ARAB REVOLUTION: SHOULD WE STILL CALL IT "SPRING"?

The Arab revolution has a long way to go before settling itself and establishing a calm and stable climate conducive to democracy in the region. Some Western circles envision the creation of a moderately Islamic and relatively democratic Sunnite "belt" in the Middle East. This approach rests on the assumption that "moderate Islam" is the antidote of "radical Islam", which does not match oriental realities. The AKP government in Turkey is aware of the fact that "moderate Islam" is an inaccurate concept. However, it pays lip service to the advocates of this idea and aspires to the leadership of a Sunnite belt. The real antidote against radicalism is for the international community to support the aspirations of the Arab peoples, rather than attempting to exploit the current political climate.

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I t has been nearly a year and a half since the young Tunisian cart vendor Mohammad Bouazizi set himself on fire, triggering the uprisings that came to be known as the "Arab Spring". On that day, 18 December 2010, no one would have guessed that this tragic incident would spark a popular movement that would change the whole Middle East. Starting in Tunisia and spreading to Egypt, this led to the protests in the renowned Tahrir Square, toppling the regime. It generated a bloody civil war in Libya paving the way to an international intervention based on a UN Security Council resolution. In Syria, due to the regime's brutal response, the clashes turned into a bloody civil strife. The riots in Bahrain and Yemen were followed by major uprisings in Algeria, Morocco, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, and comparatively minor protests in Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Mauritania and Western Sahara. It showed itself as conflicts in Palestine, close to the Israeli border.

Many of the above-mentioned countries attempted to crush, with brutal force, these uprisings, triggered off by their people's desire for democracy, freedoms and prosperity. The initially peaceful protests of the masses eventually became much more organized and turned violent in the face of the harsh retaliations of the regimes. In some regions, the protests turned into armed resistance. The oppressed peoples' longings for democracy and basic freedoms, the wide use of the internet and other social media to spread the revolutionary ideas, coupled with the violent responses of the regimes gave a romantic aspect to the movement. Thus, instead of being called simply the "Arab revolution," the movement was named the "Arab Spring."

In the year and a half that has gone by, many rooted changes have taken place, such as Ben Ali's departure from Tunisia, Mubarak's resignation and his trial in Egypt, the lynching of Qadhafi, and change of government in Libya, free elections in all three countries, and the uprisings erupting in and threatening the future of the regime in Syria. At this stage, the Arab Spring seems to have attained the goal set by the uprising masses' famous motto: "the people want to bring down the regime."

However, beyond this motto, what has happened to realize the people's wishes for democracy, freedoms and prosperity? In reality, instead of establishing a democracy and a free environment as expected from them, the new administrations seem to have adopted the methods of the tyrants they replaced. Amnesty International observed that great numbers of prisoners in Libya, most of them former soldiers of Qadhafi, were being mistreated and tortured for supporting the old regime.[1]

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[1] Amnesty International Reports indicate the existence of widespread methods of physical violence, torture, and other kinds of deprivation of human rights not only to prisoners of war but also civilians especially in the Sub-Saharan area. As an example, see: "Libya: Deaths of Detainees Amid Widespread Torture" *Amnesty International Annual Report 2011,* 26 January 2012, http://www.amnesty.org/zh-hant/node/29388. For allegiations of war crimes, see: "Report: Libya Rebels may be Guilty of War Crimes," *CBS News – World,* 12 September 2011, http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/ 09/12/501364/main20105154.shtml.

The interim military government in Egypt continues to crush the demonstrations in Tahrir Square, raising the death and injured toll each day. The new government in Libya stated it would put the Islamic Sharia regime into effect.[2] Interestingly enough, the international community that keeps its enthusiasm (and for good reason for the time being) for the "Arab Spring" appears to overlook these practices. Before briefly examining the causes for this stance, we should search for the answer to a fundamental question: is it realistic to expect democracy to take root in this region so soon?

Before answering this question, we should first examine the political structure of the Arab Spring nations. These countries, which have an ancient history, deep culture, and rich natural resources, have, in modern times, been ruled by non-democratic and oppressive regimes led by kings, sheiks and dictators. While in countries like Egypt and Tunisia, state controlled elections have given rise to non-functional oppositions, in others, there has never been any formation, which could be called democratic opposition. None of the "Arab Spring" countries have experienced real democracy.

