

A Lesson to the West: The Human Rights Legitimacy of the Arab Spring Protesters

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Your armed forces, who are aware of the legitimacy of your demands [...] will not resort to use of force.
(Egyptian Army addressing protesters in Tahrir Square, Cairo, 31 January 2011)

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1. Introduction: One Rebel Lights the Fuse

Albert Camus understood a rebel as a man who says both no and yes. He says «no» once the limits of the tolerable have been crossed. By rebelling, he also says «yes» to a certain project, a future¹. Mohamed Bouazizi, the 23-year-old university graduate and vegetable seller who set himself on fire in Tunisia on 17 December 2010, said «yes» to rebellion when he said «no» both to a corrupt system and his own life in front of the Sidi Bouzid police headquarters².

Bouazizi's project of a good life had been crushed slowly by a regime which provided no opportunities³. If in the «no» of the rebel there is an implicit right to resist, the resistance capacity of Bouazizi had been reached. His act was no mere suicide but a public symbol: a call for political action. The symbol reflected the plight of an individual, and not of a particular collective nation, a Pan-Arab or Pan-Muslim project or otherwise a religion or ideology. In contrast with the revolutions of the 1950s, when the figure of Gamal Abdel Nasser personified revolt against French and British colonialism, the hero was in the antipodes of a man of power⁴.

Indeed, Bouazizi personified disempowerment. His claim did not concern gross human rights violations such as torture, forced disappearances or other extreme forms of state repression present in the region. He did not pursue any form of religious self-sacrifice. It was a much humbler and desperate claim: the

¹ A. Camus, *El hombre rebelde*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1982 (or. ed.: *L'homme revolté*, Paris, Gallimard, 1951).

² International Crisis Group, *Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (IV) Tunisia's Way*, Middle East/North Africa Report 106, 28 April 2011.

³ T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by Richard Tuck, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, quoted in A. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, London, Penguin Books, 2010, p. 412.

⁴ M.S. Doran, *The Heirs of Nasser. Who Will Benefit from the Second Arab Revolution?*, in «Foreign Affairs», vol. 90, no. 3, 2011, pp. 17-25.

right of an individual to sell fruits and vegetables from a cart in the street without paying bribes or being harassed. The modest will of a simple citizen to live a dignified life and not that Hobbesian «nasty, brutish and short» experience⁵. Tragically, he did use a brutal form of violence, only against himself.

By eliminating his own life the rebel Bouazizi also rejected and destroyed the figure of the subordinate to the regime. Living oppressed was no longer an option. Thus, he took his own life and helped trigger a collective rebellion. Bouazizi act brings back to memory Camus' aphorism: «I rebel, therefore we exist». From the moment of rebellion onwards anything was possible and the unexpected could become a reality⁶.

Then the protesters went on to the streets demanding constitutional democracy at the national level. Hence, their political discourse shifted from the various strands of Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism that dominated much of the region's history in the second half of the 20th century to a national agenda with clear objectives⁷. They saw from one day to the other how the pillars of the regime started shaking. As a leaflet in the Madrid Puerta del Sol protests would read months later «[He] did not know it was impossible, he just went and did it»⁸.

The brutal response of the Tunisian regime did nothing but to precipitate its own downfall and allow other people from other countries to realise that their Arab postcolonial republican regimes, inheritors of the 1950s and 1960s *coups d'état* had clay feet⁹. Indeed, the self-immolation would set alight a fuse that would cross to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain, each with its own particularities, and would encourage various civic protests (ergo with fundamentally different claims) across the Mediterranean from Madrid to Athens and then on to New York, for the time being¹⁰.

Peaceful Resistance vs. Political Violence

During the last four decades, suicide bombers in the region have aimed at murdering public authorities or civilians of other ethnic groups. Bouazizi aimed not at killing but at exposing its lack of legitimacy and uncovering the falsehood of its claim to popular sovereignty. As an attack against the regime's legitimacy, self-sacrifice proved an effective trigger. Massive peaceful resistance would then prove a far more powerful method for regime change than any violence against one self or others. The triumph of

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

⁶ International Crisis Group, *Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (IV) Tunisia's Way*, cit., p. 3.

