



MIDDLE EAST REFLECTIONS

Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTIONS IN THE ARAB WORLD

-A LETTER TO A SOUTH EAST ASIAN FRIEND-

BY ALI A. ALLAWI,
VISITING RESEARCH PROFESSOR AT THE MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE,
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of MEI

Reflections on the Revolutions in the Arab World

-A Letter to a South East Asian Friend-

[This letter was prompted by a discussion with Professor Syed Farid Alatas, Head of the Malay Studies Department at the National University of Singapore. The epistolary form was used to great effect by Edmund Burke in 1790 in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. I hope this letter will present a coherent central argument, and not be the “pathless wilderness of rhapsodies” that Thomas Paine charged Burke with writing.]

My dear Syed Farid,

You have asked me to comment on the upheavals that have swept the Arab world in the last two years. The never-ending images of mass demonstrations, civil conflict, violence and warfare must seem very disconcerting to one such as you who has, blessedly, escaped such turmoil. You are on the other side of the continent of Asia; and the 1960's and 1970', when your region was torn apart by the fires of strife in Indochina, are more than a generation away. You grew up when all this had been left behind. “Why,” you have asked” when we

look at the Middle East from our vantage point, all we see are scenes of violence and instability? Why can't you overcome or transcend your divisions, or at least not allow them to consume you."

Revolutions not only devour their children but also their grandchildren. The passions and furies unleashed by tumultuous changes take decades if not centuries to work themselves out—and even when they do finally settle down, the broad divisions that consumed society still resonate down the ages. They determine the attitudes, perspectives, and inclinations of broad masses of people. Revolutions not only generate hopes and aspirations but they are breeding grounds for their opposites- resentments, hatreds and fear. Few revolutions have a benign ending- and even when such oddities arise, they are not really revolutions in the strict sense of the word. Neither England's 'Glorious Revolution' nor even the American Revolution qualifies as a mass uprising heralding a new order for humanity. For one they didn't descend into the fratricidal violence that accompanies true revolutions. Almost by definition, revolutions are resisted, and this resistance takes many forms and endures in unexpected ways and places. But counter-revolutions are equally ugly affairs. They don't often succeed, but when they do, it is not the virtues of charity and forgiveness that prevail, but the terrors of revenge and retribution.

Why revolutions happen is of course a different question from whether they should happen. However, history is littered with revolutionaries, participants in revolutions or supporters of revolution who subsequently changed their minds. Their enthusiasm for the promise of change gave way to the harsh realities of the new era. A type of buyer's remorse prevails, and this is no different in all the great revolutions of the modern era- from the French revolution down to our own times with the Islamic revolution in Iran. Wordsworth's "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive", expressing his unbounded fervour for the French revolution, changes all too often into a sense of deep regret even shame that one was bamboozled by the chimera of the new beginning that all revolutions promise. Still, revolutionary upheavals happen and there is no dearth of champions for them, oblivious to the past course of revolutions. Now, the Arab world is experiencing its own version of the Age of Revolutions, with little evidence that the pitfalls accompanying radical change will be avoided. In fact the "Arab Spring" has all the disconcerting signs of previous cycles of revolutions, with of course peculiar characteristics of its own.

All revolutions have their symbolic beginnings. These can be trivial or tragic incidents, but almost always they are not the real cause of the subsequent upheaval. The storming of the Bastille did not start the French revolution; neither did the impugning of Ayatollah Khomeini in a misguided newspaper editorial in 1978 trigger Iran's Islamic revolution. The Tunisian revolution, the first of the upheavals of the 'Arab Spring' is indelibly connected in the minds of people with the act of self-immolation of a wronged market stallholder- an 'everyman' who was crushed by a rapacious and repugnant authority. However, no one would claim that the subsequent street demonstrations and acts of resistance to the dictatorship were in direct response to this event, a kind of moral outrage against the unconscionable act of a cruel and oppressive regime. And when the multitude took to Cairo's Tahrir Square and faced the charge of the regime's camel brigades, the fate of Mubarak might have been sealed; but there were new dangers and pitfalls lurking ahead. The importance of these symbols remains however, because they colour people's perceptions of revolutions.

Stories and images of resistance are by their nature more appealing than the exercise of brute state power. They conjure up notions of right against might; of justice against oppression. Of the little man (and woman), poor, marginalised and burdened beyond endurance facing off callous rulers and the ugly props to their power. There is innocence about resistance to illegitimate power that calls out for our pity and compassion, as well as for our moral and material support. How much more so when resistance to power is twinned with the demands of universal human rights and political and social freedoms? The image of unarmed crowds facing the serried ranks of repressive authority, or the sense that the righteously aggrieved are finally rising against their oppressors are images that remain fixed for generations. Even cooler and older heads- but not necessarily wiser- are also swept up by the romance of revolution. At the onset of these revolutions, I had the occasion to meet a distinguished American academic who was also an experienced diplomat. She asked what I made out of these dramatic developments, and putting all caution to the winds, I replied in the way that I felt. "I will cherish this moment, for the Arabs have finally risen against all odds to reclaim their dignity and honour." I had also fallen under Revolution's spell.

How much this moment reflected the Arabs finally awakening to the horror of their condition- Ibrahim al-Yaziji had called on them to awaken a century and a half ago in his famous ode- and how much was an inchoate response to the excesses of brutal and corrupt regimes is a matter of conjecture. Perhaps it was a mixture of the two, but what is indubitable is the speed with which these revolutions became something entirely different. After all, the original lustre of revolutionary change does take some time to dissipate. Both the hijacking of revolutions and the confrontation with the forces of counter-revolution do not happen in a flash. At first people are swept by the intoxication of liberties hitherto only dreamed at. Jails are emptied, banned, exiled and banished individuals make a triumphant return, political organisations and groups, whose mere mentioning of name could have earned you a jail sentence, now openly parade and rally and distribute their literature. Freedoms appear limitless; a new world is aborning.

But then something happens, something untoward, even shocking breaks the halo of Revolution's innocence and purity. For Burke, the great commentator on the French Revolution, it was the mob breaking into Marie Antoinette's bedchambers. The Iranian revolution began to lose its innocence when rough and ready justice, often in the form of executions in damp basements after furtive trials, was the lot meted out to the *ancien regime's* loyalists. This was not how this much expected and needed change was supposed to unfold. In the Arab Spring of 2011-2012, it was the progressively more brutal aspects of revolution that asserted themselves. The overthrow of Qaddafi was an altogether uglier affair than that of Mubarak, which in turn was more violent than that of Ben Ali. The cruel way in which a wounded and pitiful Qaddafi was dispatched, accompanied by acts of gross humiliation, was the image that etched itself in the mind and made one reflect and even reconsider the meaning of these events. The other image was the progressive abandonment by the advocates of change of the only true mass uprising in the Arab Spring, that in Bahrain. Mass uprising in the sense that a goodly portion of the population rose as one against the tyranny. Whatever can be said of the other revolutions, nobody could claim that half the populations of Egypt or Tunisia took to the streets. So there were 'good' revolutions and not-so-good ones after all, in an Orwellian twist of double-speak.

In all cases, what the Arabs experienced was a revolt against arbitrary power- power exercised for the benefit of the few or the very few. Unaccountable power, unconstrained power, exercised with the familiarity of possession and the arrogance of entitlement. It was the arbitrariness that people resisted and finally rose against. Nobody was in the mood to measure the costs of their rebellion. These would come later in the form of divided societies and cultural wars, sectarian conflict and the spectre of break-up. In those early halcyon days, the self-congratulatory mood was ubiquitous. This was a new kind of revolution, with new kind of revolutionaries who embraced the tools of the wired world. Tales were woven about the irresistible power of social media and of liberated youth that has left the area's demons behind. This was the narrative that was trumpeted by the western world's media and picked up by the Arab shadow of it. The words of caution or alarm were ignored, dismissed as self-serving bleating from the soon-to-be-ousted dictators and their henchmen and apologists. I remember a case when a Franco-Algerian woman reporter of repute was given a tongue lashing on the BBC by the supporters of the Libyan revolution for daring to raise the question of tribalism and the possible loss of central authority in a post-Qaddafi order. This was of course before the gory end of Qaddafi, hastened by NATO's massive bombing campaign in support of his enemies.

So, am I making the case that the ousted dictators deserved to stay in power? The question insinuates itself, but let me start by giving you my views on the tyrants who were booted out or killed. They were all brutes, unprincipled men whose path to power was accidental (Mubarak), through conspiracy (Qaddafi and Saleh), or through treachery (Ben Ali). Some were certainly psychotic. No people merits rule by such specimen, unconstrained by custom, tradition, religion, institutions, law or countervailing centres of power. Bahrain's rulers, in tandem with other Gulf principalities and kingdoms, allowed themselves an exception from association with the ousted dictators. They claimed that their power was hereditary, sanctioned by public acquiescence to the mild but benevolent, traditional and paternalistic form of rule that they claimed they embodied. In reality, of course, the ruling family in Bahrain owes its power more to the assent of the US and the local military heft of Saudi Arabia than to any popular consent to its rule. They have also managed to insulate themselves from the charge of tyranny because of an artful public relations campaign, carefully cultivating a facade of modernity designed to appeal to their primary audience in the West. No country can be all bad if it is on the Grand Prix circuit of Formula 1 racing, and if its leaders are features of the annual Davos jamboree. (In case you are wondering, I have not neglected Syria. Odious regimes and systems can be removed by sustained and incremental acts of resistance and civil disobedience. I will talk about that later in great detail.)

The goals of revolutions are soon confounded and mixed up, and are appropriated by factions that were not always at the forefront of resistance. There is a commonality of interests at the onset, a demand for representative government and the right to choose who will govern over the country. In the Arab spring, the rhetoric of rights was soon added to the straight forward demand for political liberties. Of course rights are a malleable term and can be stretched to accommodate the interests of all kinds of partisan groups. Some of these rights are elevated to universal principles as to what defines a human being and the civilised society. However, they were usually kept vague at the onset of the Arab revolutions so that a broad coalition could be maintained in defiance of the dictatorship.

Fundamental divergences of opinion are kept in check, and soothing words from the leaders in the field keep a lid over potential controversies that can undermine the momentum of the cause. This pattern is challenged though if the struggle against the tyranny takes a turn to violence. The men with guns now have a say as to what the future should look like, and what they envisage, though not necessarily articulate, can be terrifying.

Nevertheless for a while, it was the promising, youthful and idealistic side of the Arab revolutions that remained in the fore. And then two events happened in quick order and fed on each other. Firstly, the forces of counter-revolution, with their locus mainly in the Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia were panicked by what happened to one of the pillars of the old Arab order, Mubarak. They regrouped, determined to control the direction of change, for to them it was indeed a matter of survival. Secondly, society in the countries experiencing revolutions began to unravel. The divisions, at first between Islamic parties of all hues and, for the lack of a better word, liberal and secular forces crystallised far more quickly and savagely than one would have expected. In all cases, the old order, rotten though it might have been, was far deeper rooted and had far more adherents and beneficiaries than one would have expected. After the initial shock of dispossession of power, the remnants of the former regimes also reorganised under different names and guises, and also plotted their return to power –or at a minimum to avoid being completely marginalised under the new dispensation.

