

The Arab Spring: “Why Exactly at this Time?”

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“Why exactly at this time?” Such is the classic question raised by conspiracy theorists—with apparent nervousness, offering the most surreal interpretations—the moment any remarkable event occurs in the Arab or Islamic world. Though I did not expect to live long enough to witness it, what has truly been remarkable during these days of the Arab Spring—popular, peaceful, civil, and urban uprisings against despotic Arab regimes—has been that the parties which have rushed with intense anxiety and unmistakable panic to take refuge in conspiracy theorizing have been the despotic regimes themselves. Conspiracy theorizing was decidedly *not* indulged in by the masses themselves—masses which we intellectuals had always thought of as enamored, sometimes to the point of dementia, of conspiracy theorizing, and as the prisoners of their naivete and oversimplifications.

The contrast was particularly remarkable after the incessant efforts of the tyrannical and coercive regimes that had worked so hard to present themselves as the loci of the most rational, enlightened, inclusive, patriotic, and civilized tendencies in Arab societies plagued by sectarian, ethnic, tribal, and regional divisions, divisions that had always reinforced their backwardness and anachronism. The usual assumptions about enlightenment and backwardness were suddenly upended by the popular uprisings from Tunisia to Yemen, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, Libya, and so on. Now we saw those very “enlightened” Arab regimes, at the moment of truth, clinging mechanically, repetitively, and neurotically to the lie of a “conspiracy,” and persisting against all odds with the Kafkaesque absurdities of their delirious logic—the logic contained in the original question, “Why exactly at this time?”

The Arab Poet had a ready answer to that question: “Exactly at this time because it is in the nature of such regimes’ tyranny to render the people ‘incapable of avoiding evil until it afflicts them,’ and ‘incapable of handling their affairs save through make-do measures.’”

Naturally, this answer neither uncovers any real conspiracy, nor offers any serious or even semi-serious answer to the question, “Why exactly at this time?” What it merely does is to vilify the autonomy of the insurgent and sacrificial masses, casting insidious doubt on their capacity for self-

government, and offering some twisted insinuations as to its mental, political, and patriotic capacities. The suggestion is that secret, nefarious wills and covert, harmful intentions lie behind the mass uprising, the essence of which is unknown, while the danger to the nation and its unity from this uprising are beyond comprehension, except by the “trustworthy hands” preserving the old regime and its security, state, and authority. The result is to weld the requirements for the preservation of a tyrannical regime with the requirements of the people’s security, so that the survival of the one depends inextricably on that of the other.

But the masses of protesters, dissidents, and rebels among the people of the Arab Spring had another sort of answer to the question, “Why exactly at this time?” No answer to the question was more eloquent than the outcry provoked by the young lawyer who trembled with elation as he wound joyfully through the streets of the Tunisian capital: “The Tunisian people are free!” It was an outcry followed throughout the world, in sound and in image. In other words, the Jasmine Revolution came at this exact time because the Tunisian people are free, and not because they were the victims of any conspiracy. Not that that answer diminishes the eloquent response of the old Tunisian gentleman we all saw on television, tugging at his gray hair, and expressing regret for the years he had lost: “We grew old, we grew old for this historical moment”—a moment that came too late both for us and for him, but fortunately came before it was too late for everyone.

There was also a third eloquent answer, in sound and in image. “Why exactly at this time?” Because the people wanted to overthrow the regime oppressing them in order jointly to save the nation and the people—and not in submission to the dictates of the foolish and belittling conspiracy asserted by the likes of President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen, according to whom the mass uprising was hatched at the White House and directed from Tel Aviv.

Some have argued that the Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, Libya, and elsewhere are a continuation of the popular Islamic Revolution in Iran against the Shah’s tyranny (1979), or perhaps an imitation of the overwhelming popular democratic movement that toppled the military dictatorship of Suharto in Indonesia (1997-98), or an extension of the millions-strong Lebanese Cedar Revolution of 2005, which purged Lebanon of the bitter tutelage of Syrian military domination, or an imitation of the Green Movement in Iran, opposing the fraud of its presidential “elections,” guaranteeing victory for the regime’s candidate Ahmadinejad (2009). Others mention in this regard the massive peaceful, popular movement that toppled Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos and his wife Imelda in 1986, in favor of a new and more acceptable democratic rule.