⁷ A.H. Al-Rahim, *Whither Political Islam and the «Arab Spring»?*, in «The Hedgehog Review», 2011, pp. 8-22. According to Al-Rahim, «[T]he centrality of nationalism in the recent protests and revolutions to the exclusion of pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism, which animated the politics of much of the second half of the twentieth century, cannot be overemphasized».

⁸ P. Velasco, *No nos representan. El manifiesto de los indignados en 25 propuestas*, Madrid, Ediciones Planeta, 2011, p. 16.

⁹ A.H. Al-Rahim, *Whither Political Islam and the «Arab Spring»?*, cit.

¹⁰ K. Andersen, «The Protester», *Time*, Time's Person of the Year, 14 December 2011.

non-violent resistance over the use of political violence in Egypt and Tunisia (including the lack of protagonism of al-Qaeda) has given hopes to believe that a different way of doing politics in the region is possible. The achievements of the peaceful protests might lead by example to other actors in the region (e.g., Hamas). As Stéphane Hessel, the veteran of the French anti-Nazi Resistance, writes in his 2011 book *Be Outraged!*, the future belongs (or at least should belong) to non-violence and understanding between cultures¹¹.

The example of the civic protests in Egypt's Tahrir Square, organised via digital and mobile networks, would prove particularly attractive for civic movements on the other shore of the Mediterranean. Their members were disenfranchised youth impoverished by the financial crisis to whom the political system seemed tailored for corruption and had little to offer in areas such as housing and employment and who sought more effective participation in public affairs¹². The example even inspired protesters in Tel Aviv demanding fair housing¹³. Hence, in Madrid, in May 2011, prior to the regional and municipal elections the Puerta del Sol Square was the scenery of the largest spontaneous demonstration (and camp site) in Spain to date. The images remarkably resembled those of the Tahrir Square in February 2011¹⁴. The means employed were the same as in Tahrir: digital media, mobile phones, internet social networks. Technology made it possible for all the various movements to learn from each other in real time (as well as to uncover police brutality on the spot).

Moreover, the interrelation between civic protest movement across the globe was evidenced by use of symbols. The Occupy Wall Street protesters, for example, wore eye patches in honour of Ahmed Harrara, the Egyptian protester who lost his first eye on the 25 January's events and the second eye in later protests in Tahrir and on Cairo's November 2011 clashes in Mohammed Mahmoud Street, when protesters demanded swifter transfer to civilian rule from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces¹⁵ (many other protesters lost eyes or were wounded by police shooting rubber bullets directly at them). Without attempting to mystify these developments and their impact, and taking into account historical precedents and the differences between each of the autocracies affected, the Arab Spring and its message has brought to many a great deal of optimism in a time of political

¹¹ S. Hessel, *¡Indignados!*, Barcelona, Ediciones Destino, 2011, p. 41 (or ed.: *Indignez-vous!*, Paris, Indigène, 2010).

¹² P. Velasco, *No nos representan...*, cit.

¹³ J. Beinin, *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and the Arab Awakening*, 1 August 2011, in *Middle East Research and Information Project*, at www.merip.org, online journal (last visited on 12 January 2012).

¹⁴ It is worth to see the images available at <http://especiales.lainformacion.com/panoramicas/manifestacion-acampada-sol/> and <http://www.abc.es/fotos-espana/20111216/imagenes-movimiento-mundo-89708.html> (visited on 18 December 2011).

¹⁵ L. Ryzova, *The Battle of Cairo's Muhammad Mahmoud Street*, in «Al Jazeera», 29 November 2011, at www.aljazeera.com, online journal (visited on 12 January 2012); I. El-Amrani, *Sightings of the Egyptian Deep State*, 1 January 2012, in *Middle East Research and Information Project*, at <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero010112> (last visited on 12 January 2012).

violence and despair linked to the financial crisis, lack of opportunities and pervasive corruption¹⁶.

2. A Lesson to the West

Due to the absence of human rights protection in the North Africa and Middle East countries, most people framed their fight throughout the uprisings as a fight not only to overthrow their leaders, but a fight for «justice». As participants recall, they defined justice as the opposite of what they experienced for decades: the negation of their most basic human rights. Of course, most protesters would not really know too much detail about the specific nature of human rights treaties and corresponding human rights narratives. They were guided by their grievances. They knew that they deserve better and that whatever human rights they were entitled to, these have been violated repeatedly and therefore they fought and are fighting to gain protection. This was very clear to those present in Tahrir in early February 2011¹⁷.