Was there anything worth preserving from the old order? Were there glimmers of the beginnings of constitutional rule, or a serious attempt to confront the problems of inequalities and corruption? I don't think so, not so much because the systems were entirely evil and thus beyond redemption; but rather because they were systems that were not built on any foundations of legitimacy and continuity. They were all erected on the basis of ideologies that had decayed and atrophied way beyond the point of repair, and then turned into instruments for arbitrary rule. There are very few Arab countries that can point to a historic constitution that had been violated, or a system of representative government that needed to be restored. These could have proven to be rallying points to confront tyrannies, but we had none of these. So we could not have asked the dictators and tyrants to return to us what had been usurped. We have never had the taste of such real freedoms and thus could not even indulge in nostalgia for more hopeful times of the past. Into this vacuum was injected the dangerous figment of the idealised world of the Islamists. They had been burrowing underneath for decades and quietly achieved a near-revolution in the mind set and perceptions of the world of orthodox Sunni Islam. Gone were the innate conservatism and caution of official Islam wedded to state power and in came the harsh, Manichean world of the Wahhabi and the Salafi. It gripped a large element of society, caught between an uncaring despotism with alien values, and the daily grind of surviving and earning one's living.

The tottering regimes had nothing to fall back on- not that this would have necessarily given them a further lease on life. The Shah of Iran found that out to his great loss. When the demonstrations against him gained momentum in mid-1978 he changed his title from the grandiose Shah-en-Shah (King of Kings) to the less magnificent Padishah (King) and muttered about respecting the principles of the 1906 constitutional revolution. The old Arab order had nothing similar to fall back upon. Mubarak could have appealed to the

ghost of the old Wafd party, which recalled the more liberal days of Egypt of the 1920's, but that would not have worked. The legacy of the Wafd was already appropriated by the tattered remnants of the old Wafd party, and in any case the Egyptian revolution of 2011/2012 moved at lightning speed. Ben Ali made a pathetic speech about listening to the grievances of the demonstrators, but what was he trying to connect with? The anti-colonial struggles of the neo-Destour were too remote from present realities and the long interregnum of the Bourguiba years did not leave any memories to which Ben Ali or the demonstrators could appeal. Qaddafi fared even worse. He and his coterie of plotters overthrew the Sanussis who could claim real legitimacy as one of the principal architects of the Libyan state. But Qaddafi had done a wreckers job in debasing the Sanussis and convincing the mass that the ousted monarchy was nothing but a bunch of bloodsuckers and agents of foreign powers.

Extraordinarily, nearly all the systems in which the Arab revolutions erupted and prevailed were legacy regimes of nationalist military coups. The regimes in power could not therefore appeal to the principles for which they, or their predecessors, used to overturn previous governments in order to stay in power. These principles were systematically distorted, abused and then ignored as the dictators consolidated their personal power. And having seen what happened to these earlier revolutionary principles, it was unlikely that the demonstrators- or their leaders- would demand a return to these principles. That is not saying that there were no groups amongst the demonstrators of the Arab spring who did not call for the restitution of the earlier spirit of nationalism and socialism. In Egypt in particular, the guardians of the Nasserite legacy were an impressive element of the groups that combined to overthrow Mubarak, and in fact their candidate performed more than credibly in the subsequent elections. But they were ultimately overwhelmed by the superior street and organising power of the Islamists groups.

The Arab revolutions were in essence, inchoate affairs. They could not point to a past in which a better form of government- and better rulers- prevailed. They were not in demand of historic rights that had been usurped; nor were they made in favour of a basic set of political and social freedoms. (Again, the exception is Bahrain where the demonstrators had a specific demand for equal political and civil rights for all the citizens of the country. But of course Bahrain was the only place-so far- where the revolution was smothered). They were uprisings against tyrannies and unacceptable economic conditions, but beyond the demand for the removal of the tyrant and his henchmen, it was unclear what was envisaged as the alternative order. But wasn't the demand for democracy the common denominator for all the revolutions you might say? Yes, but it is the very imprecision of the term democracy that undermines this argument. Behind this most nebulous term all kinds of mutually hostile and antagonistic forces could combine: feminists and Islamists, the Facebook/Twitter generation with the urban underclass, exiles and those who bolted from the regime at the last moment.

It is astonishing how dangerously- or purposefully- naïve were the commentators who read into the revolutions what they had wanted to see. Because the whole world could witness the unfolding of these dramatic events through social media, there was a conflation of the medium with the message. All successful uprisings in modern times must have part of their grounding in whatever is the prevalent technology of communication, but it is a delusion to attribute the success or lack thereof to the revolutionary potential of

communication and networking technologies. The same technologies failed spectacularly in the Green movement in Iran in 2009. And who would actually say that the Iranian revolution of 1978/79 could not have happened without the widespread use of cassette recordings as the preferred medium to disseminate the Ayatollahs' message of defiance to the Shah? The fizzling away of the networked generation from any meaningful role in the post-revolutionary societies is ample testimony to the shallowness of this line of reasoning.

Nevertheless, if there was a recurrent theme in the Arab revolutions it was to do with the trinity of rights, elections and constitutions. The uprisings in the Arab countries were made to fit into the mould of the colour-coded revolutions that had engulfed many countries. These revolutions also promised to enshrine the trinity that were the core of liberal societies, at least in their self-estimate. If the Ukraine could have an 'Orange' revolution, and Georgia a 'Rose' revolution, then Tunisia's would be a 'Jasmine' revolution; and if we had a Prague spring, then why can't we have an Arab spring. However, hurling colours and seasons at the Arab world did not make it receptive to the nostrums of liberal thought. These terms did not carry the same significance as they might have done if they had emerged from a culture that had experienced or could understand the meaning of these terms. The assumption was made- wrongly- that they meant the same in the Arab lands as they might have, for example, in Sweden or Canada. Nothing was further from the truth, because rather than usher in a world where liberal democracy would flourish, and draw the Arab countries into the orbit of western style democracies, something quite different and unexpected materialised. The old dictators were in fact right- or at least mainly right- when they said that "...after them, the deluge"! They were sitting on top of a cauldron of seething tensions and resentments- some no doubt due to their own suffocating, repressive rule- and that when the lid came off, their societies would fragment or worse.

Elections were at the heart of the Arab transitions to democracy. But elections are a mathematical affair. Power devolves, by mutual consent, to that group or groups that can command a numerical majority within the rules of the election process. The ideal models are that elections will be fought around issues of substance where political parties champion particular sets of programmes and policies. The voter- the ultimate source of sovereign power in the mythologies of democracies- then selects between these adversarial groups. The reality, even in the established democracies, veers far from this ideal, not least because of the huge range of factors that influence the voter's final decision, assuming these days he or she turns up at the polls. When transposed to the fragile and tension-strewn environment of the Arab uprisings, elections veered dangerously to becoming agents for dissension and strife, rather than the deciding factor in a non-threatening competition between responsible political forces. Sometimes civil wars are sparked by elections- think of the Bosnia referendum which sparked the terrible Balkan wars of the 1990's. In this case, elections are not the essential forum to negotiate conflicts but become Burke's "mighty evil". In the haste to create democratic political structures that will form the bases of new political dispensations after the fall of tyrannies, the rush to elections and referenda can lead to outcomes that take years if not decades to alter. A good part of the Iranian public is still scratching its head over how the electorate willingly voted in a most unusual and mostly unworkable political order.

The champions of immediate elections are usually the best organised groups who have somehow survived the tyrannies. In the Arab upheavals, these were largely Islamist parties

that quickly adopted the trinity of rights, elections and constitutions and turned the liberals' arguments against them. The awkward comment that elections "...reflected the will of the people", and their outcomes were thus sacrosanct, was a patently false statement. Elections do no such thing- because determining the will of the people in this manner is hardly a gauge of average opinion. Never mind you might say, the outcomes of elections can be later reversed. Bad governments can be cashiered by an enraged electorate. Unfortunately, these do not happen with the frequency that might be warranted, and politics settles into a slog match between groups that have managed to work the new system, constantly confounding the expectations of reformers. The straightjacketing of politics and political battle lines in nearly immobile forms can continue for generations.

Constitutions have been another will-o-the-wisp in the Arab uprisings. They are not the grand bargain between various elements of society, laboriously hammering out historical compromises, and reaching equilibrium that all respect and adhere to. The Egyptian constitutional process was frankly ludicrous. It compressed the whole matter in a few weeks and rushed through parliament with nary a debate. In truth, it was not much different from the one that the dictator had used to embellish his rule, so we are told that now the constitutional principles will be respected, while before it was flaunted. But how do we know that this would be the case with corrupt courts and unreconstructed security forces still in charge? In any case, these brand new principles are ignored whenever it has suited the political majority in power. The Iraqi constitution of 2005 is a case in point. Its terms and articles have been so frequently violated by the political class that it has ceased being anything more than a threadbare document that lists high sounding principles.

The calculus of rights- human rights, gender rights, civil rights- has all been effectively hijacked by those resisting the perceived 'Islamisation' of post-revolutionary Arab societies. In reality, they are more to do with a fear that a cherished lifestyle will be swept away by a sea of restrictions and obligations. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the matter of women's rights. There is little doubt that women's rights were championed by the dictatorships. Even Qaddafi fancied himself a defender of women's rights- think of his bizarre army of Amazonian bodyguards. The dictators claimed for themselves the role of bulwarks against the obscurantism that would surely follow if they were removed from power. In this area, the dictators' wives were usually in the forefront in the campaign to 'empower' women. No to *hijab*; no to polygamy; no to constraints on divorce; no to unequal inheritance; no to patriarchal restrictions on work and travel and so on. The possible erosion of these rights under majoritarian Islamist rule was added to the anxiety that a western lifestyle would now become impossible. Parading in bikinis on beaches would be out; alcohol would be restricted if not quite banned; night clubs and bars would be forced to close and so on. A cultural war now loomed between the teeming underbelly of society, hidden from political view for a generation or more and barred from the public arena, and governed by different values and codes; and the urban elite that thrived under the old regimes. So rights have become conflated with ways of living rather than the universal good that they had been earlier thought of. It seems that if a political majority wishes to frame the public space in its own fashion, it will trample on others' rights. Of course even in the advanced democracies, these universal rights have gone by the window when political interests are threatened. The right to asylum is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but many European countries are now legislating this right out of existence.

“What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander!” say the advocates of government by arithmetic majority in the post upheavals Arab world.

