**EXTERNAL POWERS AND THE ARAB SPRING**

**The question**

How did external powers react when the political landscape opened up and the Arab Spring unfolded? What did the US and the EU do in relation to Egypt, Libya and Tunisia? How did other states of the region – Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Iran – relate to revolutionary change? How much did they matter?

**The role of extra-regional powers**

Experience shows that when strong national and regional interests work against the objectives of extra-regional powers, there is not much they can achieve – except to destroy states by the use of force, leaving societies in shambles. In Iraq and Libya, the only up-side of the military interventions was the removal of the tyrannical top leadership. In Afghanistan, the jury is still out, but will the objectives – whatever they were, be it fighting the Taliban, stabilizing the country, introducing democratic practice, promoting women’s rights or various other worthy ideas – be reached? The Western world has worked for a two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian problem – but, except for a few months under Prime Minister Rabin’s leadership, Israeli settlements have continued to expand. Today, developments on the ground point towards a one-state outcome with different rights for different groups of people. US secretaries of state have gone to Damascus for meetings with Assad, father and son, and returned empty-handed. Sanctions and military threats did not stop the Iranian nuclear programme – the sanctions worked as intended only when realistic prospects for lifting them were created, with the right constellation of governments in Washington and in Teheran that appeared in mid-2013.

What about the democratic ambitions of the US and the EU?

With the benefit of hindsight, the Egyptian political landscape did not open up as much as seemed to be the case when Mubarak fell. Well-entrenched interests waited for an opportunity to hit back. The military never abdicated. In a superficial reading, therefore, the hypothesis that there is not much extra- regional powers can achieve if strong local forces are set against their objectives, seems corroborated.

On closer scrutiny, however, the thesis was not put to much of a test. Ideally, both the US and the EU wanted to see democratic change, but US policy was ambiguous and EU actions feeble. The US hedged its bets, encouraging the revolutionaries while maintaining relations with the military. The State Department supported NGOs which pushed for democracy, while the Pentagon kept close relations with its military counterparts. In a sense, the US political system was projected onto the Egyptian political landscape, not by design – that was unnecessary – and apparently without much coordination. Also, the US government made a series of public statements that wavered in content and came in the wake of actual developments. For instance, shortly after the revolt began, the Secretary of State professed full confidence in Mubarak – while a few days later, the President asked him to step aside. After a while, Egyptian leaders and activists of all walks of political life had misgivings and were left frustrated.

As for the EU, there was strong logic in its policy of “more for more” - more support for more democracy - but “deep Egypt” resisted calls for democratic practice and the EU was hampered by its own institutional shortcomings. The Union sympathized with the secular moderates and recognized the Brotherhood’s election victories, but acted too late and provided too little to have much of an impact, especially compared with the amounts of money that Arab states gave to its favoured partners.

At the end, to circumvent Congressional legislation and maintain the integrity of the Camp David agreement, the US Administration shied away from characterizing the military take-over as a ‘coup’. Democratic aspirations yielded to Realpolitik interests in maintaining business-like relations with the Egyptian rulers. Somehow, all the main actors of the Egyptian Spring were left with the feeling that the United States could not be trusted. That feeling may be a long-lasting effect of the contradictory and rapidly shifting US policies.

The US story reconfirms another familiar thesis: big powers cannot be expected to play a constructive role in the promotion of democracy unless it happens to be in their national interest. The US has well-known geopolitical interests in the Middle East and when push came to shove, governance issues became secondary. The EU had no comparable geopolitical ambition and encouraged revolutionary change by economic means, but followed the US lead and recognized the military takeover without calling it a coup. At that point, national interests seem to have trumped governance priorities also in the case of the EU. Quite possibly, an examination of the role of leading EU member-states would have shown that more clearly.

In Libya, the US was drawn into action without much enthusiasm. Once Qaddafi was out of the way, the EU applied its economic instruments through the ENP mechanism, but achieved almost nothing. Actually, neither the US nor the EU did much to build a new Libyan state, and ‘more’ is unlikely to have helped, for the odds were heavily tilted against it. Unlike Egypt and Tunisia, the Libyan revolution was militarized from the beginning; and under the impact of political power-play in the international community and the multitude of conflicts among Libyan tribes, clans and militias, the country fractured. To revert to the second part of our hypothesis: the big extra-regional actors had it in their power to destroy the state, leaving society in shambles. In this case, however, an important qualification is needed: unlike Iraq, where US policies after the occupation of 2003 bears heavy responsibility for the calamities that followed, in Libya the role of the extra-regional powers was secondary to that of the Libyans themselves. In particular, the Political Isolation Law, which excluded from governing roles all those who had been in leadership positions in the last four decades, exacerbated the problems.