Indeed, the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt fell ultimately because they lost legitimacy and political support amongst both common citizens and elites and thus the necessary support needed to maintain themselves¹⁸. The regimes lacked a minimum degree of legal protection for members of the respective societies to engage genuinely in reasonable politics¹⁹.

And so, the civic movements, through their legitimate rebellion have taught Western leaders a number of lessons. First, supporting autocracies and hence preventing political participation proved to be an unsustainable strategy leading to a highly volatile scenario and ultimately a cause for regret. Initiatives such as Sarkozy's Mediterranean Union that ignored urgent needs for democratic reforms or peace building exemplify this weakness. Second, the movements have also helped vanish a distorted image of North Africa and the Middle East as an obscure nest of Islamic fundamentalists, and helped provide a global audience a more nuanced understanding of the region's political and social diversity. Critically, the movement has shown to such audience the existence and political muscle of a civic minded socially conscious group of people willing to take risks to achieve democratic reforms and individual rights. Indeed,

¹⁶ L. Anderson, *Demystifying the Arab Spring. Parsing the Differences Between Tunisia, Egypt and Libya*, in «Foreign Affairs», vol. 90, no. 3, 2011, pp. 2-7.

¹⁷ Interview with protester, December 2011, in file with the author.

¹⁸ International Crisis Group, *Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (IV) Tunisia's Way*, cit.

¹⁹ Habermas saw human rights legitimacy linked to the ability of participants in a discourse to consent to a law after participating in rational discourses. J. Habermas, *Remarks on Legitimation Through Human Rights*, in «Philosophy and Social Criticism», vol. 24, no. 2/3, pp. 156-171: p. 160.

these intense efforts of the protesters to bring about the end of authoritarianism and to establish constitutional democracy do not fit in well with existing dichotomous narratives of Schmittian liberals who defend «illiberal means for liberal ends» and Western superiority against its alleged enemy, Islam.

In contrast to liberal multiculturalists, Schmittian discourses present a superior and civilised «us» against an obscure and caricatured «them» as part of a campaign to save «Western Civilisation» from Islam²⁰. It also defines migrants as impermeable obscure groups which constitute ultimately a security threat. Its existential view of the problem of diversity allows it to take positions which otherwise are against the principle of tolerance itself²¹. According to such views, Western powers should also be wary of democratic transitions due to the risk of Islamist forces reaching power²².

Such understanding of a Western superiority has accompanied tacit or direct strategic support to autocratic rulers (e.g., a situation symbolised according to Roger Cohen by Berlusconi's «Arab dancer» episode)²³. The tendency has reflected in a retreat from the use of «multiculturalism» as a term (even when multiculturalist policies *per se* where not present as such) and a rise in populist discourses of an inward, narrowly nationalist and anti-immigrant nature unwilling to engage on open discussions about culture. Orhan Pamuk has described the overall move as exposing a «fading dream of Europe»²⁴.

Hence, when the alleged obscure «them» engages in massive peaceful civic resistance in favour of liberal democracy the fallacy is exposed. In reality, the Arab Spring is a sign of the universality of the idea of justice and its global presence. The protesters in North Africa should in this sense lead to Western governments to turn their policies upside down and invest in democratisation across the Mediterranean. The decades-old «either/or» excuse used both by foreign powers and domestic dictatorial elites that democracy would bring Islamists to power has not withstood the legitimacy and the strength of the different forces present in the protesters.

Third and finally, protesters have shown «the West» how human rights (or justice and dignity) are a grass rooted claim fought for in the streets when necessary and who are its ultimate subjects. Their message seems to state: «no matter how long you deny them to us, we will take them back». Thus, the success of the

²⁰ T. Triadafilopoulos, *Illiberal Means to Liberal Ends?*

Understanding Recent Immigrant Integration Policies in Europe, in «Journal on Ethnic and Migration Studies», vol. 37, no. 6, 2011, pp. 861-880: p. 873. Opposite tendencies to understand the historic and political nuances of cultural diversity in Europe are present in Arab media. See the program *Muslims in France Part 1* on «Al Jazeera», at <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/aljazeeraaworld/2011/11/201111289409986278.html> (visited on 4 January 2012).