Of course, government is not a matter of arithmetic, and neither should we have untrammelled faith in the wisdom of majorities. It has become almost a cliché that majorities can usher in dictatorships, but that is neither here nor there. Usually, some sort of supra-constitution is employed to ensure the maintenance of rights which cannot be abrogated by law, but that is not the same as ensuring wise government or effective government. One can respect rights, however interpreted, and still provide miserable government that is neither wise nor effective. The truth is that good government and the privileging of the public interest is more a matter of habit and predisposition than a matter of laws and constitutions. The political culture out of which such virtues - a devalued term which must be resurrected to its full honour-emerge is completely lacking in the Arab countries, especially in those that have languished under dictatorships for decades. There is no doubt that the overarching issue in the Arab countries is a moral one. It is not political action that will finally tip the scales but moral action. I don't mean only moral action- but mainly moral action that guides and guards the realm of the political.

There are two arguments for this stark statement- one positive and one negative. I will start with the negative by paraphrasing Sherlock Holmes, “...If you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. “ Probably no region on earth has undertaken the number of political, social and economic experiments in running a state that the Middle East has. Contrary to the belief that the Arab world has been somnolent for generations, this is certainly not correct if we change the time frame with which we perceive and gauge changes in societies. If one takes a long cycle starting from the end of the Great War to the present, we see the area embracing, or being obliged to embrace all modes of experimentations in societal reform and running a state in one country or another. Overhaul of centuries-old legal systems, introduction of constitutions, instituting parliamentary rule, forced modernisation drives, growing state power, agrarian reform, central planning, nationalisation measures, multiparty politics, single party politics, privatisations, market liberalisation, revolutionary dictatorships, military rule; and on and on. Coupled with these are ever shifting international and regional alliances, and the ebb and flow of competing ideologies. Even in the social sphere, the Middle East probably led the non-western world (at least into the 1970's) in the acceptance of women's movements, secular philosophies, and the tenets of modernity. But then things went topsy-turvy, sometime in the late 1970's.

The performance of the Arab countries after the end of the Second World War was more than respectable by international standards, when governments and society were deemed, in retrospect, to have been mired in traditional forms. Iraq and Egypt, the two largest economies in the Middle East of the 1950's and 1960's had some of the most rapid economic development of the period. They were the “tigers” of their times. But then Egypt abandoned its semi-liberal economic model, motivated to no small extent by the desire to be rid of the apparent dominance of foreigners in the domestic economy. The adoption of socialist measures, which included nationalisations and expropriations, were all eminently respectable policy options promoted by both Marxists as well as European social democrats. So Egypt was following a path that might not have pleased free marketers, but nevertheless it was one that was advocated by a number of significant economic

development theorists of the times. Within a few years, other Arab countries followed suit- Syria, Iraq and then Libya and South Yemen. The state extended its powers and role in Arab societies, even in those that did not espouse socialist policies, changing once again the fundamental parameters of power and control in these countries. This turn, motivated ideologically by the urge towards greater equality in society, made the state the only determinant of economic growth. A short spurt of investment-induced growth soon led to prolonged periods of poor economic performance, and these countries slipped into the stifling world of bureaucratic central planning. Iraq escaped this fate in the 1970's, only because of the massive increase in its oil revenues, but the paraphernalia of state-provided subsidies, poorly performing state-owned enterprises and a huge expansion in the public sector became entrenched in nearly all Arab economies.

The only common feature of all of these series of radical changes was their short-lived duration. Nothing really stuck- neither political nor legal systems, nor economic and social models; neither state-led development nor liberal market economics. The ease with which they rapidly decayed and turned into their opposites is truly shocking. Elites groomed at the best institutions became hand-maidens to tyranny; revolutionaries became reactionaries; strutting armies fought the wrong enemy and then turned against their own people. What was rare and even inconceivable became possible as the 1970's approached. This was the starting point of the second cycle, of shorter length, of the era of the permanent dictatorships which bore remarkable similarities to hereditary monarchies. Everything seemed to be stuck in stasis, injustices and iniquities abounded, gross corruption joined misgovernment, dependency and servility abroad was matched with repression and violence at home. Out went the cry for change and reform. Why should the Arabs be any different from the rest of the world that was fast embracing democracy and open government? But people had forgotten that the Arab world had already embraced the solutions of a previous age, which had incontrovertibly led to their present condition. Why should these prescriptions have different outcomes?

The decay and deformation of radical regimes, and their metamorphosis into uglier, more arbitrary, more cruel and more violent counterparts of the systems that they overthrew was a gradual affair, taking place over two decades, roughly in the 1970's and 1980's. The old systems were destroyed and traditional social and even personal relations profoundly undermined. Why did these regimes, whose sole legitimacy came from their promise of a better and more dignified world to their populations, succumb so willingly to the corruptions and enchantments of power? One after another- Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Algeria, Sudan, South Yemen, fell into this pattern, but only after considerable and often fatal damage had been done to their societies. It was Orwell's *Animal Farm* writ large. The remaining systems of principalities, sultanates and kingdoms cowered at first in fearful anticipation, but they were ultimately saved, not by the protective security blanket provided by foreign powers, but by the overreach, gross miscalculations, appalling leadership and mismanagement of the radical regimes. Later, their exploding oil wealth would give them the wherewithal not only to pacify their own populations, but to buy off the crumbling radical regimes through subventions and siphoning off a large number of their unemployed. One or two countries escaped this particular fate. Lebanon for one had no coups but it fell into something more disastrous- a civil war, a harbinger of more brutal such conflicts that would affect many Arab countries later.

How these systems changed from revolutionary nationalist and socialist experiments into kleptocracies, corrupt autocracies and ossified bureaucratic states, is not easily deciphered. The tyrannies and dictatorships which mutated from revolutionary regimes had their bevy of supporters, apologists and enforcers. They were not all thuggish brutes who graduated from various security academies or were drawn from societies' criminal underbelly. Many were in fact their opposite. Technocrats sporting the finest degrees and intellectual pedigrees, part of the tiny elite that form the world's movers and shakers. Davos men and women- or their clones- effortlessly switching from one language to the next, and masters of the jargon that frames the ever-shifting boundaries of the global agenda. It was a masterful act of deceit, but it was a necessary prop that kept the regimes alive and in the good graces of foreign powers. The great causes that had agitated and moved the multitude were well and truly forgotten. In time, even the hollow rhetoric of the past was dropped as the final veneers came off. The pursuit of social equality led to an unprecedented concentration of wealth in the hands of the few; an activist state turned into a repressive, domineering and unaccountable power; the misbegotten socialist experiment was dumped in favour of the latest prescriptions emanating from the Washington-based development institutions; or from that fabled leviathan, simply called *the* Market or from its offshoot, the bond market. The cause of Palestine, the Arabs' only true moral claim on the rest of the world, was diluted beyond insipidity. This was not a political failure; it was a moral and ethical collapse. This is the crux of the matter. The Arab upheavals of 2011 onwards took place in an environment that had lost its moral moorings, and where the elites- both those who were soon to be ousted, and those who sought to replace them- were deeply compromised by their abandonment of the public and private virtues without which no decent society could be constructed. That is why the intricate social and political weave that accommodated people of different classes, religions, sects and ethnicities came under great strain, and finally gave way in many countries.

Well you might ask, isn't this a damning condemnation of the hundreds of thousands who directly challenged the dictatorships in unprecedented acts of defiance? Are these not actions driven by a moral imperative to resist injustice and discrimination and regain human dignity? What about the myriad groups that sprung up to organise ordinary civilians and push them to provide a modicum of the essential services that the state has either ignored, refused or was simply unable to provide? Is that not a protest against a dysfunctional state and a determination to bypass it for the greater good of aggrieved communities? My answer is quite simple. One can proclaim the moral impulses behind the uprisings and still be deeply wary of their outcomes. Revolutions are almost always hijacked. They begin with fraternity and end with fratricide. The Arab revolutions have their own specificities it is true, but they have not escaped this axiomatic truth.

These early heroic acts of resistance to the state suffer from their ultimate inability to either determine the direction or process of change or develop a long-lasting institutional depth that can have a serious effect on society. None of the self-help groups in the Arab world ventured beyond their immediate purpose of ensuring the means of survival, by providing emergency food and shelter. There are no independent cooperative movements that in other regions underpin entire sectors of the economy, providing, for example, mortgage finance or mobilising small savings or involved in food distribution and retailing. Labour unions, even where they have some continued presence, are not the backbone of political parties that can challenge the state's authority. The institutions that provided the

focus for such efforts in the past- trade guilds, religious endowments- have all been emasculated beyond recognition, and they survive purely on the sufferance of the state. The sinews of civil society were cut in nearly all the Arab countries (Lebanon might be an exception), and the state, which abrogated for itself their functions failed to provide an adequate substitute that would meet the needs of modern times. However, the state still retained its ability to stymie the work of others and coerce them into either submission or marginalisation. Whatever remained of non-governmental social action became associated with the Islamist parties- especially the Muslim Brotherhood- but these are hardly voluntarist organisations with no political agendas.

The Arab regimes that were booted out by the upheavals were mostly cruel and corrupt, but they in turn were products of other revolutions or violent upending of established authorities. Mubarak emerged from Sadat who in turn emerged from Nasser who emerged from the 1952 revolution. Qaddafi was the leading figure in Libya's 1970 revolution. The Assad domination in Syria came as a result of coups that brought the Ba'ath party to power. The regimes that they displaced were not paragons of liberal virtues but they were invariably more moderate, accommodating and far, far less violent and repressive. The point is that the systems that they replaced were reformable without the trauma and upheavals that accompany violent or abrupt change. But where the Arab regimes of 2011/2012 reformable; or did people have no choice but to rise up against them and demand their complete overthrow? There are no gradations assigned to tyrannies and autocracies, so that if a certain point is exceeded it becomes morally and politically acceptable to demand their replacement. But here we enter a paradox. It is generally easier to overthrow mild autocracies than out-and-out dictatorships which are in turn easier than totalitarian systems. The former are easier to reform than the latter, and therefore the gains of revolutionary change are greatly outweighed by their costs. So, reform autocracies and rebel against dictatorships. But successful rebellions have to contend with the degree of entrenchment of tyrannies, the power and loyalty of their security apparatuses and the limits that established regimes are prepared to go to stay in power.