Wisdoms of hindsight are often self-serving, but in this case, critics familiar with Libyan societies – plural, for they are many and disparate - argue convincingly that the malady could have been foreseen. President Obama says the failure to plan for the day after was his “worst mistake”, but without regretting the military intervention. In saying so, he has been more critical of the Libyan operation than the European leaders who spearheaded it. To which the critics argue that a sincere effort to foresee the consequences might have convinced him not to go along with the French and British objective of regime change by military means. Anyhow: to shoot first and plan afterwards is the wrong sequence, contrary to the precautionary principle of “*do no harm*” – the first commandment of foreign involvement - which says you must understand enough of the context in which you engage so that as a minimum, you don’t make things worse.

In Tunisia, structural factors and able leadership put the country on a distinct path to democratic governance. Tunisia was ethnically and religiously homogeneous; the middle class was relatively well educated; its geographical location shielded it from much of the turbulence further east; the military was small and apolitical; and the judiciary, co-opted under Ben Ali, was quick to make itself independent. Joachim Nahem argues, however, that the key factor in the transition was the approach taken by the political and civil society leaders. There was a clean break with the past, and the old regime was abolished without excluding its collaborators from political affairs. The new democratic system is aided by the fact that no political party is strong enough to overwhelm the others, and there is no extra-parliamentary support to mobilize, as the military is out of politics and the judiciary guards its independence.

The US and the EU were happy to render advice and provide economic support. Fortunately, the Tunisian leaders maintained local ownership and control of the political process, inviting – on their own initiative - the UNDP, the Venice Commission (associated with the Council of Europe) and countries in Africa and Latin America to give advice. If not, the process might have been chaotic, for the many well-wishers were poorly coordinated. EU economic support was helpful, but slow in coming and modest in scale.

It is hard to trace NGO influence to specific outcomes. They cannot take credit for the fact that, by the end of 2014, Tunisia had held four free and fair elections in a row, but they did contribute to the development of a democratic political culture and can thereby claim a share of the Tunisian success story.

Two lessons are particularly worth noting. First, the importance of civil society, which brought the political process back on track in the autumn of 2013, when it was on the verge of break-down; and second, more economic assistance should have been provided in support of that which was moving for the better, but which remained vulnerable and could have fallen apart for lack of international support. Clearly, preventive action depends on strong leadership – for, when things seem to be going well, there is usually no public pressure to push decision-makers into action.

**The role of regional states**

Turkey saw great potential in the Arab Spring. It assisted Arab states in their democratic transition while trying to use the energies that were released to promote its own big-power ambitions. There was no contradiction in this: as a Muslim country with a secular democratic state, Turkey was well positioned to capitalize on the uprisings. Ankara could shape its ambitions in terms of identity politics and undergird this by economic strength and comprehensive foreign trade. It was well positioned to act as interlocutor between the West and economically stagnant Arab countries and by the time the Arab Spring started, the volume of Turkey’s trade with the Middle East had grown to about the same level as that with the EU. Barkey and Neli – the authors of the chapter on Turkey – emphasize, furthermore, that the Turkish approach was overdetermined by one overriding goal: marshalling the energies released by the Arab Spring to support Turkish regional and even global aspirations. Foreign Minister Davutoglu stated that “ (Turkey) will continue to be this Middle East’s owner, leader and servant”. However, his declared ambition (of 2009) to have “no problems with neighbours”, soon turned into problems with all neighbours.

The Saudis were strictly guided by their national security interests. These interests came in two inter-related categories: security for the regime, and regional stability. Saudi worries about regime security were due to a combination of regional unrest triggered by the Arab Spring and growing unease about the reliability of their alliance partner, the US. The focus was on Egypt – Libya and Tunisia were marginal – the primary concern being that a Brotherhood leadership might usher into another wave of Arab nationalism and renewed Egyptian ambitions of dominating the Arab world. An Islamist government could mobilize its sectarian co-travellers for such aims and, at worst, become a challenge to the regime. Better, then, to embrace the military dictatorship and make it economically dependent on Saudi good will. It bitterly regretted that the US withdrew its support for Mubarak and was relieved by Sisi’s takeover; yet, true to its longstanding tradition of relating to whoever is in power in Egypt, it received Mursi and said it would work with him. (Similarly, Saudi Arabia said it supported the nuclear agreement with Iran while in reality, it had strong misgivings).

Israel acted with utmost restraint, following developments closely while refraining from official statements and acting only when tangible national security interests were at stake: when there was a risk that weapons that could be particularly harmful to Israel might find its way to Hezbollah or other resistance groups, and when there were signs of Iran-supported military build-up next to its borders on the Golan. Naturally, the rise of the Egyptian Brotherhood was a matter of deep concern. Still, Israel did not interfere directly, fearing that might prove counterproductive. Occasionally, it tried to influence matters indirectly via the USA, but without much success.