²¹ T. Triadafilopoulos, *Illiberal Means to Liberal Ends?...*, cit. See also R. Koopmans, *Trade-Offs between Equality and Difference: Immigrant Integration, Multiculturalism and the Welfare State in Cross-National Perspective*, in «Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies», vol. 3, no. 1, 2010, pp. 1-26.

²² J.M. Aznar, *Spain's Former Prime Minister José María Aznar on the Arab Awakening and How the West Should React*, 9 December 2011, CNBC Guest Blog, at <<http://www.cnbc.com/id/45600052>> (visited on 4 January 2012).

²³ R. Cohen, *Berlusconi's Arab Dancer*, in «The New York Times», 21 February 2011.

²⁴ O. Pamuk, *The Fading Dream of Europe*, in «New York Review of Books», 25 December 2010, quoted by R. Cohen, *Berlusconi's Arab Dancer*, cit.

North Africa and Middle East popular protests has further weakened a pervasive paradigm of Western moral supremacy united to an understanding of human rights as belonging to national and international elites as their legitimate interpreters of human rights discourses. In this sense, they have made again relevant that third paragraph of the Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that «[W]hereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law»²⁵. The battle has just begun and different alliances between political actors will determine whether democratisation advances against authoritarianism, «deep state» security forces and/or religious intolerance²⁶.

3. The Bumpy Road Ahead

The demise of the authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Tunisia, the violence in Yemen, Libya and Syria and other developments in the region signify a new beginning but will also bring repression, suffering and political violence²⁷. The promise of democracy and human rights will indeed face difficult times. Apart from outright violence against civilians and other forms of violent repression, there are other real threats which need to be confronted such as regression linked to political advances of fundamentalism and the resistance of the remaining old regime structures or further tensions linked with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict²⁸.

3.1. Fundamentalism, Justice and the Will to Deliberate

Political Islam is a dominant local political force within the new balance of forces in the region. Paradoxically, this counters the civic protesters' ideas of a governance system based on «neutral» or secular political autonomy of citizens. The success of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP, 46% of the votes) and especially that of the Salafist Hizb al-Nour («Party of the Light», 24%) in the first phase of the post-Mubarak elections, and that of En Nahda (literally «Renaissance», 37% of the votes in the October Constituent

²⁵ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations GA Res. 217A (III), UN Doc. A/810, para. 71 (1948), Preamble.

²⁶ D. Shehata, *The Fall of the Pharaoh*, in «Foreign Affairs», vol. 90, no. 3, 2011, pp. 26-33.

²⁷ R. Springborg, *Whither the Arab Spring? 1989 or 1848?*, in «International Spectator», vol. 46, no. 3, 2011, pp. 5-12.

²⁸ A. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, cit.

Assembly elections) in Tunisia shows political mobilisation on religious grounds is as powerful as ever²⁹. The fact that a mobilisation largely initiated by secular forces has led to a victory of conservative Islamic parties after elections in Egypt and Tunisia constitute in this sense a paradox³⁰.

The electoral success of political Islam is not too surprising taking into account its role as a channel of resistance and political discontent in the Arab world³¹. The reasons for the strength of political Islam are manifold: the failed promise of modernity in North Africa and the Middle East has contributed to the success of fundamentalism. Hence, the «economic losers of the Middle East» and their alienation and uprooting has led many to yearn for a pre-modern past where the laws of God and those of man ruled together in harmony³². Other reasons for Islamist success have been their denouncing corruption and secular dictatorships, and their emphasis on justice and dignity, words that have resonated in the Arab Spring more than democracy and human rights. Last but not least the Islamists also mobilise impoverished classes through parallel welfare systems³³. It is understandable that parties which provide access to education or health receive political support from their beneficiaries.

Some of the political forces arising out of the revolts aim directly against the principle of tolerance itself, that is, they are not willing to deliberate or «agree to disagree» on religious questions or to de-link religion from the political and legal system. The modern principle of equal rights of all citizens, irrespective of religious or ethnic belonging or gender is seen by fundamentalists as countering a social order based on the laws of God³⁴. A fundamental problem arises when those forces that claim to be holders of the ultimate truth and are not interested in deliberative democracy get closer to political power³⁵.