Another factor which has been ignored is that the entrenched dictatorships are not merely family affairs, even in the weird world of Qaddafi's Libya. The functions of public institutions such as the civil service and the judiciary are distorted and re-moulded to reflect the peculiarities of power of these tyrannies. These in turn degrade and debase the public space, but at the same time create an affinity of interest between their members and the dictatorships. The greater the degradation of the public space by arbitrary power, the greater is the chance that a successful uprising would result in great strife and mayhem, as elements that were created by and feed off the old system fight to preserve their power and privileges. This risk increases with the longevity of the regimes. But this would appear to give license to terrible regimes to remain in power because the consequences of their overthrow are so unpredictable and dangerous. Regimes that appear merely tyrannical from the outside- or as portrayed by their enemies and victims- often have deeper roots than meets the eye. They have had decades to perfect their control over the bureaucracy, the security apparatuses and judiciary; but equally importantly, their power often rested on favouring particular communities or social groups. Thus Saddam's power rested on pyramid that at its apex included his own clan, but spread downwards in weaker degrees to regions and sects, Qaddafi's power also included important tribal elements; while the regime in Syria rested on acquiescence or connivance in its power by large ethno-sectarian

communities. Ben Ali and Mubarak also drew into their orbit a large portion of the moneyed classes. Overturning such regimes- especially those that claim the allegiance of ethno-sectarian groups, frequently degenerates into fratricidal warfare. At the same time, the amount of force needed to push such regimes out of power can be very large and enormously costly. It took an invasion to overturn Saddams' power, while the Syrian regime's hold on power has been strong enough to challenge the rebels, backed by a huge international support system, in a protracted civil war. Libya required foreign backing for the rebel factions before they could decisively turn the tide against Qaddafi. Intimation of what could happen when entrenched regimes fend off serious challenges was the Algerian civil strife of the 1990's. There, the regime of shadowy generals and security henchmen was threatened by Islamists groups. Nearly 100,000 people lost their lives in a raw power struggle where the old order ultimately prevailed.

The politics of fear and loss quickly displace that of hope and expectation when long-standing tyrannies are threatened by forces that appear to also challenge the base of support of these regimes. A profoundly ethical leader is required to bridge the chasm between communities- a Mandela type figure if you will who can, by example, appeal to the better instincts of people and assure those who might be expecting retribution or worse that they will not be cast to vengeful wolves. No such figure has emerged in the Arab upheavals, and it is unclear whether such figure would either have the power and the moral authority to calm the situation and stop the slide into violence and open warfare. And neither do the "better instincts" have any appeal in an environment where a zero-sum mentality prevails- whatever the other side wins will be at our expense and we will stand to lose. Relations between groups can turn adversarial in all societies, but this danger is kept in bounds by convention, tradition and regulation in more stable orders. In the Arab countries, especially those that have gone furthest in undermining and even destroying society's and individuals' ethical foundations, the struggle between groups have instead become the basis of mortal conflicts. And nowhere more so than in the decades when revolutionary dictatorships metamorphosed into tyrannies and despotisms.

The erosion of the standards of public administration and justice by decades of dictatorships and arbitrary power in many Arab countries drove their societies to the brink of disintegration. The nefarious effects on social relations and behaviour by the unbridled exercise of power made large elements of society complicit in the crimes of government. Huge material benefits could accrue to the accomplices of power from state-awarded licenses and monopolies, and illegal sequestrations. The security state rewarded spying and encouraged sycophancy and duplicity. The corruptions of power percolated from the top right down affecting entire layers of society. The longer this process continued, the deeper and more irreversible was the damage. Many exiles who had spent decades abroad were shocked by the changed circumstances in their homelands- the pervasive mistrust, the loss of common standards of decency and solidarity, the extreme selfishness of people- a result no doubt of the infinite compromises that people have to make with the ways of tyranny. In many ways it was little different from the conditions in Eastern European countries after the fall of communism- without the succour that the West gave these countries for their own transition.

Why ethics are fundamental to understanding the Arab revolutionary and post-revolutionary condition is that they provide the scaffolding to understanding the meaning

and significance of the notion of the public interest. The public interest in turn cannot be seen in isolation without knowledge of what constitutes the legitimate scope and purpose of private interest. Discussion of the public interest is not some matter of arcane political philosophy- which has been discussed at great length in any case by a whole array of philosophers- but because it is the loss of the sense of the public interest that underlies the problems of 'governance' in the Arab world. 'Governance', true to technocratic form, has become a matter of policies and procedure, quantification and measurement, effectiveness and utility. But these mean precious little when they are undertaken in an environment where arbitrary power reigns supreme, where injustice, unfairness and iniquities abound.

I venture to say that prior to the emergence of revolutionary regimes in the Middle East, there was something called serving the public interest, a notion that was upheld by a large number of people who worked in the public arena. These included politicians, administrators, law makers, and educators. This was a phenomenon that coincided with the emergence of independent states in the Arab world. Whether it was connected to the ideas of patriotism and building modern countries, or whether it was a holdover of the traditional sense of dutiful obligation when undertaking public service is a matter of conjecture. It might also have been a residue of the modern idea that public service was not a license to steal and rob, an idea that was probably introduced by the colonial powers. In any case, the standards of public administration and ministerial and judicial probity in the Arab world up to the 1970's were reasonably high- probably much higher than most countries at the same stage of development. There was undoubtedly bureaucratic rigidity and individual acts of misuse or abuse of power, but by and large, corruption was limited, judges were mostly honest, and rulers did not confuse their countries' treasuries with their private purses. The state did not generally transgress beyond recognised boundaries for its power, and when it did so, there was sufficient resistance from civil society to keep such transgressions in check. I cannot recall any major corruption scandal in the Arab world of the 1950's and 1960's. There was hardly a whiff of scandal in Iraq's relatively large development expenditures of the 1950's.

In fact arbitrary power, though the prerogative of princes and potentates, was invariably constrained by convention and by the existence of countervailing centres of authority and legitimacy, where the power of the state had not yet encroached. The rise of revolutionary/radical regimes led to an extraordinary extension of state power, so the basis of exercising unconstrained power grew ever broader. Arbitrary power, though existing notionally in the pre-revolutionary period, became a reality in the radical/revolutionary era. Non- state institutions- for example independent schools outside the purview of the government- had been decimated and what was left had been gutted for decades and were nothing more than the handmaidens of arbitrary power. Even religious institutions could not escape the heavy hand of dictatorships and one party states. Zaitounia in Tunisia had been emasculated; al-Azhar had lost its autonomy; and further afield, the Najaf Shia hierarchy was on the verge of elimination by the time the 2003 invasion of Iraq took place. The notable classes, which for decades had provided guidance and leadership to their communities, and a degree of civility to their politics, had been ruined by the destruction of their material foundations in agriculture, trade and finance. There were no natural leaders left, not in the sense of feudal lords or political bosses; but rather a group of people, who, although dominating the game of politics, nevertheless held themselves up to a reasonably high standard of public service when in office. The old social

classes of Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Libya had gone by the wayside, felled or squeezed out of political life by coups, revolutions, and ideological one party systems. No traces of them were left to remind people of the purposes of politics- and the necessity for recognising other communities and views. For all their flaws, the old notable classes nevertheless operated through networks and relationships that put a premium on accommodation and acceptance, at least of the elites of other groups and communities. They acted as a safety valve in societies that were diverse, though not necessarily divided. The dictatorships that replaced them substituted the state in this role, and in time, as the revolutionary/radical regimes decayed, diversity turned into divisiveness.

Unconstrained, arbitrary power is antithetical to the idea of public virtues- of probity, justice, fairness, moderation, selflessness, civility. How much more so when it positively undermines and ridicules, through its conduct, these virtues? The ideal of the public interest retreats from the public's awareness, replaced in the public consciousness by its opposite. Governments serve only the interests of the few; corruption of public officials is a natural condition; judges are for hire; police don't protect communities but are there for shakedowns and repression. It is true that the folklore of the Arab upheavals spoke in the language of retrieving dignities, stopping corruption, creating accountable institutions. But the habits of the heart- to quote Tocqueville- spoke of something else.

The magic potion that would set all these aright has been elections and constitutions- in short democracy. Even Islamist parties that had spent decades denouncing democracy as a western import spoke of the centrality of democracy in the new order. *Vox populi; Vox dei*. However, it soon became clear that the dictatorships had been sitting atop deeply divided societies. There were no shock absorbers between the finality of elections and the divided societies that had been the by-product of dictatorship. Elections therefore became the catalyst for further divisions and fragmentation. For democracy's advocates, this is explained away by pious hopes about the difficult learning curve towards a democratic culture; or by a version of the old adage "that you cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs"! The reality though is more fraught with risk. Elections in sharply divided societies, where power is concentrated in the state, have often dangerous outcomes. In Tunisia, society is divided along class, regional and cultural lines. In Egypt, the fact that Islamists of one variety or another won nearly 75% of the vote in parliamentary was a shock to the liberal/left /youth groups that appropriated for themselves the role of the revolution's instigators. I daresay that the politics of these two countries will be dominated in the years to come by the confrontation between mutually uncomprehending groups that see the state as the arena for them to defend or advance their own agendas.

The democratic alternative, *in its present form*, will fail, in my opinion, in producing stable, secure and prosperous societies in the Arab world, for two fundamental reasons. The first, I had already mentioned, is the loss of the sense of the public interest and the absence of a politics of virtues. The second is to do with leadership. In most of the countries that have experienced revolutions or uprisings, politics has become a binary affair of Islamists versus anti-Islamists, the latter a grab bag of liberals, nationalists and leftists, former regime elements, women and youth groups, minorities and so on. The Islamists in turn are divided, though not yet fatally, between Salafists who have no clue whatsoever about the implications of their economic, social and religious agenda, and the damage that it could inflict on fragile social relations; and mass Islamist parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood

and those groups that sprang from them. In this case, their programme, a 'responsible' Islamism, is little different from the welfare state policies of the European social democratic parties of the 1950's and 1960's. The Islamic component of their programmes is little more than a general social conservatism and state-sponsored public piety.

Will Islamists exercise the politics of virtues? Will Islamist governments be cleaner, more fair, more concerned with the public interest? I doubt it, at least from the experience I have had of them. I also believe they are programmatically incapable of exercising a politics based on ethical virtues and principles. Firstly, ethics- or *akhlaq* and *fadhā'il*- do not feature much in their political theology. These are invariably subordinated to their construct of Sharia rulings and thus have no reality of their own. Secondly, there is a peculiar alliance between the most reactionary expressions of Islamist thought and the most brazen and ungodly- if I may use this term- manifestations of wealth and power. You have witnessed for yourself in Mecca the marriage between Wahhabi Islam and the most garish expressions of materialist excess. The easy subordination of the public interest- in this case the maintenance of a sacred public space- to the demands of money and power is clear for all to see. Thirdly, Islamist parties, especially those that have forged connections with private or public Gulf oil centres have a great number of IOU's to pay. Islamist parties of one type or another have held sway in Iraq ever since 2005, and I can safely say that they have provided the most appalling cases of corruption and mismanagement that I have ever witnessed. True, Iraq is an exception and one might not be able to legitimately extrapolate from that experience to tar the entire Islamist movement in other Arab countries. But I am nevertheless convinced that the lure of money and power will prove corrupting for them also. The ethical and institutional defences are simply too weak to expect any other outcome. The Islamist parties might not rise to the Olympian levels of corruption of Mubarak, Ben Ali and Qaddafi, but they will not significantly reverse the corrosive effects of corruption on state and society. They will also have their braying packs of business groups and camp followers demanding some form of recompense for their past support- in contracts, jobs, favours.

