False dawn: the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring was not the positive event many hoped it would be, argues **Daniel Mandel.**

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In a sense, the so-called Arab Spring can be said to have begun on 26 December 2010 in the Tunisian hinterland township of Sidi Bouzid, where a 26-year-old impoverished vegetable seller and father of eight, Mohamed Bouazizi, immolated himself in protest at the umpteenth confiscation by local police of his vending cart.

Bouazizi's story of grinding poverty, struggle and degradation by authorities that cared nothing for his dignity or livelihood resonated across the country, igniting a month-long series of popular demonstrations. These soon came to encompass protests against matters as diverse as the high cost of living, unemployment, restrictions on union rights and censorship that culminated in the flight of Tunisia's autocrat of 23 years, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. A similar sequence of events quickly unfolded in Egypt, Libya and Yemen, disposing of seemingly immovable Arab autocracies and making it possible, at least at first, to speak of an Arab Spring.

Stated like that, it is difficult to see what objections could be made or misgivings registered with this process. Little appreciated, however, has been the pivotal US role in the upturning of the old order and just what that turbulence has brought in its wake. Here, some perspective is essential.

President George W. Bush had tried to promote democracy in the Muslim world (the 'freedom agenda') on the basis that regional pathologies stemmed from repression and autocracy that incubated Islamism and harvested global terrorism. However, while this diagnosis had merit, the proposed treatment was less efficacious: a preoccupation with importing the processes of democracy (elections, constitutions) rather than its purposes (rule of law, accountable institutions, civil society and political pluralism) to the region.

Moreover, Bush's reforming zeal did not commend itself to his Arab interlocutors, least of all Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. Despite withholding tranches of military aid and applying diplomatic pressure on this most populous Arab state and US ally to see human rights activists like Saed Eddin Ibrahim and Ayman Nour freed from prison, matters continued to be arranged in Cairo so as to confirm Mubarak's grip on power. American efforts to alter regimes, with armed force in the case of Iraq, also fuelled a furious critique of American neo-imperialism and unilateralism.

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Lacking support at home and abroad and without much to show for its efforts, the Bush Administration quietly drew back from (without, however, entirely abandoning) its freedom agenda. While it continued to back Egyptian democrats and bloggers, it looked on and relented to resuming aid as Mubarak rigged parliamentary elections, cancelled local elections, cracked down on demonstrators and re-imprisoned Nour. There matters rested until Barack Obama coasted to victory in the 2008 US presidential elections.

Coming in as the anti-Bush, Obama duly instituted a 'reset' with the Arab and Muslim world. In his new policy of Muslim outreach, enunciated in his June 2009 address in Cairo, Obama promised a 'new beginning', 'mutual respect' and dismissed active American promotion of democracy: 'no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other'—an applause line that was actually met with silence by his Cairene audience.

Thus, in 2010 Obama, the biggest-spending US president in history, drastically cut Bush's funding to NGOs and programs designed to promote democracy in Egypt from about $50 million to $20 million. He also abruptly discontinued funding for the US-based Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, which was forced to close its doors almost immediately after the 2009 orgy of Iranian repression which followed the rigged presidential elections that reconfirmed Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in power.

Obama's 'reset' also included another element: promoting Islam as a beneficent force in world affairs. To this end, Islamist pathologies were now played down to vanishing point. An effort afoot in the Washington policy world to encourage the US to engage 'non-violent' Islamists, especially the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, came to fruition when Obama entered office. The turbulence that erupted in Cairo in January 2011 enabled Obama to act on it, despite the Brotherhood's consistent record as a Muslim supremacist movement implacably hostile to all that was 'unIslamic' at home and abroad. This of course includes the 1979 Egyptian/Israeli peace treaty, the cornerstone of the American regional security doctrine. None of this was secret. The Brotherhood's platform, calling for jihad, the re-establishment of the Caliphate governed by sharia law and the abrogation of the peace with Israel, had been leaked in August 2007.

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Yet if these realities caused misgivings in the Obama Administration, they were squelched. Obama's National Intelligence director, James Clapper, described the Brotherhood as a 'largely secular' umbrella group working for social betterment, while another Obama adviser, Bruce Riedel, argued that America 'should not be afraid' of it. Thus, Mubarak—who had professed to be pleased with Obama's change of course ('I look forward to working with the president' had been his reaction in the pages of the Wall Street Journal to Obama's Cairo speech)—soon found himself twisting in the wind.

On 31 January 2011, after days of unrest in Egypt, Obama declared that 'transition' in Cairo should come 'now,' with as many elements involved as possible, including what his press secretary Robert Gibbs obliquely termed 'non-secular actors'—a clear allusion to the Brotherhood.

The loss of American backing proved decisive. Within days, Mubarak was out of office and the military establishment under Field Marshal Mohammed Tantawi was heading an interim government with a promise of early elections. This could only favour the Brotherhood, the only organised opposition group previously permitted any kind of parliamentary existence. But to an administration bent on outreach, the popularity of the Brotherhood, far from inducing caution, might have seemed self-recommending.

The Brotherhood's outlook does indeed find resonance in an Egyptian society that a 2010 Pew poll showed to be extremely radical, favouring the institution of sharia law, the stoning of adulterers (82 per cent), amputation of limbs for thieves (77 per cent) and the death penalty for Muslims who change their religion (84 per cent).