The mainstream Islamic parties in Turkey, Egypt and Morocco share the word «justice» in their titles³⁶. Hence, just as the «light» of the Egyptian Salafist «Party of the Light» is not that of the Age of the Enlightenment, when Islamic parties talk about justice they tend to do so through the particular lenses of a world-view based on religious values. However, they seemingly seek to balance such values with those of secular democracy (e.g., restricting their religious conservatism to moral and social issues). Fundamentalist parties, on the other hand, seek an idea of justice which promotes a particular religious end only

²⁹ *Leaders Section, and the Winner Is... Islamists, Elections and the Arab Spring*, in «The Economist», 12 October 2011.

³⁰ In this sense, in Spain, passive demonstrations were followed by a sound electoral victory of the conservative Partido Popular, which had explicitly distanced itself from the 15 May protesters.

³¹ J.M. Owen IV, *Why Islamism Is Winning*, in «The New York Times», 7 January 2012.

³² J. Habermas, *Fundamentalism and Terror: A Dialogue with Jürgen Habermas*, in G. Borradori (ed.), *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2003, pp. 25-43, quoted in V. Boon, *Jürgen Habermas and Religious Fundamentalism: On the Limits of Discourse Ethics*, in «Journal of Global Ethics», vol. 6, no. 2, 2010, pp. 153-166: p. 158; J. Flynn, *Habermas on Human Rights: Law, Morality, and Intercultural Dialogue*, in «Social Theory and Practice», vol. 29, no. 3, 2003.

³³ *Egyptian Elections, Preliminary Results*, in «Al Jadaliyya», 12 January 2012, at <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/3331/egyptian-elections_preliminary-results_updated-> (visited on 12 January 2012).

³⁴ A.H. Al-Rahim, *Whither Political Islam and the «Arab Spring?»*, cit., p. 10.

³⁵ V. Boon, *Jürgen Habermas and Religious Fundamentalism...*, cit., quoting Sayyib Qutb, *Milestones*, Indianapolis, American Trust Publications, 1991 (rev. ed.); T. Heneghan, *Arab Spring Stretches «Islamists» Tag to Its Limits*, in «Al Arabiya News», 19 December 2011.

³⁶ Freedom and Justice Party (Egypt), Justice and Development Party (Turkey), Justice and Development (Morocco).

and does not enable citizens to achieve equality (particularly women). In this regard, Amartya Sen points to an interesting distinction based on Indian jurisprudence: that of justice as *niti* (an ideal organisational propriety and behavioural correctness) and justice as *nyanya* (a comprehensive concept of practical justice taking into account social realities). Sen also describes the state of *matsanyanya*³⁷, that is, justice in the world of fish, where the big one eats the smaller. He does so to point to an idea of justice which aims at preventing manifest injustice in practice and not a transcendently ideal institutional set up (be it based on Sharia, dialectic materialism, liberalism or any other world-view). Arriving anywhere close to such type of imperfect but real justice requires a great deal of public discussion.

Such is perhaps the form of dialogue that Jürgen Habermas would advocate for. One «based on relations of mutual recognition, reciprocal perspective taking, a shared willingness to consider one's own tradition with the eyes of the stranger and to learn from one another»³⁸. The problem is that such process can only take place between persons willing to deliberate, and to accommodate their own opinions when rational arguments justify so, and neither those in positions of strong political power nor orthodox fundamentalists meet such criteria³⁹. Moreover, all of them are likely to use some form of transcendental institutionalism (i.e., based on a *niti* conception of justice) to justify their positions. A viable institutional set up will, in this sense, require pragmatism from religion based political parties, a willingness by Western governments to revisit their own positions and a way for the secular and civic forces within the region to participate democratically.

In this regard, Vivienne Boon highlights the difficulties of engaging political Islam by referring to the writings of Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian Islamist theorist and member of the Muslim Brotherhood executed in 1966 after his third attempt to overthrow Nasser. Some of Qutb's writings, a source of inspiration for Sunni fundamentalist groups, reject deliberation and any form of philosophy that deviates from an intuitive form of knowledge linked to Islamic faith: all ideologies outside Islamism (nationalism, liberalism and socialism) are part of *jahilliya* (a Quranic term for tribal and clan polytheist society existing before the arrival of Islam)⁴⁰. In this conception of justice, dignity and the good, the *jahilli* state of ignorance is to be overthrown, if necessary through violence⁴¹.

³⁷ A. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, cit., pp. 20-22.

³⁸ J. Habermas, *Remarks on Legitimation Through Human Rights*, cit., p. 169.

