THE ARAB SPRING SEVEN YEARS ON: A FAILURE OR JUST THE BEGINNING?

Using the 1789 French Revolution as a blueprint, scholar Crane Briton observed a pattern in four historic revolutions and identified four distinct phases: the rule of the moderates; the reign of terror and virtue; Thermidor; and the end of the revolution. Although seemingly incomparable at first, in this article the author identifies a number of similarities between the French Revolution and the Arab Revolutions: both stemmed from a younger generation aspiring for more political freedom and rights and both proceeded in line with each of Briton’s phases. The author argues that as it took France 86 years to establish its first stable democracy, not all hope is lost for the Arab world.

Koert Debeuf*

* Koert Debeuf is the Director of the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP) Europe and Visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict, Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford. Debeuf is a former advisor and spokesperson of the Prime Minister of Belgium.
When Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi announced the creation of the Islamic State on 29 June 2014 in Mosul, it came as a shock to every observer of the Arab world. Experts failed to predict this major event, just like they failed to foresee the coming of the Arab Spring in December 2010 and the first months of 2011. Prior to 2010, many articles appeared in news outlets describing the dire situation in which vast parts of the Arab population were living. However, at the same time, internal and external observers showed careful optimism.

10 years before the Arab Spring a new wind seemed to blow over the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In 1999, for example, King Mohammed VI of Morocco succeeded his father, while Abdullah II did the same in Jordan. In 2000, Bashar al-Assad became the president of Syria, succeeding his father, Hafez al-Assad. Each one of these new rulers were young, educated in the West, and promised modernization. In 2002, the newly-formed Justice and Development Party (AKP) won the elections in Turkey and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became prime minister. He promised a new step forward in Turkey’s accession process to the European Union, and in December 2004, the European Council decided to commence accession talks — convinced that Erdoğan was the right man to lead these negotiations.

The year 2005 gave perhaps even more reason for hope in the region. In Palestine, Mahmoud Abbas was elected as the new president, creating optimism for a peace agreement with Israel. In Lebanon, the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri did not lead to a new civil war, but to the Cedar Revolution which pushed Syrian armed forces out of the country. Moreover, in 2005, Egypt held its first presidential elections, while in Iraq a new constitution was approved in a referendum. American commentators were happy with this turn of events and credited US President George W. Bush for it, calling it “Bush’s Arab Spring.”

However, despite signs of optimism in the early years of the 20th century, very few people believed that real change was possible in the Arab world. When Tunisians went to the streets in December 2010 and January 2011, observers still remained very cynical. A columnist for Foreign Policy, Marc Lynch, wrote an article1 on 6 January 2011 wondering if the Tunisian protests were signs of “Obama’s Arab Spring.” This was eight days before the Tunisian dictator Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali fled the country, and 19 days before the protests on Tahrir Square in Cairo started. When crowds turned up on Tahrir Square on 25 January 2011, Mohamed El Baradei was quoted2 in Der Spiegel saying: “Perhaps we are currently experiencing the first signs of an “Arab Spring.”

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Arab Spring or Arab Revolution?

The term “Arab Spring” was introduced long before the real political earthquake happened in the Arab world. The word “Spring” obviously refers to the “Prague Spring,” a short-lived liberalization and democratization process in former Czechoslovakia in 1968 under the leadership of Alexander Dubček, before it was crushed by Russian tanks. In this context, it is hard to deny the cynical meaning of the word “Spring.” Nobody believed that the Tunisian protests – and later the Egyptian protests – really would lead to a more liberal and democratic Arab world.

The question is if we – now seven years later – should still use the word “Spring,” or if it is better to use the term “Arab Revolution”? The claim of this article is that using the term “Arab Revolution” is more appropriate.

The problem with the term “revolution” is that there are multiple definitions. However, all definitions agree upon the fact that contrary to evolution, revolution means the effort to change political institutions or authority in a relatively short period of time. Some definitions add the element of mass demonstrations. Nevertheless, the definition of a revolution remains problematic, as is the consensus on when to call a political change a revolution or not.

One example is what some Egyptians refer to as “the second revolution,” when President Mohamed Morsi was ousted from office. From 30 June to 3 July 2013, millions of Egyptians marched on the streets to demand the resignation (or the call for an early presidential election) of Morsi. On 3 July 2013, General Abdel Fattah Sisi, then Minister of Defense, removed Morsi from the presidency and imprisoned him. Supporters of Morsi – and most international observers – called this act a military coup. However, those who went to the streets against Morsi call it a revolution.

The Anatomy of a Revolution

In 1965, Harvard scholar Crane Brinton wrote a book called The Anatomy of Revolution, in which he traces the similarities of four great revolutions: the Glorious Revolution, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the

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Russian Revolution. Using the French Revolution as a blueprint, Briton divides these large revolutions into four phases: the rule of the moderates; the reign of terror and virtue; Thermidor; and the end of the revolution.