In the absence of a publicly-spirited ethic or strong institutions that protect and advance the rule of law, the success of Arabs' embrace of revolutionary change comes down to the quality of the new crop of leaders in power and authority. Here, the future does not augur well also. The collective leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has produced a colourless figure to represent it in the public arena; exiles predominate in the Libyan government, none of whom can claim any special or effective role in confronting Qaddafi; while the Syrian rebellion is effectively under the field command of jihadist forces whose leadership identities are uncertain. The only revolution that has a face that can remotely be said to have leadership qualities is Rachid al-Ghanoushi of the *Nahdha* Party in Tunisia. Although well-meaning, Ghanoushi has not been a galvanising force and has proven unable to rally society behind a common set of precepts. His voluminous writings in exile on the compatibility of Islam with democracy and his generally non-threatening policies have found support in Washington but not yet in his own country. He is still considered a wolf in sheep's clothing by the secular and liberal forces, which harbour grave suspicions as to his true intentions. The *dramatis personae* that are part of parcel of the romance of revolutions are curiously lacking in the Arab upheavals- no Guevaras, Maos, Trotskys or Dantons here; and neither Jeffersons or Hamiltons. The leaderless nature of the Arab revolutions, especially in Egypt, were turned into an asset, proclaiming the arrival of a new form of

politics- of networked individuals connecting through social media and spontaneously forming and re-forming to confront tyrannical authority. But this was a chimera. People still needed to be inspired and to have a guiding figure upon whom they could rest their trust and hopes. Pale versions of such leaders emerged here and there, but they failed to connect with the multitude and did not comprehend the enormity of the forces unleashed. They quickly faded away. (A sad example of this was the failed attempt by the media to turn an unwilling and unprepared Wael Ghoneim, a Google executive, into the Egyptian revolution's heroic face.)

The existence of established and legitimate non-state institutions could have helped in stopping the slide into confusion, anarchy and violence in post upheaval Arab countries. But the destruction of these institutions had been effectively completed during the long rule of the dictators. This process has been going on for decades, commencing with the revolutionary/radical regimes that took power in the 1950's and 60's. These were all done in the name of the abolition of retrograde institutions mired in tradition, and were part of the state's modernising drive. Private educational institutions were effectively nationalised, foundations and endowments lost their autonomy, private markets and bazaars were displaced by monolithic state-owned trading and distribution companies, self-help groups and social organisations were brought under the strict control of the state; the media was a mouthpiece of the government. The rise of the internet, and the growth of NGO's, mostly financed and supported by western parent organisations or directly by foreign governments or agencies, created an illusory space of unrestricted flow of information, free-wheeling bloggers and activist NGO's. They were supposed to be the surrogates for the absence of real institutional depth, and were to be the new forms of a reborn civil society. But of course they only spoke to a limited circle of others like them. Other groups, who had invested more time and effort and blood in this process, were far better placed to reap the political advantages that came with the collapse of the dictatorships.

It is true that no person or group can stop the march of revolutions towards their ultimate end. Neither the multitudes nor their leaders would entertain cautionary tales at the height of their revolutionary fervour; but all revolutions, which are after all the successful ends of acts of resistance, become in turn the object of others' acts of resistance. Counter-revolutions incubate even as revolutions reach their apogees and the Arab upheavals are no different. It is in the incipient acts of resistance to successful revolutions that the hands of foreign powers come into play- mostly in abetting counter-revolutions but some in defending the gains of successful uprisings. In the Arab upheavals, the most blatant form of foreign interference was first in Libya, and then Bahrain and now in Syria. In the Libyan case, the revolution could not have possibly succeeded without foreign interference. In fact, Qaddafi's forces were on the verge of snuffing the revolution out at its last bastion when NATO started its bombing campaign. Other Arab countries also jumped into the act, Qatar in the most egregious way by playing a diabolical game of cheerleader for western interference while maintaining cosy, even incestuous relations with the Islamists and Salafists that provided the muscle power for the confrontations with Qaddafi. Qatar, with its tiny population and inordinate wealth, seems to have fashioned for itself a great power's, even an empire's foreign policy, partly by co-opting or buying influence with mass Islamist parties, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. Even in the Tunisian uprisings, there are more than mutterings regarding the deeply divisive role that the Gulf countries have

played in nurturing their home grown Salafist movements. In Bahrain, there is little doubt that the course of the mass uprising would have seen the end of the tribal domination of the Khalifa family were it not for the Saudi led invasion of the country, camouflaged as a police action under the GCC's defence agreements. In Syria, which is a special case, the footprints of foreign powers are all over the place- from the regime's backers in Iran and to a lesser extent Iraq, to the rebels' supporters, financiers and armourers in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey and the West generally. The destruction of state sovereignty is one of the major side effects of the Arab upheavals, and with that comes the seed of prolonged civil wars. Again history is a guide and a judge. The Lebanese civil war was a playground for all kinds of foreign powers; while the invasion and occupation of Iraq, a profound upheaval in every respect, opened the floodgates to foreign powers- not counting the US and its motley allies- to interfere in the country's affairs and to contribute to its paroxysms of violence. The purity of the myth of revolutions as a liberating event against oppressive forces is sullied by the surrender of autonomy and sovereignty when foreign powers come into play. Even revolutions that pronounce their determination to be rid of foreign influence- such as in Egypt in 1952 or in Iran in 1978- the anti-foreign rhetoric and actions can draw in foreign powers, fearful of the consequences of revolutions on their own regional interests.

The counter-revolutions of the Arab 'Spring' have taken a curious shape, for they are composed of both attempts to reverse the tide of revolutionary change as well as to control and manipulate it. The reversal process started with the fumbling attempts by Saudi Arabia to convince the US to pressure the Egyptian Army to stand firmly behind Mubarak. This ploy collapsed when the US made it clear that it would not back Mubarak to the bitter end. Saudi Arabia sulked and muttered about the perfidy of the US towards its erstwhile friends and partners. Qatar on the other hand chose to ally itself with revolution for it had forged for itself a privileged place with the mainstream Islamists, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. The presence of a large number of Egyptian clerics in Qatar, fulsomely rewarded and ensconced in Doha's myriad mosques, was a potent force acting in support of Qatar's ambitions. The octogenarian cleric and Muslim Brotherhood stalwart, Qaradawi, a long time Qatari resident was mobilised to fulminate against Mubarak and in support of the masses in Tahrir Square. It was only a short step from that to not only supporting the Libyan uprising, a far more tentative affair than has been admitted, but to arming it and sending in special forces to stiffen the revolution until NATO could be corralled into bombing Qaddafi out of power. Qatar's role in manipulating the Arab revolutions to its own advantage-as well as to its western patrons of course- is now a commonplace observation. Lurking behind the mainstream Islamists are the darker forces of the Salafists camp, those who actually do the real fighting and killing. They were also linked, sometimes openly and other times murkily, to the forces of counter-revolution. In a small but nevertheless profound way, these currents came together to try to destroy the Bahraini revolution.

Here mainstream Islamists and Salafists, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, all came together to justify the crushing of a truly mass uprising. Sectarianism and fear of Iran trumped every other consideration. This, rather than Syria, is the real turning point in the course of the Arab revolutions. The forces of counter-revolution did not succeed in maintaining the old order, but they did succeed in manipulating and turning the revolutions into a profoundly disturbing direction. The pathetic response of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutionaries to the crushing of the Bahraini uprising, which ran counter to their own trumpeted notions of

human, civil and political rights, spoke volumes about the limitations of the Arab 'Spring' and the success that the Gulf countries and the West had in influencing their course. Iran tried to cast the Arab revolutions as part of an "Islamic reawakening", a continuation of the model of the Islamic revolution in Iran. It was a futile and baseless claim. The leaderships of the Arab revolutions had already been handed to a combination of the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafists and assorted camp followers, whose alliances and loyalties were to their patrons in the Gulf. Thus, when the Arab upheavals crossed from the Maghreb and Egypt into the heart of the Middle East, Syria, the landscape of revolution had profoundly changed.

The forces of counter revolution in the area- and the western camp and Israel- had forged an opening whose ultimate purpose was nothing else than to upturn the balance of power in the Middle East. This had been severely jolted by the US invasion of Iraq. By a combination of incoherence and ineptness, the US effectively strengthened the position of Iran in the area. Iraq, even in its final decrepit years under Saddam, hitherto an implacable foe of Iran and a block to its regional ambitions, was now governed by Shia Islamist parties, allies of Tehran. The failure of jihadi violence to dislodge the Shia control over Arab Iraq was deeply worrying to Saudi Arabia. King Abdullah of Jordan's loose talk of a Shia crescent over the Middle East, stretching from Iran through Iraq, through Syria and into Lebanon, was a nightmare to the Saudis. The US had resisted this kind of depiction because it undermined the logic of its Iraq policy, but finally the US had to face the realities on the ground which spoke otherwise. It took the US nearly a decade to admit to the failure of its Iraq policy. However, after it did so, the transfer of the Arab 'Spring' to Syria, gave it a golden opportunity to recover its position, drastically curb if not eliminate Iran's power, secure its Arab Gulf allies from revolution's contagion and plan for effectively pro-western governments, aligned with the Gulf countries, in power in the countries of the Arab 'Spring'. This neatly coincided with Israel's phobia regarding Iranian power and its manifestations in Israel's neighbourhood through Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Syrian regime. Hamas was easily neutralised by Qatari largesse, quickly abandoning its long-time patron Syria, and announcing itself in favour of the Syrian rebels. The rebellion thus came to Syria when the groundwork for redrawing the balance of power in the Middle East was already very advanced. An extraordinary alliance of Gulf countries, the US, Britain, France, Turkey, Israel, Islamists and jihadi Salafists were about to face off a sectarian Syrian regime, ideologically secular and rooted in Arab revolutionary socialism and nationalism, backed by Iran, Russia, and the guerrilla forces of Hezbollah. Lost in this titanic struggle were the voices of moderation and liberality. The earlier promise of the Arab 'Spring' was finished off in the killing fields of Syria. All the demons of the Middle East- sectarianism, ethnic discrimination, religious intolerance, mindless violence- which had been kept in check were now being stoked in order to achieve the most cynical of ends.

I have never been a supporter of the Baath Party, which in both its Syrian and Iraqi forms perfected the Arab security state; or any form of ideological Arab nationalism or aggressive secularism for that matter. I cannot forget the support and sanctuary that the Syrian Baath gave to jihadi elements, financed by Saudi Arabians, whose indiscriminate violence and terror left a long trail of deaths, maiming and bereavements in Iraq. But I also do not accept that you are allowed to start forest fires simply to remove the undergrowth of weeds and deadwood. The narrative that we are where we are in Syria because of a sequence of events that inexorably escalated to full blown civil war is simply not credible.