Iran tried to improve relations with Egypt, but otherwise it was short on action. In this respect, Iran behaved like Israel: where Israel confined its actions to averting tangible national security challenges, Iran stayed with its perceived national interest in maintaining the Shia arc of influence. In the early phases of the Arab Awakening, it called for the formation of a new bloc of Islamic powers, appealing to common interests across sectarian lines. These objectives were incompatible, however, for the Shia arc creates anxiety and triggers counter-action among Sunni Arab states and their external partners. Accentuated by the nuclear deal, this dilemma presents a strategic choice for the time ahead: to use the growing strength made possible by sanctions relief to solidify the Shia arc and gain ground in relation to regional rivals – or to strengthen the country’s status and reputation by giving priority to domestic economic recovery and international cooperation to solve regional problems.

In short: Turkey identified with the revolutionaries and supported them in the belief that it would strengthen their position in the region; Saudi Arabia took exception to the revolutionary uprisings irrespective of their sectarian orientations, preferring continued authoritarian rule as the best way to maintain stability in the region; Israel’s attitude was hands-off, acting only in defence of its security interests; and Iran tried to ride two horses – appealing to common interests across the Shia-Sunni divide while maintaining the Shia arc of influence. In all cases, national and regional political interests proved paramount. Sectarian preferences and promotion of democracy were heeded only if they happened to coincide with national security interests and regional geopolitical ambitions.

To sum up: except for the bombing of Libya, the role of external states is well captured by what I originally suggested as the subtitle of the book: they were *little more than bystanders*. Some tried to assist in the transition to popular power (Turkey, the EU and partly the USA); one of them preferred to keep its distance (Israel); one wanted to exploit the opportunities presented by the Islamist movements, but did little to support them (Iran); and another one opposed the revolutionary changes in the name of stability (Saudi Arabia) – but none of them influenced the course of events in any major way.

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The book does not explicitly address what the external powers *should* and *could* to promote democracy in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, but by telling the story of what they actually did and what motivated them, some lessons are clear enough. I have tried to capture the main ones in telegraphic form, but would like to wind up by elaborating on a few of them.

From day one, the media did much to shape Western perceptions of what was going on. The CNN, al Jazeera and numerous other media outlets built a narrative of strong support for revolutionary ideals. The public in the United States and Europe seized on the democratic potential of the rebellions and reacted accordingly. Political leaders likewise, reaching out to the demonstrators with statements of support – sometimes convoluted and hesitant, for the drama was unfamiliar; sometimes trailing events, for things were moving so fast that it was hard to keep abreast of developments.

Both the EU and the USA acted on the implicit assumption that the more the neighbouring countries on the other side of the Mediterranean could resemble them, economically and politically, the better it would be for all parties. Here, Americans and Europeans suffered from the same blind spot.

The democracy promotion of US NGOs and the State Department was, furthermore, conducted in a manner that made it unnecessarily vulnerable. The NGOs pushed for democracy based on the rule of law – but in Egypt, they themselves disregarded local laws that regulated the activities of foreign organizations. They did not register in Egypt; they transferred money illegally; and they recruited locals without work permission. They probably felt they had no better choice, but they obviously failed to understand the situation well enough to take care. In Jean-Francois Seznec’s assessment, there was an element of naiveté about it all.

NGOs and foreign governments operating in South Africa under the apartheid regime circumvented national regulations too, transferring money and working with locals illegally. However, in South Africa the foreign agents cooperated with the African National Congress (ANC), the majority movement of the country, whereas in Egypt the secular youth who spearheaded the uprising were a small minority and a rather disorganized one at that. Moreover, the foreign anti-apartheid activists probably had a better understanding of the landscape in which they were operating. Above all, the ANC’s conception of democracy was rather similar to the Western one. The Brotherhood’s was not.

The Pentagon had well-established relations with the Egyptian military dating back to the Camp David agreement of 1979. It is much better funded than the State Department; it is well represented at US embassies; its military representatives are trained independently of the State Department, and they report to their military superiors. They promote US interests as seen by the military establishment. While the State Department/NGO line of activity was terminated by the end of 2011, the Pentagon’s involvement continued on what became the winning side.

That the US hedged its bets was no surprise, however. To repeat: big powers cannot be expected to play a constructive role in the promotion of democracy unless it happens to be in their national interest.

Even if EU and US democracy support had not been marred by the weaknesses mentioned, it would hardly have made much of a difference. In essence, developments were domestically driven, and “deep Egypt” was underestimated. I would not blame anybody for that. In the atmosphere that the media did so much to colour, optimism prevailed for quite a while. The story also shows that the regional powers cannot be counted upon for democracy support. Israel looks to its security interests; Saudi Arabia to stability, as the best way to ensure authoritarian rule; and has Iran, with its political system is a peculiar mix of theocratic and democratic elements, has no convincing record to date. Only Turkey – our calms about current developments there notwithstanding - could make a difference.

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