The history of the French Revolution is well known. On 5 May 1789, King Louis XVI summoned the convention of the Estates-General in Versailles to discuss tax reform. The Third Estate did not agree with the voting system wherein the 25 million people they represented had the same weight as the other two smaller Estates: the Catholic clergy and nobility. As their demands were not met, the Third Estate gathered amongst themselves and first declared itself the National Assembly, and then, on 9 July 1789, the National Constituent Assembly. The revolutionary atmosphere increased and on July 14th, a group of 954 people decided to take over the Bastille, an old prison in the center of Paris and a hated symbol of tyranny.

After the revolutionary events and a brief “honeymoon” period, the first phase of the “rule of the moderates” started. Under the leadership of the Girondists, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was put in place in August 1789, as well as a constitution that transformed France into a Constitutional Monarchy. The main problem of the “moderates” was that they did not succeed in delivering their promises of the revolution, and that they could not stop the violence as Austria and Prussia invaded France.

This paved the way for more extreme revolutionaries to take over power. A well-organized group of radicals organized an attack on the Tuileries Palace in Paris and overthrew the monarchy on 10 August 1792. Lawyer and politician Maximilien Robespierre’s Jacobins took power on 10 August 1793 and installed a “Reign of Terror and Virtue,” the second phase according to Briton. The new National Convention drafted a new constitution. More importantly, under the leadership of “The Incorruptable” Robespierre, every “corrupted” person – anyone against the revolution and its principles – risked death by guillotine. Around 19,000 people were eventually executed. Alongside the “Reign of Terror,” there was also the “Reign of Virtue.” The Jacobins used religious rhetoric and organized meetings of the “Supreme Being.” They changed the names of streets and squares and put a new calendar in place. They were against gambling, drunkenness, sexual irregularities of all sorts, and “ostentatious displays” of wealth or idleness. At the same time, Robespierre and his revolutionary forces waged a war in the Vendée, west-central France, against royalist forces. An estimated 200,000 people died in this civil war.

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4 Estates-General refers to the representative assembly of three “estates” in pre-revolutionary France: the clergy, nobility, and the majority of the people (Third Estate).
5 Such as military officer Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette and political leader Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, Count of Mirabeau.
On 9 Thermidor of the Year II (27 July 1794) almost all members of the Convention conspired against Robespierre, who was executed without trial together with 22 of his closest associates. The new Thermidorian regime (and thus phase three) re-granted people the freedom of religion. However, the new regime also started its own “White Terror” and persecuted, jailed, and executed hundreds of Robespierre sympathizers. A third constitution was drawn up and approved in a referendum with 95.4 percent. After two years of relative stability, the five members of the Directory (the executive power) started to fight each other. This lead to another coup (18 Fructidor), new purges, and major economic mismanagement.

The fourth phase, according to Brinton – the end of the revolution – saw a number of new constitutions and referendums. It started with Napoleon Bonaparte’s coup d’état on 9 November 1799 (also known as the 18th Brumaire). A new constitution was adopted and the Consulate was established. Napoleon, however, started another coup and appointed himself first consul. Again, a new constitution was adopted in a referendum with an approval rate of 99.9 percent. In 1802, another referendum confirmed (with 99.8 percent approval) Napoleon as “First Consul for Life.” Two years later, the Senate passed a bill abolishing the First Republic and installing the French Empire, with Napoleon as its emperor.

The rest of history is also well known. France experienced one regime change after another. Republics, kingdoms, and empires replaced one another, which lasted until 1870, when France became a stable democracy under the Third Republic. The constitution of 1875 was the 14th constitution since the start of the French Revolution 86 years prior.

**The Four Phases of the Arab Revolution**

At first glance it seems impossible to compare the Arab Revolution with the French Revolution. The most obvious reason is that contrary to France, the Arab Revolution has not been confined to one single country. Each country in the Arab world has witnessed its own history and chronology of events which has shaped it. It is clear that, for example, Tunisia and Syria have seen a very different outcome of their respective revolutions. However, the reason why the overview of the French Revolution

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*The Consulate was the government of France from 1799 until 1804.*
has been addressed in a rather detailed way, is precisely because there are more similarities than many would have expected.

First of all, the revolutionary events in the Arab world all started in close secession. When street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire on 17 December 2010, protests spread across Tunisia. On 14 January 2011, the country’s President Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia. On that very same day, people started protesting in Jordan. On 25 January, thousands of Egyptians started to fill Tahrir Square. On February 11th, after 18 days of struggle, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) deposed President Hosni Mubarak. On February 3rd, protests started in Yemen. On February 17th in Libya. On February 19th in Bahrain. On February 20th in Morocco. On March 14th in Saudi Arabia. On March 15th in Syria. In short, within a very brief period of time, no less than nine countries were engulfed by a revolution.