It is too pat. A group of schoolchildren in Dera'a, a down and out Syrian town, are horribly tortured and killed by security forces because of some anti-regime graffiti that they scrawled on the walls. That in itself is true, but I am gravely suspicious of what comes later. The regime uses disproportionate force to cow demonstrators demanding freedoms and rights. The regime then targets the civilian population, who, in desperation turn to whatever means are available to defend themselves. This draws in enraged citizens and fleeing army officers and soldiers who coalesce into an embryonic fighting force. The Gulf countries, led by the redoubtable Qatar and Saudi Arabia, then do their best to give the Syrian regime a chance to redeem itself. It fails to do so, which triggers Arab League opprobrium and allows the arming of the defenceless citizenry of Syria. Turkey is outraged at Syrian's indifference to its advice, and turns violently against its erstwhile ally. The West, in shock and horror, organises the "Friends of Syria" to support freedom-loving Syrians and helps them to form an internationally acknowledged body to group the liberal opposition. Meanwhile, the regime loses territory to freedom fighters led by something called the Free Syrian Army, which fights the regime on all fronts. It is sometimes assisted by unsavoury elements including jihadi group, but this is inevitable in warfare and one cannot be too particular about battlefield allies. Entire regions rise against the horrors of the regime, but because of the regime's firepower, and the limitless support from Iran and Russia, and also Hezbollah fighters, the war is proving more costly and taking longer than expected.

The Syrian regime's counter-narrative runs something along these lines. The security forces did use excessive force when dealing with the disturbances in Dera'a, but this does not preclude that *agents provocateurs* were seeded in the demonstrations and bent them to their own agendas. Within short order, malicious Gulf countries, led by Qatar and Saudi Arabia, began to execute a plan that involved buying off the loyalties of suspect military officers, whom they joined with unrepresentative exiles to form a supposed opposition group. The Gulf countries in cahoots with the US and Israel then put an already evolved plan into effect. In short order- breathless speed in fact- this involved the illegal removal of Syria's legitimate government from its seat in the Arab League, and then providing a fig leaf for their massive intervention into Syria's internal affairs. Seditious forces were encouraged in the armed forces and an orchestrated assassination of top regime officials ensued. West European powers and Turkey quickly joined the effort to destabilise the country, which included, unforgivably, a concerted programme to destroy Syria's celebrated religious, ethnic and sectarian diversity. Jihadi groups were encouraged to flock to Syria to fight its legitimate government and they were provided with all manner of logistical, financial and military support. Through a violent campaign of intimidation, terror and wanton destruction, the jihadists established footholds for themselves in some Syrian towns and villages, and cowering behind civilians deliberately drew on them the government's firepower. The Syrian refugee crisis is a straightforward consequence of jihadi terror. Syria is now fighting a war for its survival as a country and for its valued way of life against jihadi terrorists, aided and abetted by the West, Turkey and the Gulf countries. The destruction of Syria in its present form will hand radical Islamists a stronghold from which they can impose their unacceptable practices on all manner of groups who would not assent to their rule. Israel will also be a principal beneficiary of such a change as Syria withdraws completely from being a staunch advocate and defender of the Palestinian cause.

Two narratives- two diametrically opposed perspectives-each with a kernel of truth that would provide its advocates and supporters with plenty of grounds for justifying their

actions. But this is true in all civil wars, otherwise how would they continue for years? The Syrian case however is somewhat different. The issues are not all local. In fact the opposite might be the case although much of these contrary narratives try to limit their case to Syria itself. The subtext to the intervention by the West, the Gulf countries, Turkey and Israel in the Syrian war is the reversal of the gains made by Iran as a result of the Iraq invasion, the isolation and fatal weakening of Hezbollah, and the re-establishment of unchallenged American supremacy in the Middle East. By-products of this change in Syria will also include strengthening of the pro-Western camp in Lebanon and the possibility that undivided Shia control over Iraq and its resources will be drastically curtailed. The Sunni majority provinces of Iraq will become empowered by the presence of a friendly regime in nearby Syria thereby enabling them to mount a serious challenge to Baghdad's authority.

However the crude tools that the Syrian rebellion's supporters have chosen to deploy to meet their objectives carry the most monumental of risks. Firstly, it risks destroying the integrity of the Syrian state. Whatever emerges from the wreckage of the Syrian civil war it will not include a strong, central state. Secondly, it promotes sectarian hatreds and warfare as an integral element of the strategy- and here I am talking about the Sunni-Shia divide. By linking the Alawites of Syria, the regime's backbone, to the Shia of the region and they in turn to Iran, a connection is made that demonises the Shia as a whole and creates conditions of unbridgeable hostility between these communities in countries outside of Syria. Anti-Shia vitriol is a potent motivating force behind all jihadists' actions in the Middle East. The corollary of that is the increasing perception of the civil war by non-Syrian Shia forces as an existential threat to themselves. Hezbollah has made its position clear, but in time other actors in Iraq- offshoots of the Sadrist movement and the Badr Brigades for example- will also send their "volunteers" to the war. The Shia's dislike for Salafis generally and Wahhabis in particular- and their fear and loathing of jihadists- risks spreading indiscriminately to the entire Sunni communities with whom they have co-existed for centuries. We have the possibility now of a reprise of the Thirty Years War, played out in the Middle East, between the Sunni and the Shia, with Syria as the battle ground. The front line troops of this mindless war will be Sunni jihadists facing off Hezbollah and Shia volunteers from Iraq.

Who benefits from such an outcome? For one, I don't think any Arab country can possibly benefit. The Middle East- outside of Egypt, whose influence in the Middle East has shrunk drastically- is divided almost equally between Sunni Muslims and non-Sunni Muslims and other religious groups. A sectarian war cannot lead to any conclusion and it is not possible for one group to prevail totally over the other. So a pragmatic calculation strongly suggests a policy of reconciliation and accommodation. The alternative is perpetual suspicion between the sects and violence. If logic- and even cold, utilitarian, political calculation- calls for compromise, why does a suicidal policy of encouraging sectarian divisions persist? I believe it is mainly due to outside interests, insisting on pursuing a hegemonic foreign policy in the Middle East and feeding the insecurities and anxieties of client regimes, some of whom have their own grandiose visions of partaking in domination and power. Israel- or at least that part of it that views the Arab world solely in terms of its national security- can only benefit from civil wars in the Arab world, as long as it is safely insulated from their after effects. Coupled with the destruction of the integrity of large Arab states, the strategic landscape turns massively to its advantage, leaving only Iran and its nuclear ambitions in its bull's-eye. The US and other western powers, may not share in the advantages of

internecine warfare in the Middle East, especially if it spills over into the oil states; but the strategic gains of flipping Syria outside of Iran's camp and the prospects of destroying Hezbollah are too great a prize to ignore. Keeping the two sides of the civil war going can also work to the west's advantage if the jihadists and Hezbollah are both bled to death.

Do Iran and Russia share in the strategic advantages of keeping the Syrian civil war going? Iran is certainly on the defensive as it seeks to protect its strategic gains from the fall of Saddam, while not losing its strongholds in Syria and Lebanon. Short of going to war itself in the defence of the Syrian regime, Iran will mobilise all its capabilities and allies in the region to confront the huge threat to its power in the event the Syrian regime collapses. Iran is also using the sectarian aspects of the war to ring the alarm bells with the Shia of the area; and the majority of Shia opinion in Iraq and Lebanon see the Syrian civil war as a defining event for their own future. The stakes could not be higher, and it moves, by extension, to other countries, such as Turkey, where the Alevis are mainly ranged against Turkey's involvement in the Syrian civil war. The Alevis, a determinedly secularist minority in Turkey also have their anxieties about Erdogan's religious agenda and his neo-Ottoman policies in the Arab east. Russia is also seeking to preserve its position and even extending it if the opportunity allows. A western hegemony in the Arab east, in fact an extension of NATO to the Middle East, is a major strategic threat to Russia and it will try to vigorously counter it. Its support for the Syrian regime is thus a factor of its fear that its "near abroad" will be hostile to its interests. Russia had expended a great deal of energy and resources in recovering its position in the former Soviet republics on its southern flank. The Middle East might be a step further away but it will not surrender its privileged position in Syria, with which it has had strong links going back to the 1960's, without a fight.

We started with the Arab 'spring' and now we have the most savage sectarian war in centuries. Mind you I say war and not conflict, because I believe the war had already begun. It started in Iraq in the years after the 2003 invasion, simmered for a while and burst out fitfully in Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain. In some ways it was inevitable that the Arab spring would turn suicidal as it neared the Middle East. The Syrian regime was far more entrenched than its opponents were led to believe. It did not crumble or run away- it fought back. The bitter irony was that its domestic opponents were railroaded into joining comic-opera, foreign sponsored, 'national fronts', while the hard fighting was being done by jihadis, both home grown and imported. These flooded into Syria well before any Hezbollah involvement became evident. When the tide of battle turned against the uprising, panic set in, especially with Saudi Arabia. Its rulers turned to their tried and tested allies in the Wahhabi establishment who declared a jihad against the Shia of the area. (They were forbidden from doing that in the Iraq-Iran War because most of the Iraqi army was made of Shia conscripts. In any case Saddam, for all his faults, would not have countenanced it.) Literally within weeks, the airwaves were crowded with the vilest sectarian incitements, augmented this time by superannuated clerics who did not mince words as to who the enemy was. It was the enemy within- as usual. The genie of sectarianism is out of the bottle, and in the medium term (a few years? A few decades?) will not return to its former home. If the Syrian regime prevails, the much feared axis of the Shia crescent under Iranian leadership will come into being- a self-fulfilling prophecy if there ever was one. The Gulf countries will withdraw into their US-protected shell, disengage from Middle Eastern affairs and snipe at the new alliance from outside. In its fear and paranoia of Iran, Saudi Arabia might very well try to purchase one or two nuclear bombs from Pakistan. I believe

the Arab Shia of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain will be placed under intolerable strain- by expulsions, draconian police control and surveillance and intimidation. Egypt under the Muslim Brotherhood, which seems to have jumped on the sectarian bandwagon, even though it has a minuscule Shia population, will quickly exhaust the possibilities of demonising the enemy within. What will the Brothers and their Salafi competitors then do? Turn against the Copts? Or against the secular liberals? Declare themselves ordained by God to stay in power? All I can say is that Egypt's problems will not go away because they were not caused by any fifth column burrowing secretly inside the country.

If the Syrian regime is defeated, the outlook would be pretty bleak-this time for the integrity of the state itself, and the knock-on effects on Lebanon and Iraq. Hezbollah will feel itself besieged and the forces arraigned against it will have an irresistible urge to challenge its power. Will Lebanon survive such a challenge? A Syrian state aligned with Saudi Arabia will also act as the launching pad for regrouping the sectarian Sunni powers in Iraq which will reignite their war against the Baghdad government. They will not win, but they will push Iraq ever further into a rock-hard alliance with Iran, while simultaneously alienating the Sunni Arab population even more. It is incredible that with such prognoses, there are no voices calling for an end to this demonic march into hellfire. But sometimes history does unfold in this way. After all, Europe has had plenty of experience in this regard-just reflect on the origins of the First World War.