These assumptions and hypotheses, while entirely respectable, give insufficient attention to the Damascus Spring of 2000 in its specifically Arab context.^[1] It is the Damascus Spring which represents, in my opinion, the

[Eds.: ¹ See Sadik J. al-Azm, “The View from Damascus,” *New York Review of Books*, June 15, 2000, accessed online at: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/>

“theoretical introduction” and initial peaceful “dress rehearsal” for the later explosion of slogans, demands, complaints, appeals, aspirations, and sacrifices that arose during the Arab *intifadas* of 2010-2011. The pioneering precedent in the Arab context derives from the Damascus Spring because the collective slogans, demands, and protests invoked by the popular Arab uprisings from Tunisia to Yemen to wounded Libya were all present, in a very sophisticated manner, in the political, reformist, and critical documents issued by the Movement for the Restoration of Civil Society in Syria during the brief Damascus Spring. These documents were the subject of public democratic discussion through a wide range of lectures, seminars, debates, fora, and meetings which dominated Syria during that period, offering a wide variety of theses, competing views, criticism, and journalistic ferment. The hope was that the new youthful leadership of Syria would participate in this lively and refreshing activism, and make its contribution through debate toward forming an inclusive form of public opinion concerning Syria’s need for immediate remedies, intermediary reforms, and political solutions for the more distant future. For example, the Statement of the 99 Intellectuals (Charter 99, Damascus, September 30, 2000) and the Founding Document of the Committees for the Revival of Civil Society, known as the “Document of the One Thousand” (Damascus, January 2001), as well as the Statement of the Forum of the Supporters of Civil Society (Damascus, August 2002), all deal accurately with and concisely diagnose the issues, dilemmas, difficulties, and gaps that caused Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain to rise up in the name of freedom and dignity in 2010-2011.

It is true that none of the aspirations of the Damascus Spring came to fruition. Indeed, quite the opposite: the authorities suffocated the Spring’s discussions gradually, killing them off before any of its flowers could blossom. The Damascus Spring was suppressed because it explicitly brought light to the accumulating crises in the country without having had a hand in creating them; because it explicitly touched on the stagnation and gridlock which plagued the Syrian regime, without having had a hand in bringing them about; and because it responded clearly to the general deterioration of Syrian society, without having produced any of it. The great strength of the Damascus Spring consisted in its having reacted to intractable problems in the knowledge that its participants were *not* responsible for having brought them about.

For these very reasons, and “exactly at this time,” precious blood has been shed in Syria’s cities, towns, and villages, not because the protesting

[archives/2000/jun/15/the-view-from-damascus/](#). See also Torgeir Norling, “A View from the East: Sadik al-Azm,” *Global Knowledge* 1 (2006), accessed online at: <http://www.siu.no/eng/Front-Page/Global-knowledge/Issues/No-1-2006/A-View-from-the-East-Sadik-al-Azm>; and Juliette Terzieff, “Whither the Damascus Spring? Syria Steps Up Crackdown on Reformers,” *World Politics Review* (May 23, 2007), accessed online at: <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/794/whither-the-damascus-spring-syria-steps-up-crackdown-on-reformers>.]

masses have been implementing a nefarious foreign plot to undermine the stability and strength of their country, but for precisely the reverse reason. The fear is that there is a policy of official, willful blindness about all of this, and that a security-based solution will consistently be sought for each protest and demonstration, treating its peaceful, popular demands as subversion, rebellion, treachery, and betrayal. This has deepened an already deep rift between the ruling regime and Syrian society from which there is no escape in the foreseeable future. Policies that drive this divide will lead to generalized sectarian strife and factionalism that wax and wane in cycles of concealed repression and outward explosion.