The outcome of these nine revolutionary moments, however, were very different. In Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, a dictator was ousted in a relatively peaceful way. In Morocco and Jordan, reforms were promised by the King. In Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, demonstrations were crushed by the military. In Libya and Syria, demonstrations led to a civil war. With the help of NATO, the Libyan war came to an end with the killing of Muammar Gaddafi. In Syria, the war is still ongoing. But just like in France, a short “honeymoon” period followed the first revolutionary victories in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Morocco, and Jordan.

If we look at the different phases of a revolution according to Brinton, we could make an easy comparison. Take for example, Egypt. We could say that after the revolution, the “Rule of the Moderates” was the rule of the SCAF. The army tried to lead Egypt towards democratic elections, without too much chaos. As the Muslim Brotherhood won the elections of 2011 and 2012, they could take up the “Reign of Virtue,” but hardly the “Reign of Terror,” even though people in Egypt felt that they were ruled in a (Islamic) way they did not like. The Egyptian Thermidor would then be the second revolution of 30 June 2013, followed by the coup of el-Sisi on July 3rd. After one year of Adly Mansour’s interim-presidency and “White Terror” against the Muslim Brotherhood and other revolutionary activists, the election of Field Marshall Abdel Fattah el-Sisi with 96.1 percent of the vote signaled the end of the revolution or, the fourth phase of Brinton. Just like in the French Revolution, every single phase of the Egyptian revolution has had its own constitution.

Although Brinton’s four revolutionary phases might not apply entirely to Egypt,

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1 This overview is based on Koert Debeuf, *Inside the Arab Revolution. Three Years at the Front Line of the Arab Spring* (Til: Koert Debeuf and Lannoo Publishers nv, 2014).
there are striking similarities. However, comparing the rule of Morsi with the rule of Robespierre seems to be unfair for Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood. On the other hand, the fanaticism, the terror, and the choice between virtue or death does ring a bell when we compare it with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). Just like Robespierre and his Jacobins, ISIS installed a “Reign of Terror and Virtue” in Syria, Iraq, in Sinai, parts of Libya, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia.

In all of the countries swept up by the Arab Revolution, we are seeing moderates (moderate revolutionaries and Muslim Brotherhood) coming to power. In Egypt, the moderates were kicked out by a counterrevolution or Thermidor. In Syria, the moderates were overpowered and kicked out by ISIS’ Reign of Terror and Virtue. In Libya, a fight between moderates led to a civil war. At one point, the moderate revolutionaries were overtaken by a Thermidor figure, General Khalifa Haftar, while the moderate Islamists (the Muslim Brotherhood) were overpowered by extremists. The same story counts for Libya. In Morocco, the king brought the moderate Islamists into the government. In Jordan, the king was reforming the system, but then halted his reforms.

The Causes of the Revolution are Still There

The causes of the French Revolution are something that Crane Brinton does not discuss in his book. However, parallels can be drawn between the French Revolution and the Arab Revolution. The century prior to 1789 saw the population of France grow from 20 to 30 million. The economic and social system of France could not cope with the growing young and ambitious population. Jobs typically passed from father to son, which created high levels of unemployment for the sons who were excluded. The system was also very corrupt; the few who could afford to buy a title or a function stood in contrast to the masses who could not. Aside from demographics and a socio-economic injustice, the younger generation aspired for more political freedom and political rights.

When people were shouting, “bread, freedom, and justice” during the Arab Spring, they were pointing to exactly the same problems. In the Arab world, demographics exploded. During the past century, the population in Egypt and Morocco multiplied
more than fivefold, with a majority of the population under 25. The social and economic system is very rigid which causes massive unemployment. This young generation is not only frustrated economically, but also about police violence and the lack of freedom of expression and political rights.

"The Arab world deserves some more time before we conclude that democracy will never work there."

The reason why it took France so long to develop into a stable democracy in 1870 after the 1789 revolution was precisely because of the disconnect between the hopes and aspirations of the younger generations on the one side, and the fight between power elites who time and time again failed to deliver, on the other. That too is not different in the Arab world today. The hopes and aspirations of the younger generations are not gone. Their situation is not better today, or even worse than before 2011. Thinking that the Arab Spring has now become an Arab "Winter" or that the Arab Revolution has ended and failed, is a myopic analysis. The revolution has probably only started and might continue for the years – and maybe decades – to come.

An Arab Revolution That Is Not Finished Yet

Calling the Arab Revolution an Arab Spring is historically unjust. The Arab Revolution has all the elements of a real revolution, just like the French Revolution. Just like in France after 1789, the Arabs have their moderates, their extremists, their counter-revolution or Thermidor, and their generals who want to end the revolution.

Also like the French Revolution, the causes of the Arab Revolution are to be found in demographics, social and economic injustice, and in the repression of free speech and political rights. The current situation in the Arab world does not look particularly hopeful, but if we were living in France in the late 1790s we would have been very pessimistic too. France took 86 years and 14 different constitutions to achieve its first stable democracy since its revolution. The Arab world deserves some more time before we conclude that democracy will never work there.