In short, the belated conversion of the Obama Administration to the cause of promoting democratic transition to populist Muslim radicals riding a wave of protest, served to ensure the transfer of authority from known autocrats to authoritarians of a different stripe. Embarking on transitions 'now' to democratic processes involving 'non-secular' forces was bound to imperil the prospects of liberty.

And so it has proved. In Egypt, legislative elections held during November 2011—January 2012 saw the Brotherhood, operating as the Freedom & Justice Party (FJP), capture 37 per cent of the vote, while a competing Islamist bloc attracted a further 28 per cent—a clear Islamist majority. In contrast, the largest non-Islamist group, the Wafd Party, polled a mere 9 per cent of the vote, while a coalition of secular, socialist parties attracted the votes of less than 3 per cent of Egyptians. In presidential elections of June 2012, the Brotherhood candidate, Mohamed Morsi, won office and quickly disposed of newly-imposed constitutional devices aimed at containing his power and prerogatives. In August, Morsi dismissed Tantawi and the heads of the armed services who had instituted these expedients in an effort to conserve the role of the military and contain the presidency.

In Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, president of 33 years, has stood down and his vice-president, Abdu-Rabbo Mansour al-Hadi, was elected last February in his place for an exceptional two-year term during which a new constitution is to be drafted. Yet the country is far from stable, with secessionist and tribal movements and al-Qaeda launching attacks and perpetuating instability. The same could be said of Bahrain, where Washington has been more cautious, saying little of its suppression of protesters with forces airlifted to their aid from Saudi Arabia.

In Tunisia, affairs of state have been for over a year in the hands of a curious consortium of leftist secularists and the Ennhahda Islamist party, headed by Rashid al-Ghannushi. This alliance of convenience is intended as a holding pattern before constitutional drafting and general elections next year. Ghannushi, an aggressively anti-American ideologue (he called for unending war on America at the time of the 1991 US ejection of Saddam Hussein from Kuwait), has called thus far only for a non-coercive program of Islamisation and, indeed, no reference to sharia as a source of law appears in the new draft constitution. But this may be no more than a case of biding his time. Since Ben Ali's departure, a number of Salafist Islamic parties—adherents of the most retrograde form of Islam, stemming from Saudi Arabia—have been legalised; blasphemy laws have been introduced, an anti-Semitic demonstration has been held outside the Tunis synagogue; and a Polish Catholic priest has been murdered.

In Libya, protests against perennial dictator Muammar Gaddafi surged to outright rebellion by a collection of forces based in the port city of Benghazi that coalesced into a National Transition Council (NTC). Here, matters took a far more explosive turn than the spontaneous, sporadic but, on the whole, short-lived violence experienced in Egypt and Tunisia. Many months of armed conflict unfolded, involving the aerial intervention of NATO forces on the side of the NTC rebels that included, as elsewhere, Islamist groups and al-Qaeda elements.

After Gaddafi's slaying and the collapse of his regime in October 2011, the NTC held power until

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elections last August which delivered a majority to Islamist groupings and an assembly composed of more than twenty parties. How this variegated alliance might govern remains a mystery and the first prime minister, Mustafa A.G. Abushagur, has just been dismissed following his failure to cement a cabinet. Worse, Islamist, including al-Qaeda, elements have successfully orchestrated attacks on Westerners, most notoriously the September 11 anniversary murder of US ambassador Christopher Stephens in Benghazi and the incineration of the US consulate. This has been accompanied by popular anti-American demonstrations across the region—evidence enough that US support for liberation from tyranny is far from assuring a renaissance in local attitudes towards America and the West.

Less likely than all others to enjoy a happy outcome is Syria. Here, contrary to its willingness to shunt aside allies in Egypt and Tunisia, the Obama Administration, as with the Iranian democracy protesters in 2009, was loath to intervene on the side of forces challenging the ruling dictatorship. What small opportunity for an Arab Spring moment of popular protest, bolstered by Washington, bloodlessly overwhelming the regime, was lost before the possibility of it had been even noticed in the White House. As late as March 2011, one month after the first serious violence and unrest, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the US would not intervene in Syrian affairs since, she said, it was the views of many American legislators who had met Assad that he was a reformer.

While the Obama Administration was compelled by unfolding events to abandon this chimera and call for Assad's departure, it chose to take little action, unlike its response to events in Libya. Here, by this time, its caution had better justification, inasmuch as the largely Sunni Islamist armed groups seeking to wrest Damascus from the pro-Iranian regime were themselves likely to prove hostile to America and barbarous once in power. But this realisation only meant that Washington took refuge in fruitlessly seeking for months an accommodation between the Syrian government and the rebels, suggesting a profound misapprehension of the forces at work and the stakes involved. Only when this too was exposed by events as a mirage did Washington abandon the effort, remove its ambassador, Robert Ford (October 2011) and close its embassy (February 2012). By that time, a drawn-out, bloody conflict was the only certainty facing the country.

An Arab Spring? No. A season of upheaval beguiling Westerners? Certainly. But wishful thinking of this kind has been standard in the West, whether in the chanceries of government or the talk of the town. As Elie Kedourie, perhaps the wisest of Middle East scholars in the second half of the twentieth century, put it over fifty years ago, 'the prevalent fashion has been to proclaim the latest revolution as the herald of a new day, and the newest turbulence as the necessary and beneficent prelude to an epoch of orderliness and justice.'

Egyptian anti-government protesters on their way to Cairo's central Tahrir Square. Cairo, Feb 1, 2011
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