The current Arab Spring *intifadas* have been called “youth revolutions” and “high-tech revolutions” on account of their reliance on such instant communication and electronic information technologies as mobile phones, laptop computers, satellite television, the Internet, or even more specifically, Facebook, Twitter, and You Tube—technologies geared to monitoring events moment by moment, around the clock. This enormous qualitative shift has played a decisive role in favor of the insurgent people, and has helped strengthen the movement’s character as skillful, well-informed, and fundamentally peaceful, educated in the latest achievements in communications technology, information exchange, and the social transmission of knowledge. At the same time, this technological shift has put the old Arab regimes and their security apparatuses in an awkward position, as they lack the techniques by which to deal with the emerging situation, except to seek cover in the supposed uniqueness of each Arab country, asserting the illegitimacy of what is happening in *this* Arab country as against the possible legitimacy of what is happening in *that* one. Suddenly, each despotism insists that *it* is the *sui generis* exception to the rules that govern its Arab neighbors. And so, each official Arab government spokesman claims that Egypt cannot be likened to Tunisia, that Libya cannot be likened to Egypt or Tunisia, that Syria is neither Tunisia, nor Egypt, nor Libya....

And yet the fact is, in these revolutionary times, Egypt was never more similar to Tunisia, Bahrain, and Libya. Just as the insurgent citizen of Bahrain wants reform that provides him with a constitutional monarchy and a Prime Minister who is appointed not by the Royal Palace but by the actual balance of forces in the political arena, so the insurgent Egyptian and Syrian citizen wants, in his turn, a reform that provides him with a genuine constitutional president of a republic, a Prime Minister who is not appointed by Presidential fiat, but by the democratic political processes of his or her country. The truth is that Arabs have never felt their political affinities—the similarities in the challenges they face and aspirations they share—as keenly as they have today. Nor have the police states of the Arab world ever been as similar as they have been during the Arab Spring, unified in their commitment to despotism and oppression.

A note of caution ought to be made about the desire to reduce the Arab Spring’s revolutions, especially those in Tunisia and Egypt, merely to the use of high-tech communications. It is *people* who make revolutions and

intifadas. It is people who demonstrate, protest, object, and sacrifice, using whatever technology is available to them. It is true that the youth constitute the largest demographic in the Arab population, so it is no surprise that the *intifadas* of our people now tend to be revolutions of young men and women, and likewise unsurprising that they use modern technologies to bring them about—just as previous revolutions and uprisings made use of the audio cassette, radio, transistor, newspaper, pamphlet, and newsletters. (During Nasser’s times, there were the “Voice of the Arabs” radio broadcasts; even messenger pigeons were at times used to achieve revolutionary goals.)

But we ought not to let the fascination with technology obscure the real character of the present uprisings. The youthfulness of the uprisings broke radically with the deep-rooted Arab tradition, which requires the emergence of charismatic leadership behind which the revolutionary masses march, charismatic leadership being the necessary condition for the achievement of revolutionary goals. This time, the “charisma” of the revolutionary moment has shifted from the usual fixation on a single or unrivaled leader, to the flow and diffusion of the assembled masses in many Tahrir Squares across the Arab world, making their assembly itself the true charismatic locus of revolution and change. This important development is certainly new for us Arabs and for our modern socio-political history.

For this reason, and perhaps for the first time, the various “Tahrir Squares” of Tunisia, Cairo, Sana’a, Manama, and Benghazi were characterized by intense civil participation by women, and by the visible presence of children—both boys and girls—and this in extremely conservative societies and cities. In addition, the demonstrations were characterized by innovative forms of aesthetic and other expression—various forms of art, music, performances, plays, dances, balloons, prayers, satire, sarcasm, and graffiti. Generally, this found joyful expression, despite the wholesale use by the entrenched regimes of aggressive thugs, deadly militias, indiscriminate repression, and live ammunition. There was, despite this, something of a carnivalesque spirit and practice in the packed squares of the Arab Spring, something certainly unheard of in modern Arab political history. Such innovative youthful phenomena were foreign to the usual mode of Arab political protest, which had previously inclined to the severely cruel, the intensely grim, and the immensely angry, as expressed by aggressive screaming, conflagrations of books, flags, and other objects, attacks on foreign embassies, and constant threats of violence and intimidation. In fact, most of the uglier manifestations of violence were confined, for the first time, to the despotic regimes themselves and their agents of repression—thugs, militias, and “trustworthy hands.” The “mark” one saw on their faces bespoke servile prostration, venality, and blind loyalty.

