however still early to fully assess the content, depth, and duration of the change. Major changes cannot be achieved overnight, to say the least, and their long term impact cannot be assessed at once, let alone concluding meaningful trends.
- People are gradually discovering their strengths within the current unstable era. Awareness of human rights, citizenship and decent living is increasingly developing and people are participating mostly for their first time in piloting their own future.
- The criminalization of political activism throughout the years caused more devoutness. The religious ideology aroused people and led them to confront authorities in a brave and determined manner. What is important is the shift of religious people’s perspective from the religious law to the political sphere^{iv}.
- Generally, these movements lack vision, clear goals, coordination, alliance and definite alternative systems; they also require determination in order to preserve the essence that brings people together.
- If it continues to be manipulated by an ideological hegemony, the emerging socio-cultural system risks generating a fragile and distorted democracy, and excluding the rights of the minorities, the vulnerable and women.
- It is worth mentioning that the current confrontations and military actions in the Arab cities would further aggravate the situation, which was already stigmatized by a full spectrum of needs, including recurrent crisis and traumas. These traumas are caused by dramatic changes in the family, such as death, injury, displacement, homelessness, severe poverty, child abuse and neglect. Comprehensive approaches are deemed necessary to respond to the multi-faceted needs of the people, in order to interrupt this aggravated cycle of violence, poverty, childhood adversity, social exclusion and inequality that many Arab Countries currently endure.

- A common characteristic is the movements' appeals to foreign countries without attending to the dire consequences of foreign intervention including the tendency to diffuse responsibility and disperse the focus of the local players in function to the diverse interveners. *"They were initially sudden grassroots movements without any clear leadership or vision, and it was after the upheaval erupted that the Islamists, foreign diplomats, tribal alliances and political figures have intercepted and exerted influence in their favor over the protestors"*^{iv}.

IV. Conclusion

The current turbulence in the Arab world carries positive effects as citizens find self-confidence and confidence in others as a cornerstone to the ability of solidarity and interaction towards a free and dignified future. To that wish, scholars should investigate the kind and applicability of the socio-cultural change the Arab Transition is bringing about. A long and hard struggle is awaiting Arab societies in terms of building civil peace among conflicting groups, addressing the issues of illiteracy, poverty and unemployment (which are the main drivers of the revolutions), overcoming structural, social and organizational obstacles, and enabling citizens to practice democracy and accountability.

Many years (or decades?) will lapse before the full picture of the Arab Transition becomes clear. We aspire that it will result in freedom and equality. Otherwise, it will definitely lead to several disappointments and re-revolutions.

The sustainable gains lie in the deep and long-term impacts the Arab Transition may present to the rights of women, children and marginalized groups and minorities, and their conformity with human norms and rights. The said impacts are the milestones that will indicate how far the change is fundamental and worthy.

Another indicator will be the role of the civil society that is in the stage of formation. Concepts of freewill, institutional governance, and acceptance of diversity are indicative in this context. Being the framework where citizens work and willingly offer their best to the people and the country, only civil society is eligible in finding solutions to the conceptual and practical issues related to citizenry and human rights, and in shaping freedom and dignity of every individual. The critical factor is the concept of equal opportunity for all, regardless of their race, color, gender, or social and ideological backgrounds. Any bias contradicts equality and undermines the main principles of human rights and development.

The transition to the cultural and social change is not a simple act of changing the rulers. The victorious Arab revolution should be a choice of nonviolence, a humanitarian choice which is derived from a civilized system that allows the participation of all the citizens, and fosters dialogue as a value, and a manner

of inducing change. A new leadership and a new political order are surely emerge but in a slow and painful process, with the possibility to witness other types of oppression and challenges. But that is a major characteristic of revolutions, e.g. the French, Bolshevik and the Iranian.

In the short run, a transitional period will witness a priority given to defense and security issues as well as political and economic stabilization. It is hoped that, later on, the limited financial resources will be reallocated towards enhancing knowledge institutions the Arab transformation can provide many opportunities for boosting the creation and transfer of knowledge. The new spirit of positivity brought in with the wave of change in Arab societies has the potential to promote a new social culture that should help to improve awareness and commitment to the appreciation of knowledge and to support cooperation to enhancing its transfer, as well as to developing sound plans and systematic institutions that are required for the creation and transfer of knowledge^{vi}.

It is widely labeled the Arab Spring, whereas our impression is that the current phenomena is rather anti-authoritarian movements that are shaking the lives of the people every where in the MENA region, and beyond. It is a dawn of a new era in the Arab World which remains uncertain in so many ways.

References:

i Ditrich Jung, Unrest in the Arab World: Four Questions, Insight Turkey Vol.13/ No.3/ 2011. pp.1-10

ii Majed al Sheick, Middle East online

iii Raed Charafeddine, paper presented in: " Common Terms XII" Beirut, November 22, 2011

"مؤسسات الإمام الصدر والتغيير الاجتماعي: ٥٠ عاماً في بناء العدالة الاجتماعية والسلام الأهلي"

"Imam Sadr Foundation and Social Change: fifty years of building social justice and civil peace".

iv Mansoor Moaddel, Trends in Values, the Arab Spring, and implications for National Security, www.mevs.org

People's Daily Online, October 24, 2011

vi Samia Satti Osman Mohamed Nour, Arab Spring: Will more freedom boost knowledge transfer?

United Nations University, June, 14, 2011