³⁹ V. Boon, *Jürgen Habermas and Religious Fundamentalism...*, cit.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 160.

⁴¹ M. Sandel, *The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self*, in «Political Theory», vol. 12, no. 1, 1984, pp. 81-96.

While from a theoretical perspective anyone defending strictly Qutb's positions would be hard to dialogue with, the reality of the forces present in the region is more nuanced and should not be looked at through dichotomous secular/Islamist lenses: a mix of secular, religious, national and transnational ideas concerning the good is present in the new balance of forces. Indeed, one of the striking features in the movements has been the absence of dogmatic fundamentalism as well as Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism and al-Qaeda's chimerical ideas (i.e., abolishing the modern nation state system as imposed by the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement and establishing a new Caliphate from Tangiers to Indonesia)⁴². The revolts are instead essentially national uprisings which follow clear domestic agendas for reform⁴³. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere, has despite its utopian foundational programs functioned in practice as Islamist organisations at the national level⁴⁴.

During the ongoing transitions secular forces will need to advocate for the protection of two key vulnerable groups: women and religious and ethnic minorities. The Arab Spring has undoubtedly marked a watershed in the political participation of women in the Islamic world. Moreover, a sense of solidarity across borders with the struggle of protesting women has been developed. The beating and stripping of a female protester in Cairo in December 2011 sparked the largest demonstration by women since 1919. Images of women mistreated in the streets of Cairo and instances such as the infamous «virginity tests» outraged people across the world. Women across Europe and the US engaged in an «I also wear a blue bra» campaign after an Egyptian woman was publicly undressed as a result of being beaten by the police in the street of Cairo in December 2011. Some minorities are certainly at risk. Incidents such as those of October 2011 in the state broadcasting headquarters (known as Maspero) initiated by inflammatory media treatment of Copt Christian grievances, that led to at least 24 civilians being killed by armed forces are a stark reminder⁴⁵. On the other hand, the political openings linked to the crisis have seen an upsurge in the claims and hopes of national minorities. Such has been the case for example in Libya, where Berber (i.e., Amazigh) groups have made their claims heard concerning their right to maintain their culture⁴⁶.

In such a complex scenario, it is early to discern to what extent

42 The 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement was a secret pact between United Kingdom and France, consented by Russia, which defined their territorial areas of influence in Western Asia after the expected demise of the Ottoman Empire during World War I. It divided the territories of the Ottoman Empire outside the Arabian peninsula into zones of future control by the British and French. A.H. Al-Rahim, *Whither Political Islam and the «Arab Spring»?*, cit., p. 13.

43 The political Islam forces within the revolt have in this regard the modern Arab understanding of nationalism as defined by early thinkers such as the Egyptian cleric Rifā'a Rāfi' al-Tahtāwī (1801-1873) which views the people of Egypt following the prophetic tradition (*hadith*) «[L]ove of the homeland is part of [religious] faith». *Ibidem*, p. 11.

44 *Ibidem*, p. 13.

45 M. Tadros, *Egypt's Bloody Sunday*, 13 October 2011, in *Middle East Research and Information Project*, at www.merip.org, online journal (last visited on 12 January 2012); I. El Amrani, *Sightings of the Egyptian Deep State*, 1 January 2012, in *Middle East Research and Information Project*, at www.merip.org, online journal (last visited on 12 January 2012).

46 Z. Maze, *Minorities and the Arab Spring: The Great Divide*, in «Jerusalem Post», 24 December 2011; S. Dagher, *An «Arab Winter» Chills Christians*, in «The Wall Street Journal», 5 December 2011.

the democratisation of Northern Africa contain the seeds of its own demise. The programs of political parties linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly En-Nahda in Tunisia, seem to reflect pragmatism in this sense and a public rejection of extreme positions taking into account key interests such as tourism (e.g., the returning from exile party's President Rachid Ghannouchi soon clarified that «bikinis and beards will have a place in Tunisia»)⁴⁷.