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The current and the first elected Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (formerly called the Organization of the Islamic Conference) is a Turkish national, Professor Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu. During his election held in Istanbul in 2004, many delegates from the "Arab Spring" nations stated how happy they were to be voting in a ballot for first time their life.[3]

On the other hand, banning the opposition does not mean that there is no opposition at all in these countries. There have always been clandestine movements opposed to the regimes in the Arab Spring countries. However, the continual pressure of persecution has driven these movements underground. In some cases, these opposition movements have turned into armed resistance and eventually terrorist groups. But most of the time, the opposition emerged as religious movements

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[2] Richard Spencer, "Libya's liberation: Interim Ruler Unveils More Radical than Expected Plans for Islamic Law," *The Telegraph*, 23 October 2011.
[3] During the elections, İhsanoğlu won 32 votes versus the candidates from Bangladesh and Malaysia –each received 12 votes. For more information about the electoral process, see: Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, *The Islamic World in the New Century: The Organization of Islamic Conference, 1969-2009* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010)

operating from the mosques due to the fact that they were the only medium that could possibly lead to some sort of organized opposition. In other words, in oppressed Arab countries, the opposition has only been able to survive either as Islamic fundamentalist formations or terror-centered groups.

In the course of the Arab Spring, while the use of the internet and social media has ensured coordinated actions among regime opponents who subscribe themselves to neither of these two typical groups, it has yet to create an effective and enduring opposition in such a short time. Accordingly, as stated above, one does not come across powerful opposition movements in the Middle East apart from religion based movements like the Muslim Brotherhood or armed movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah. Even in Syria, where the uprising against the Assad regime continues and violence increases each passing day, the opposition movement that claims to lead this uprising lacks unity and coordination.

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As a result, in countries that opted for elections like Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, one sees that religiously oriented political parties are winning these elections. In the days ahead, if free elections are held in other Arab countries, the results will not be any different.

The mere fact that democratic elections are being held does not mean that the parties elected will put into effect democracy, basic freedoms and human rights. But just the fact that these elections are being held and the subsequent change of the regimes, whatever the outcome, seems to satisfy the leading Western countries.

It looks like the developing political climate in the aftermath of the Arab Spring will give rise to a "democratic" so called 'moderate' Islamic belt starting from the Western Sahara and Mauritania and reaching as far as the Central Asian frontiers. According to some Western and especially American think-tanks, this is exactly the antidote against radical Islam.

Is that really so? Is there such a thing as moderate Islam? Maybe according to Western blueprints there might be. But the adepts of Islam do not think so. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has said, on more than one occasion, that there was no such thing as moderate Islam. He states that when you suggest

moderate Islam, the alternative would be non-moderate Islam, whereas, there can only be one interpretation of Islam.[4]

The typical error of the Western thinking is its tendency to build its theories on its own blueprints, which rarely match the realities of the target societies. Accordingly, social engineering based on incorrect assumptions fails.

Democracy needs flexibility and as religion does not accept flexibility with its set of laws, any religion-based regime, Islamic or other, will have difficulty adapting itself to democracy. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, most of the elected political parties of the region are affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood which finds its references in Islam and started as a radical movement. The claim that it has evolved into a moderate democratic political foundation, suggested by some circles including Turkey's AKP, is yet to be proven. One thing is for sure, a long time will be needed to correctly assess the post election political climate in the Middle East region.

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Whatever the outcome of this political climate, the theory put forward by several Western and American theoreticians resting on the assumption that "moderate Islam" is the antidote of "radical Islam" is based on occidental blueprints. These blueprints do not match oriental realities.

Those advocating the theory of "moderate Islam being the antidote of radical Islam" pretend that it has proved to be correct in Turkey, where a moderate Islamic political movement has been able to rise to power and now operates in a democratic environment. Accordingly, they think that Turkey can be a role model for Arab countries. Many scholars say that the Turkish experience proves that Islam is compatible with democracy. To promote this claim and this theory, some even advocate that Turkey should advance even further in "moderate Islam" and lead the Arab countries in the "right direction".

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[4] Erdoğan made his speech in Oxford Center for Islamic Studies on 2 April 2009. For press coverage, see: "Erdoğan: Türkiye Ilımlı İslam'ın Temsilcisi Değildir"(Turkey is not the Representative of Modarate Islam), *NTV-MSNBC Haber Portalı,* 3 April 2009, http://www.ntvmsnbc.com/id/24953078/; "Turkish Prime Minister denies term "Moderate" as Islam exclude all extremisms," *Hürriyet Daily News,* 22 September 2011,
http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=pm-denies-term-8216moderate8217-as-islam-exclude-all-extremisims-2011-09-22.