In fact, the regimes behaved with great cunning in adopting narrow, destructive, and self-interested domestic policies whose basic objective was the destruction of all prospects and possibilities for civil society. Typically, they confronted the population with an irresolvable trilemma: *either* (1) allow the continuation of the despotic regimes, with their martial law, their

permanent states of emergency, and their security apparatuses; *or* (2) accept the dark rule of Islamic fundamentalism, out to cancel modern history in the name of God's *hakmiyya* (divine sovereignty), and eager to impose the Islamic form of martial law called Islamic *sharia*, with its notoriously brutal penal code; *or* (3) accept the inevitable vertical disintegration of our societies along sectarian, ethnic, regional and/or tribal lines, with all that this means in terms of discord, strife, and war. The point was to restrict the possible options so as to force on the population a politics of "the lesser evil"—option (1) being the presumptively least evil of the three.^[2] The goal was to force the people's submission to the despotic status quo, whatever the cost. Brother Leader Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi took this further by adopting a kind of Samson option: either *me . . . me . . . me . . .* and my family and children remain in power, or I bring the Libyan national temple down on our heads.^[3]

The charismatic moment of the Arab Spring uprisings exhibited a high degree of maturity that succeeded in transcending the alarmist scenarios promoted and put into practice by the entrenched Arab regimes. The popular *intifadas* transcended this disabling trio of options—transcended it *in principle*—through their transparent civility, collective citizenship, open patriotism, tolerant humanism, and nascent democracy. In fact, the very effort required to transcend the evil options, along with the work carried out on behalf of the animating values of the popular movement, contained within them the capacity to bind together the pre-national loyalties, sects, allegiances, and regionalisms that still divide Arab society. This same political energy should also provide the capacity to deal properly with democracy and its constitutional and electoral mechanisms so as to prevent any elected majority from turning once again into a power-monopolizing tyranny intent on imposing yet another despotism on the country. The political minority's right to exercise its role as a democratic opposition, and its right to reconstitute itself democratically into a new ruling majority, have become permanent features of Arab political psychology. This energy should likewise help to secure greater empowerment for civil society, as well as the rules and conventions for participating in it; to ensure the expansion of the civil state, along with the neutrality of its agencies, posts, regulations, and procedures (including the principles of the separation of powers and independence of the judiciary); to guarantee a minimum level of respect for human rights, for both male and female citizens, and all of their personal and public rights, chief

[Eds.: ² Cf. Anthony Shadid and David D. Kirkpatrick, "Promise of Arab Uprisings Is Threatened by Divisions," *The New York Times* (May 21, 2011), accessed online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/22/world/middleeast/22arab.html?pagewanted=all>.]

[Eds.: ³ The original version of this essay was written and published before Qaddafi's death in rebel hands on October 20, 2011. The exact circumstances of Qaddafi's death remain unclear as of November 2011.]

among them the rights of conscience, thought, belief, expression, and the right to worship or not to.

As my wife Iman put it to me, if glory goes to the youth Muhammad al-Bouazizi for sparking the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia by immolating himself (and not others) in protest, and if glory goes to the Egyptian youth Khalid Said, who died under torture after the notorious security services arrested him before the spark of the uprising moved to the roundabouts and squares of Egypt, then surely the glory of sparking the Syrian *intifada* goes to the boys of Dera'a who had their nails pulled out and palms burned with fire after being arrested.[⁴]

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