These jumble of interests, ambitions and fears have all come together in Syria to produce a most disturbing, if not yet apocalyptic picture of a ravaged Middle East, torn by endless violence and irreconcilable conflicts. Is the end result another cataclysmic reorientation of nations, states and peoples, akin to the re-ordering of the Arab east after the fall of the Ottoman Empire? The ingredients are all there, including, for good measure, the rise of Kurdish nationalism in the form of the proto-state, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The destruction of the integrity of the Arab states that emerged from the Ottoman Empire is now almost complete. The first to go was the Kingdom of the Hijaz, swallowed up in 1925 by the Najd Sultanate of Ibn Saud. The second to go was Palestine, erased out of existence in 1948 by the founding of the state of Israel. The third to go was Lebanon, eviscerated by its fifteen year civil war. The fourth to go was Iraq, destroyed by the mad adventures of Saddam, the US invasion and occupation and the fragmentation of state power which allowed the rise of the Kurdish Regional Government and provincial threats to the central authority in Baghdad. Only Jordan managed to escape the state's devastation, but even so it was a near run thing, having gained and then lost half its population in less than twenty years. After nearly a hundred years, the state system in the Arab east, which for a while carried the hopes for a better life for the people, sank into decrepitude. In the end, the near magical powers that were invested in the state- the *dawla* in all its potency- and its ability to rectify wrongs, proved to be a whimsy. In the radical/revolutionary states the decline of the state was accompanied with lasting damage done to the fabric of society. The weakening of these states has allowed them to become the plaything of foreign and regional powers. No other part of the world tolerates the brazen intervention of foreign powers in its affairs, and neither do its political classes align themselves so subserviently to foreign interests. The solution to this predicament did not lie in the authoritarian state, buttressed by all-pervasive security and police infrastructures. These experiments which started with Nasser's socialist and nationalist revolution in Egypt generally ended in

debacles. It is now the moment for political Islam. But its rise to power through the ballot box will not put an end to foreign intervention and meddling.

Surely it can't be all that bad you might say? What about the economy for example? The Arabs are better off materially, live longer, have higher education levels. Doesn't that somehow compensate for the weaknesses in state and society? Actually it doesn't, because the story is also one of giant inequalities, underachievement and failure. I am deliberately excluding the oil producing principalities which have created a bizarre amalgam of 'Disnified' cities and giant energy complexes, run by a tiny, pretentious and even megalomaniacal elite, perched on the back of millions of foreign labourers. The entire GCC does not account for even 8% of the population of the Arab world, but probably accounts for over 60% of the Arab world's GDP. A very rich man's club if there ever has been such a thing. The rest of the Arabs can watch with amazement and envy at the scale of wealth in these countries, but like the proverbial child outside the sweets shop, they can only see and not participate. Some are let in into the halcyon world of the Gulf oil exporters, and they do help their native lands, by remittances and investments. But the vast majority have to make do in their own countries. Their lot is best described in the UNDP's Arab Development Reports produced on and off since 2002. I won't quote chapter and verse from these reports, nor will I refer to any of the myriad studies and theses that map out the failure of the non-oil Arab countries in producing the development economists' mantra of self-sustaining economic growth. This will enmesh this letter in a thicket of statistics and technical jargon and I want to spare you that. Just travel to any of the great cities of the Arab world and the scenes will be of urban desolation, overcrowding, decaying infrastructure uneasily co-existing with a world to which the vast majority have no access. A world of five star hotels and shopping malls; of gated communities and fancy restaurants. In short, a plutocracy whose wealth cannot be quite connected to a source in any wealth-generating activity, but more to abuse of power, government favouritism and bending the rules and laws to their advantage. The economists call this rent-seeking, but in the common experience of the ordinary man or woman, it is simply a gross abuse of power- power that has no counterweight in charitable giving, or a sense of duty or obligation to the less fortunate. These had gone by the wayside with the collapse of the traditional order and with the abject failure of the state to compensate for its destruction of the nexus of mutually shared ethical responsibilities.

The innocuous term of rent-seeking also masks the reality of corruption. Even more than Russian oligarchs, the international face of the excesses of the corrupt global elites is Arab. It is extraordinary how much has been actually stolen by the Arab power elites. I had always maintained that the media had exaggerated their excesses but the figures that are now being released are mind-boggling. The *Economist*, that insidious but nevertheless accurate newspaper (its term), has set out the figures: Mubarak, up to \$ 70 billion; Ben Ali, between \$3-5 billion; Qaddafi \$30-80 billion. This is just for the despots. If you add their cronies, fixers, enforcers, business partners, and other flotsam the figures can reach the hundreds of billions. One cannot but gasp in amazement, not only at the levels of greed, but the brazenness and contempt for the public interest that such corruption implies. The money of course pours into the banking systems of hypocritical western countries where it is protected by a battery of lawyers and accountants and the not-that- few corrupt public figures in the west that connived and benefitted from the industrial looting of the Arab world. This kind of corruption engenders another one, to which the ordinary folk are

subjected. After all, how can a labourer or a farmer connect the billions siphoned off to write ups on gas supply contracts or issue of mobile phone licenses? But they do understand the graft and venality of the minor official, the shakedowns by thuggish policemen and the exhausting and often futile pursuit of justice in labyrinthine and corrupt courts. The fish rots first from its head. I am not talking here about the Gulf's "monarchies", for there the private wealth of princes is conflated with the public treasury, and it is futile to rant about their excesses. It comes with a sense of entitlement that is partly condoned by tiny native populations who have been lulled into indifference at their rulers' dissipations and by their own submersion in immoderate largesse.

Unconscionable wealth garnered through corrupt practices might not be the sole face of the economies of the Arab lands, but it is surely the main force behind the region's inequalities. The Arab world, like the Grand Duke of York in song, has marched up the hill of equality, only to march down it again. The variety of socialist experiments in their early days-roughly into the 1970's- did improve the level of incomes while at the same time managing to grow their economies. But the mixture of high state-led investments and agrarian reform which fuelled the economic growth of that period gave way to the caricature Arab economy of the 1980's and 1990's- corruption, cronyism, dysfunctional state institutions, and a slavish commitment to the prescriptions emanating from the Washington development complex and the US Treasury. Arab statistics are notoriously unreliable but even so, it would be difficult to disguise the relative deterioration in the performance of the Arab economies in the "liberal" era. In the 2009 UNDP Arab Human development report, the ailments of the Arab economies were laid out bare. Population pressures- the Arab World will have a population nearing 400 million by 2015; urban squalor; a youth bulge with some 60% of the population under 25, a world record; ever more scarce water in an arid region; desertification; water pollution; increasing levels of violence and this before the cataclysm in Syria; human trafficking affecting refugee women and children especially; large numbers of internally displaced people. The Arab world hardly had any economic growth between 1980 and 2005, tied as its economies are, directly and indirectly to the oil price and to capricious commodity markets. The average per capita income in the Arab world grew a paltry 0.5 per cent annually from 1980 to 2004. In the last few years, Arab economies perked up once again only to be plunged into the economic maelstroms of the Arab upheavals of 2011-2012.

A truly sad and dispiriting condition, all the more so if we compare the Arab world's performance in the last 50 years to East Asia. Egypt and South Korea had roughly the same size economy and population in 1960. By 2010, Egypt's economy grew to about \$ 200 billion and its population reached about 80 million. Korea on the other hand grew its economy to \$ 1.1 trillion while keeping its population growth down to about 50 million. In other words the average Korean's economic lot improved by 10 times that of the average Egyptian. Even if we take shorter time cycles, say the past twenty five years, and compare Egypt to other countries of similar size and disposition, the results are equally sobering. Turkey, with roughly the same population and economy in the 1970's, has far outpaced Egypt in its subsequent development. Turkey's manufactured exports grew ten times in the period since 1980, while Egypt's only managed to grow by 50% over the same period. The income, GDP, and other gaps between the two countries were massively skewed in favour of Turkey. This experience is mirrored in nearly all the large population Arab countries. Syria of course has no more an economy worth analysing. The lot of its twenty five million people is now hostage to the fortunes of war and the cynical manipulations and

rivalries of the great powers, their regional counterparts and the wannabes scurrying around the globe. This latter group does not only include ambitious Gulf countries, but increasingly the billionaires who dot the Middle East and who see themselves as latter-day makers and breakers of states.

Well, you might say, the underperformance of the Arabs can be attributed to a variety of factors. The same blanket condemnation was applied of other regions- Latin America for example- but they managed to extricate themselves from the morass of stagnation and most are now fully fledged members of the fraternity of global liberal democracies with robust economies. Even Africa, which had been written off until the past few years, is now making a comeback. However, such comparisons are not all that relevant. If it is to do with the shifting mix of economic policies, then the Arab world picked up the Washington 'consensus' prescriptions even before Latin America, by adopting market-friendly reforms, dismantling of subsidies, and selling state assets. But the incidence of cronyism and industrial-level corruption in the Arab world has no equivalent elsewhere, except perhaps in Nigeria and Angola. If it is to do with education and health spending, then the Arab record is not all that bad. But education has not created a large pool of resourceful and skilled workers and managers eager to build a modern, technologically-driven economy. Instead, it has bloated the public sector with huge overmanning while achieving the feat of destroying the quality of secondary and tertiary education. Arab universities regularly occupy the lowest rungs in international league tables of university quality, even though in their heydays up to the 1970's, they could easily hold their own against longer established rivals. If it is to do with "unleashing the private sector", in many of the formerly socialist economies of the Arab world, the private sector is equated with criminality, blatant state favouritism, and market manipulation. They have a marked bias towards rent-seeking. Fixing government contracts, price gouging and back door dealings are the stock in trade of the business royalty of the Arab world, all the while operating in an environment of poor regulation and supervision. The quality of governance- or in other words maladministration, inefficiency, opaque rules and bureaucratic inertia and oppressiveness- is generally appalling. At some point, around 2002 when the UNDP published its famous first Arab Human Development report- the Arabs' lot was attributed to various 'deficits'- a democracy deficit, a women's empowerment deficit, and something called the 'human capabilities deficit'. The whole deficit business fitted well within the new post-Cold War era of triumphant liberal capitalism, the march of human rights and the short life of the then fashionable end-of-history thesis. This went the way of all other fashionable prognostications that had been inflicted on the Arabs, and which they gullibly took on as a quick fix to their predicament.