3.2. International Relations as an Enabling Tool

The entry into stage of the people, a long neglected actor in the region, means that at least in that respect the times are indeed changing⁴⁸. In this regard, human rights standards do not only contain a promise of social justice but also an explicit right of everyone to a «social and international order» in which human rights can be realised (Article 28, Universal Declaration of Human Rights). Up to now, the reality of international relations concerning North Africa and the Middle East has emptied such a promise of real meaning. Indeed, the Arab Spring has occurred in spite of and against an international order which sustained autocracies in the region. The popular protests have challenged such order successfully. Indeed, North Africa and the Middle East deserve a new order based on respect for fundamental democratic principles (which Europe should support unequivocally). In fact it is the one agreeable goal of international relations⁴⁹. Hence, while assessing the complexity of international relations in the region is beyond the scope of this article, it is interesting to look back at important signs which foresaw such a development. Such is the speech of President Barack Obama in his address to the public in Cairo's Al-Azhar University in June 2009. In hindsight, it turned to be prophetic.

Obama talked straightforwardly about the US seeking «a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles – principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings». Obama talked to the students about their power to «remake the world»⁵⁰. This is quite remarkable when compared to his

⁴⁷ L. Sadiki, *The Arab Spring: Voting Islamism. Three Crucial Questions about Islamism Must Be Faced in Order to Build a Framework Explaining the Arab Spring*, in «Al Jazeera», 9 January 2012, at www.aljazeera.com, online journal (visited on 12 January 2012); S. Hamid, *The Rise of the Islamists*, in «Foreign Affairs», vol. 90, no. 3, 2011, pp. 40-48.

⁴⁸ M.S. Doran, *The Heirs of Nasser. Who Will Benefit from the Second Arab Revolution?*, in «Foreign Affairs», vol. 90, no. 3, 2011, pp. 17-25.

⁴⁹ J. Habermas, *Remarks on Legitimation Through Human Rights*, cit., p. 162.

⁵⁰ US President Barack Obama, *On a New Beginning, Remarks of President Barack Obama*, Al-Azhar University of Cairo, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Cairo, Egypt, 4 June 2009.

predecessor's human rights record and infamous dialectics (e.g., George W. Bush's «you are with us or against us in the war against terror»)⁵¹. Obama confirmed this Copernican shift in policy and claimed that governments that protect human rights are ultimately more stable, successful and secure. The previous US government would have argued oppositely (i.e., «no human rights without security»)⁵².

Two years later, in May 2011, the President of the United States would again address the same public to promise that the US would promote reform across the region, and support transitions to democracy⁵³. The US, he followed, would tolerate any government resulting from free and fair elections as long as standards on political participation, non-violence, rights of minorities and women are met.

As for religious diversity and gender, the US position is surprisingly more committed to accommodating religious traditions than some European countries. Thus, Obama called on Western countries to «avoid impeding Muslim citizens from practicing religion as they see fit – for instance, by dictating what clothes a Muslim woman should wear» and criticised those who «disguise hostility towards any religion behind the pretense of liberalism». Finally, the US «cannot hesitate to stand squarely on the side of those who are reaching for their rights, knowing that their success will bring about a world that is more peaceful, more stable, and more just»⁵⁴.

To what extent such promises, in essence moral claims framed in a human rights narrative, will be accompanied by coherent action will be used to measure the honesty of the statement. In real terms, his speech should be read with more prosaic and tangible policy interests of the US in mind: continuous flow of oil at fair prices, stopping nuclear proliferation of Iran, protecting key allies fighting terrorism and promoting reforms in a way that benefits US interests in the area⁵⁵. While the message of Obama is part of a much more complex puzzle, US foreign policy will surely be a fundamental factor. As an actor playing an Israeli soldier who saves an Egyptian in the performance *Come as You Are*, by Fouad Mohamed and Nir de Volff, notes comically: «both Coca-Cola and tear gas come from the US». The market and the security apparatuses in the region will ultimately reflect the policies of the main world powers⁵⁶.

⁵¹ President George Bush State of the Union Address, 20 September 2001, quoted in J. Castellino, *The End of the Liberal State and the First Terrorist*, London, Middlesex University Press, 2009, pp. 51–53.

⁵² *Ibidem*, pp. 56–57.

⁵³ L. Anderson, *Demystifying the Arab Spring...*, cit.; US President Barack Obama, *Remarks on North Africa and the Middle East*, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Cairo, Egypt, 19 May 2011.

⁵⁴ US President Obama, *On a New Beginning...*, cit.

⁵⁵ C. Toensing, *A New Clarity for Washington*, 1 December 2011, in «Bitter Lemons International», online journal, at www.bitterlemons-international.org (visited on 12 January 2012); M.S. Doran, *The Heirs of Nasser*, cit., p. 22.