The AKP government in Turkey gives a nod to this way of thinking. Longing the lost Ottoman grandeur, encouraged by the country's supposed economic achievements, the AKP government promotes the idea of creating a Sunnite belt in the larger Middle East region and hopes for its leadership. While being aware of the fact that "moderate Islam" is an inaccurate concept, the AKP government pays lip service to the advocates of this idea. In the meantime, the AKP government backs Muslim Brotherhood affiliated Arab political parties all over the region and tries to present this radical movement as a moderate democratic organization.

Can Turkey be a role model for Arab Spring countries? This question is being voiced since the very beginning of the Arab Spring. Some say that the correct question is not whether or not Turkey can become a model but whether the AKP can be a role model for Arab political parties. Actually, there is no big difference between these two questions. In fact, those in the West who see Turkey as a possible model for the outcome of the Arab Spring miss a crucial point; as do those who turn to AKP as a possible model.

What made democracy prevail in Turkey is the secular nature of the Turkish political system. It is constitutional secularism that makes democracy (despite its many deficiencies) work in Turkey.

As for the AKP, one should not overlook the fact that this party is a product of the secular Turkish democratic system. Secularism has acted as cement in AKP's case and allowed this party with a religious background to operate within the parliamentarian democracy of Turkey.

There is another point that should not be missed when tackling the question of Turkey being a role model: the relatively long past of the Turkish democracy. As a matter of fact, the history of the democratic experience in Turkey precedes even the foundation of the Republic. Despite more than a hundred years of constitutional parliamentarism, today, there are still serious deficiencies in the practice of democracy in Turkey.

Yet, another crucial difference between Turkey and the countries of the Arab Spring is the fact that Turkey, whose population is overwhelmingly Muslim, belongs to the Western world. It is a member of almost all Western forums and alliances with the exception of the EU, with which it is a negotiating candidate. These particularities make Turkey not an easy model for other countries of the region.

The countries of the Arab Spring need to build up democratic experience and parliamentarian practice to reach their aspirations. If they turn to Turkey as a role model, they should see that they have to come to terms with the principle of

secularism. And, this is not at all easy to realize. Secularism is still a taboo for many of them. When Prime Minister Erdoğan made a reference to secularism in a speech he gave in Cairo, the negative reaction he received, despite his simplistic and superficial interpretation of this concept, proves the difficulty of the case.

However, nothing should prevent the Arab parties from analyzing the Turkish experience and finding some sources of inspiration in it.

At this stage of the Arab Spring, a dangerous tendency of the international community appears to be the readiness of some major Western countries to accept that the wishes of the Arabs for democracy, freedoms, human rights, and prosperity could be interpreted differently from their contemporary sense.

In other words, some Western governments seem to be satisfied with show elections and a democracy bon pour l'Orient in the Middle East. This would mean accepting that restricted rights and freedoms are good enough for the Arab peoples. The reasons of such an acceptance could, on the one hand, be some sort of xenophobia caused by seeing the Arab peoples as part of a different civilization and, thus, not necessarily worth the same standards as those of the Western world.

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On the other hand, it could also be put down to a preference of replacing strong tyrannical leaders with more pliable and ostensibly democratic figureheads elected through purported elections. The aim of such a preference could not be other than neo- imperialism. The international community dedicated as it should be to human rights and contemporary values should accept nothing for the Arab peoples less than a full democracy fit for Western societies.

Although sparked spontaneously, and based on the genuine aspirations of the peoples for a better life, at this point the important issue is by whom and how the Arab Spring is being directed. The "moderate Islamic belt" mentioned above, however wrong it is, is a social engineering project. The aim of this project is to take measures against radical Islam. But at the same time, it probably aims to

accentuate the frictions between Sunnites and Shia in order to create a strong front against the Shia, more precisely against Iran.

As stated above, those who aspire to design global social engineering projects should always keep in mind that the Western set of mind does not always correspond to the way of thinking of the Middle Eastern peoples. They should also never overlook that accentuating and betting on ethnic and sectarian differences in the Middle East may cause bigger complications in the future.

The Arab revolution has a long way to go before settling itself and establishing a calm and stable climate conducive to democracy in the region.

Should we still call this revolution "Spring"? The answer lies in the outcome of this long period of change. While waiting for that, the international community and, in particular, the Western world should refrain from exploiting the legitimate and courageous aspirations of the Arab peoples and instead help these people to reach their goals. The achievement of these goals would be the real antidote for all kinds of radicalism.