I have seen with my own eyes what wars, insurrections, civil strife, sectarian conflicts and foreign interventions can do to one country. They have ripped out the heart of Iraq and are threatening to do the same in Syria. The baneful effects of revolutions and radical social engineering are self-evident. Less so are the patently false sentiments of the current wave of wreckers posing as reformers. They have mastered the language of democratic rights and freedoms but none of its substance for they have proved unable or unwilling to transcend their bigotries and hatreds into a new calculus of politics. Arab 'liberalism'- an oxymoron if there ever is one- is just another dogmatic ideology behind which lurk other, darker forces. Actually this is not that much different from the increasingly obvious degradation of the reality of liberal democracy in its western homelands. But that is

another story. I recently came across a representative of this new breed of Arab glib operators, a fixture of global conferences on democracy and human rights. His public remarks on human rights and freedoms were textbook perfect; his private opinions though were almost genocidal in intent. Of course the debate was about Syria, and the passions generated by the crisis burst through the carefully honed veneer of the worldly academic and statesman. This is not a one-off condition. Time and again I have come across people who volubly professed their commitment and passion for democratic rights, but whose reality and true loyalties lay elsewhere.

But there is such a thing as tyranny and there are terrible dictatorships. Their continuation are an affront to human dignity and they must be opposed. The point though is how to oppose them if you are pretty certain that radical change will usher in another cycle of repression and misrule. I am certainly not advocating quiescence and inertia as a substitute for action. This is the position of court clerics and their minions who justify their support for monstrous regimes on the ground that "...sedition is worse than killing its perpetrators". The Wahhabi establishment in Saudi Arabia and Qatar produce copious rulings on why it is forbidden -*haram*-to oppose their rulers. They then turn around and extol gullible or disturbed youth to blow themselves up in far-away countries whose governments happen to be at odds with their princely overlords. There is, I believe, a right way to oppose Arab tyrannies, especially in the moral vacuum which prevails in the Arab world. And that is the way of Thoreau and Tolstoy, of Ghandi and Martin Luther King- the way of civil disobedience and moral resistance. Non-violence in all its forms has two profound effects: firstly it rejuvenates a society that has lost its ethical compass; secondly, if it is sustained, it can and does destroy tyrannies while building the groundwork for a better ordering of society. Civil disobedience is hardly a panacea for all the ills of the Arab world, but it is infinitely preferable to the lottery of revolutions or the passive acquiescence in misrule, corruption and tyranny. Civil disobedience puts a premium on virtues that are sorely deficient- courage, cooperation, forbearance, fairness, patience. These are the real deficits in Arab societies, not some concocted version derived from current global preoccupations. The Arabs' experience in civil disobedience is very rare. Even the mass rallies that pushed out the Syrian army from Lebanon, soon descended into factionalism. This was practically inevitable as the groundwork for such action was not laid over a long period of time. It was immature and poorly formed and fell prey to the prevailing divisions of the country.

What does civil disobedience mean, you might ask, when faced with dictatorial systems which will quash its earliest manifestations? Well, the whole point of civil disobedience is that it can only play out- and make sense- over a prolonged period of time. It works by incremental gains, by painstakingly changing people's perceptions, willingness to change age old habits and jettison their prejudices; it confronts people with their own inner demons and gives them a morally acceptable and satisfying exit out of their conundrums. The thousands of little mutinies-against misrule, corruption, bigotry, religious obscurantism- do accumulate into a formidable force that brings lasting change; especially if it is coupled with another essential enterprise- that of breaking the thrall of the state and those who wield the power that comes from its control. But nearly every independent social force has in one way or another been co-opted by the state. That is why when the state was challenged by the revolutions of recent times, the end result was more often than not the descent into chaos.

But where does this all leave us? I started by saying that the Arab crisis is basically a moral crisis. Essentially it was a collapse of a perspective on the world; and of perceptions rooted in centuries-old norms and embedded in the various societies and local cultures in which Arabs dwelled. At its heart was an ethico-religious construct of virtues and noble character traits to which most people subscribed most of the time. It circumscribed behaviour and set limits and boundaries to acceptable conduct. Passions and prejudices were kept in check and mutual obligations and responsibilities were kept alive. This ideal was not always betrayed by the reality until well into the 1950's. At this point, a critical juncture, the tide turned and the unravelling of the political and social order in the Arab world accelerated downwards towards the devaluation of the principle of the virtuous individual and the virtuous society. Why and how this happened has been ignored by historians, political scientists, sociologists and economists. They focused on the outer world of events and crisis, of revolutions and wars; but not on perspectives and values. Weber's argument that Protestantism was the force behind the rise of capitalism might not be the entire story; but it was certainly part of the story. Less contentious has been the idea that the Confucian spirit was the major force behind the rise of the East Asian economies of Korea, Singapore and Taiwan and now China. The value systems that underpin the actions and precepts of people are an incontrovertible part of the story of successful societies. After all we take it for granted that the claims that western societies, especially the US, make for their success are self-evidently true- individualism, risk-taking, limitless curiosity, "thinking outside the box", open societies, respect for human and civil rights and so on. And we also believe- or are led to believe- that their institutions have a lot to do with it too- rule of law, political liberalism, parliaments, and civil society organisations. A lot of this is self-congratulatory but it nevertheless sustains the story of the rise of the west.

Where do the Arabs stand in all of this? Having consciously or otherwise undermined if not yet completely destroyed their own value systems, can they aspire to anything more than copying or borrowing from the world view of others? The Arab elites have been dupes for whatever is the universal theory of the moment and have ordered their societies, often by force, towards these elusive goals. At each turn of the screw, they become more and more distant from their ethical moorings. Without ethical moorings, there can be no justice and not even a framework for administering laws justly. And with no ethical moorings, the work of institutions will not function either effectively or appropriately. This is the second grand failure in the Arab world- the atrophy of institutions; or the nexus of administrative structures, organisations, laws, customs and ideas. Here I am not talking only about the formal rules of society, but perhaps more importantly, the informal rules of conventions and codes of conduct, which underpin the functioning of political and religious bodies, economic units, and educational institutions. When you ask me why East and SE Asia have developed so startlingly when compared to the Arab world, I would venture that this was possible mostly because of the robustness of your institutional base.

However regaining virtues that make for a better society are easier said than done. These have to be painstakingly reconstituted, not in some grand experiment in re-making societies but in learning habits that are essential to any decent and fair society. These are the habits of radical moderation and a principled rejection of extreme modes of thought and behaviour- whether they are religiously based or inspired by secular ideologies. Yes, secular ideologies because they too have given the justification for all kinds of excesses in our part of the world. Arab nationalism was turned into outright racism; socialism into

illegitimate confiscations and predatory seizures, and now the enthronement of the ideology of democracy- but not its practice- threatens to turn that also into a tool for unacceptable impositions on traditionally minded groups..

Having read so far, you might very well charge me of promoting sanctimonious moralising in lieu of real, hard policy prescriptions. I refer you back to Sherlock Holmes's dictum. We have tried everything else, so this is what remains after we have cleared the dross. But isn't that what Islamists claim to be doing- bringing society back to the right path? Shouldn't we give their programme a chance? The answer is, unfortunately, no; because latter day Islamists have based their thinking and actions on a blinkered view of their religion. Rather than follow the path which ethical conduct determines, they invert the formula and seek their ethics in their adherence to a narrow and often pernicious interpretation of Islam, one of many possible alternatives. They then conflate it with the religion itself. In the process, manifestly unjust rulings become sacrosanct, diminishing not only the religion itself but also those who choose, or are obliged to order their lives accordingly. At its edge, this type of Islamism can turn into a vicious and misbegotten ideology propagated by wicked people. If any of these bigots bellows out his venom anywhere else in the world, he would undoubtedly be hauled in front of a judge for incitement and hate crime. But this is the daily fare that millions of people are subjected to in many Arab countries. It is at the heart of the sectarian divide in the Middle East. I believe this ideology- at least in the form that spreads hatred and rejection of entire groups of people and even nations- must be rejected by all right-thinking Arabs and Muslims. Even in its milder forms, which might not go as far as demanding the extermination of people, it is nevertheless the source of many retrograde ideas and customs. It too must be combatted for it is destroying the foundations of the civilising power and potential of Islam. But when warped interpretations of religious teachings help to destroy the ethical sensibilities of people, what hope is there for a moral recovery?

There are many ailments that afflict the Arabs, but the most important one is the loss of the sense of the golden mean- the *wasatiya* or fairness that is not only the hallmark of the good society but also the character of the good person. It is the necessary compass that draws one back to the centre, back to the sense of balance and equilibrium that rejects outlandish experiments and placing unacceptable divisions between communities. The Middle East is out of balance: between the wealth of the very few and the misery of the mass; between the state and civil society; between favoured regions and impoverished hinterlands; even between men and women. *Wasatiya* demands a fundamental shift in understanding the nature and experience of power in the Arab world. Power can no longer be the preserve of the few or of shadowy organisations that are a law unto themselves. It must be devolved as a matter of utmost priority: to regions, provinces, cities, civil and religious institutions, and new forms of economic organisation. Without *wasatiya*, human beings are driven by their basest qualities: envy, resentments, aggressiveness, greed, vengeance and on and on. This is what we have been reduced to having lost our ethical tethering. There is no higher calling than to regain the virtues inherent in *wasatiya*.

I conclude my friend with the perhaps specious hope that the darkest hour is before dawn, that we will wake up to our true predicament and step back from the wars and conflicts that will ruin us for a long time to come. But history might have something else in store for us, something altogether more sinister. It might be that only through strife, killings,

destruction and interminable suffering that the poisons of the Middle East can be squeezed out. I hope not.

Your friend
Ali A. Allawi

Post Script

I had reached the end of this letter just as the 'Second Egyptian Revolution' was unfolding. The Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt was ousted by military coup, even though this was dressed up as a response to an overwhelming public demand. Needless to say, the mass demonstrations owed as much to the resilience of the deep state- the military, security and judicial institutions of the *ancien regime*- as they did to expressions of outrage and disenchantment of the public with the meanderings of the ramshackle Brotherhood government. The forces of counter-revolution do not go away. They adapt, choose new allies and wait for the right moment to re-assert their power.

Ali A. Allawi is a writer, biographer and former government minister in Iraq. He received his education at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and at Harvard University. He served in the World Bank group for a number of years before founding his own investment firm. Following the changes in Iraq in 2003, he served as the Minister of Trade, and then the first civilian Minister of Defence. In 2005 he was elected to the Constituent Assembly of Iraq and then served as Minister of Finance. In 2007, he left public service to pursue scholarly and academic interests. He has authored four books including *The Occupation of Iraq* (Yale: 2007) and *The Crisis of Islamic Civilisation* (Yale: 2009). His book *Faisal I of Iraq* will be issued in September 2013 (Yale). It will be the first comprehensive biography of this seminal figure set against the formative years of the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the founding of the state system in the Middle East. At various times, Ali Allawi has been associated with Oxford University (Senior Associate Member); University of Exeter (Fellow); Princeton University (Fellow); and Harvard University (Fellow). He has made numerous media appearances, and his articles and essays have appeared in major international journals and newspapers. He is the recipient of several public policy and

diplomacy awards, and his books have garnered prizes. He is currently working on a book on the economic history of the modern Arab/Islamic worlds.