⁵⁶ F. Mohamed, N. de Volff, *Come as You Are*, dance performance at the Dancing on the Edge Festival, The Hague, 17 December 2011, at <http://www.korzo.nl/en/productions/come-you-are> (visited on 4 January 2012).

4. Conclusion

Once again a historical transition has come as a surprise to many. The Arab Spring, sparked by the desperate rebellion of a single youngster against a regime which prevented him from making a living and followed on by women and men activists of various creeds, represents a victory of peaceful civic resistance by those disempowered against a *status quo* of post-colonial corrupt autocracies tolerated by the West. Non-violent activism has achieved in Tunisia and Egypt what political violence has failed to do in other scenarios.

The Arab Spring has taught Western leaders first that supporting authoritarianism and preventing reform is an unsustainable strategy leading to highly volatile scenarios and ultimately a cause for regret. Secondly, it has crushed a caricatured image of North Africa and the Middle East as a cradle of fundamentalists by exposing to a Western (and global) audience a more nuanced view of the region and critically the existence and political muscle of a civic minded socially conscious group of people, including women, willing to risk themselves to achieve democratic reforms and individual rights. Third, these protesters and activists, whose protagonism has outweighed national and international elites, have also taught Western societies and their leaders a lesson about ownership and human rights (or justice and dignity) as a grass rooted claim fought for in the streets when necessary, a lesson about democracy in the global age understood as public discussion within and across borders.

The Arab Spring has thus strengthened a layer of international relations: that between its individual citizens who share outrage before injustice and develop strategies to address it, all in real time. The movement has galvanised democratic participation in the region and beyond. Human rights NGOs, bloggers, other parts of civil society, have been intensively involved in the revolts. Women have had a role and a resonance they never had before.

The Eastern protesters have also implications for the West in terms of European domestic policy. At a time characterised by Schmittian narratives based on Western superiority, the protesters have insisted on upholding justice and dignity (so-called «Western values») against leaders often recognised and/or tacitly supported by different Western governments.

Indeed, these developments happen at a time when Europe debates its own cultural foundations confronting its own *de facto* multicultural societies. By mingling with anti-migrant discourses based on a caricatured Islamic otherness, European policies have disappointed liberal minded intellectuals abroad. If prior to February 2011, a «small-minded» Europe was the logical image of an autocratic and depressed Middle East and North Africa, after the revolts, the craving for openness on the Southern shore of the Mediterranean should lead to changes in Europe's approach to its Islamic «other».

Not all political forces present in the transitions will be interested in developing or even entering into a discussion about constitutional patriotism. Though the Tunisia and Egyptian protesters did not seek to empower religious fundamentalism, political Islam forces of various kinds have shown a solid electoral weight. Intolerant attitudes within the Islamic political forces together with resistance to change from the structures of the old regimes remain a major threat to democratisation in the region, women and the rights of minorities. Once in power, the forces of political Islam, from the most liberal to the extremists, will see themselves forced to deal with issues of culture and policy, including the treatment of their minorities and gender issues. Western foreign policy should support efforts to balance majority rule with women and minorities' interests in this regard.

International security policies have a potential to both block and encourage the transitions. In this sense, a settlement for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is more needed than ever, as populist forces may use any incident to escalate tension in the region. Continuous reasonable dialogue between those who hold power globally and those who mobilise on religious grounds is necessary. Dialogue will require pragmatism from all sides: from those forces which base their policies on the aesthetics of religion and the dogmas of faith, from those who believe in the superiority of Western civilisation and from those who believe in the balanced accommodation of cultural and ideological differences through democratic institutions.

Before such a challenging scenario, democracy supporters East and West share the hope for a society free from political violence and where institutions are subject to the law. It is them who will bear the weight of helping those in power calibrate religion-

based politics in order to accommodate the rights of women, minorities and secular forces. In this sense, it is high time for strengthening links between human rights actors in civil society across both sides of the Mediterranean and beyond and to seek to engage in reasonable terms of dialogue with the forces of political Islam. As mentioned earlier, Camus defined a rebel as «a man who says no»: after the Arab Spring and the loud «no» from its rebels, home and abroad, Western societies and their leaders have now yet another opportunity to learn their lessons.