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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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The Third Anniversary of the Arab Spring: Towards a Counter Counter-Revolution

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Inasmuch as a revolution is a break with history, the Arab peoples' revolution broke with history three years ago this December. But inasmuch as a revolution is an evolutionary process, the revolution has entered its fourth year.

The Arab revolution is a long time coming. It has been incredibly shocking, largely unpredictable, but hardly surprising. There is no point, therefore, in trying retroactively to figure out why or how it was missed.

And while the Arabs share a common political history, geography and culture, the multiple uprisings that started in Tunisia and made their way through Egypt and to other parts of the Arab world, while diverse, are, in fact, part and parcel of one Arab revolution and one mega Arab spectacle. Nonetheless, each Arab country has acted and reacted according to its own particularity and circumstances, defined mostly by the nature of relationship between regime, society and state.

In retrospect, the revolutionary wave which swept through Tunisia and Egypt was breathtaking, but also "too good to be true." Democratic revolutions require radical, mostly painful changes to succeed; the undoing of old structures and institutions; reining in the old regimes' bloated and unchecked power, and unseating their resourceful benefactors. This revolution, in all likelihood, was going to face a stubborn counter-revolution. In fact, one indicator of the democratic nature

of the Arab revolution was its allowing for old powerful and conservative forces to compete fairly, overcoming old habits and archaic politics.

True that revolutions open the way for the emergence of new forces to represent and fulfill people's aspirations; these forces, however, take time and effort to organize into democratic parties with comprehensive agendas.

And inasmuch as the revolution dominated the first year, counter-revolution, in all its forms, has made a comeback in the second phase. Today, we are witnessing the rise of new forms of counter counter-revolution. Some are peaceful, others violent and if left unchecked, will further destabilize the region.

A Break With the Past

The promise of the Arab revolution was -- and remains -- a break with repressive authoritarian and totalitarian regimes to pave the way towards an era of freedom, dignity and prosperity.

Never in the history of the region have people been so hopeful, so ready, and so adamant to change their lives for the better as they were in 2011.

Never has the spread, speed and similarity of uprisings across continents been so breathtaking, and the contagion, so instantaneous.

Never have the young and old, men and women, middle class and working class worked so closely and so satisfyingly.

Never have the religious and secular, the liberal and conservative marched so trustingly in the streets and public squares of the Arab world as they did at the outset of this revolution.

Never have their voices been raised *for* rather than *against* something or someone.

Never have their demands been so just, so universal, and so timely.

Never has a revolution been so peaceful, so passionate, and so "pleasant."

But the "ancient regime" and its reactionary forces saw in all this an existential, zero-sum conflict that would end their influence, privilege and any chance of governing again, and so have been as adamant on maintaining power. And towards that end, they've used all necessary means to stem the tide of revolution.

Reversing Revolution

As a result, the slogans that echoed out from the streets and public squares of the Arab world didn't make it to the corridors of power over the last three years. By the second year, liberty, prosperity and social justice had become catchphrases to be repeated as mantras by revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries alike.

Local and regional counter-revolutionary forces have persistently undermined and suppressed dissenting voices. They have confronted -- and at times violently crushed -- the more peaceful and less experienced forces of change. But despite their relatively successful comebacks, attempts by counter-revolutionary forces to turn back the clock have failed to kill the spirit of freedom and justice that prevails throughout the region.

Their recourse to extreme violence in Syria and to a lesser degree in Egypt -- the two most important battlegrounds for counter-revolution -- reflects both their naked power and weakness. They see their fight as one of survival and are ready to fight until death -- at least, the death of their opponents.

The Syrian regime's deadly campaign against a peaceful uprising in 2011 has spiraled out of control after new, armed groups began to take root. In the process, so much blood has been shed to tame and defeat the regime's detractors, moderates or extremists into total submission. "*Après moi, le déluge*" means that in its attempt to safeguard its power and privileges, the Assad regime would stop at nothing regardless of the price for Syria and Syrians.

In Egypt, Mubarak fell, but the Mubarak regime remained intact. And so the military and intelligence services took advantage of the anti-Morsi and anti-Muslim Brotherhood sentiments among their previous partners in the public squares to mount a coup d'etat in July 2013 under the pretext of saving the revolution from the Islamists and to try and reverse the changes that took place after January 2011.

The tenacity of the military and the so-called "deep state" -- the institutions that have long preserved, protected and profited off the regime -- became transparent as they undermined and deposed the elected President and detained him along with other Muslim Brotherhood leaders, most of whom were previously elected to Parliament.

The terrible setbacks in both of these important Arab nations have largely dimmed the excitement over the revolution and undermined the promise of change, when change has brought even more instability, violence and despair.

Political Islam and Democracy

The earlier decision of the Muslim Brotherhood to join the revolution and its acceptance of the democratic system of governance were seen as promising signs that a new era of stability could be ushered in. The rush to elections ensured victory for the better-organized 82-year-old movement (as well as the Salafists). The Islamists' gains were also seen in Tunisia, Libya and Morocco.

However, while the Islamists agreed to the electoral process, they projected a limited understanding of the nature of democracy. Indeed, their detractors and former partners alike have accused them of exploiting the democratic processes to gain and hold on to power. Many rushed to highlight an inherent incompatibility between democracy and political Islam. Some even demanded outlawing the Brotherhood and other Islamist political parties, a *déjà vu* of a past era.

It's true that the Islamists have had their share of mistakes and failures; nonetheless, it was made abundantly clear that they weren't really given a chance to govern in Egypt, the central and most influential Arab state. What would have happened if the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists had governed and legislated? What if the June 30 popular uprising against the Brotherhood was allowed to spread and take root without an intervention by the military? It's hard to tell.

So now that the Islamists have been pushed into a corner of Egypt, and other places, by those who claim the Islamists are not suited for democracy, a growing number of them, especially among the youth, insist that, in reality, democratic processes are counter-productive and that non-political means are more effective to gain power.

Breakthrough to Breakdown

In my estimation, the use of force by the likes of the Syrian regime, the foreign military intervention in Libya, and the arming of their opposition have greatly undermined the cause of the revolution and paved the way toward more instability and violence.

That's not to equate the violence by Qaddafi, Assad, Saleh and Sisi with the violent resistance of their citizens in self-defense. As Nelson Mandela wrote in his memoirs, it's the oppressor that determines the means and nature of the conflict, not the oppressed.

And so, regardless of their motives, the shift from peaceful uprisings to armed resistance and intervention has undercut the revolution's goals and chances of national renewal in the short and intermediate run.

In the process, the youthful movement yearning for change has thus far been eclipsed by the two oldest post-colonial forces in the region -- the military and the Islamists -- which have, once again, taken off their gloves to go after one other with total venom.

As the seasons have turned on the Arab Spring, the resulting political paralysis has allowed for instability and chaos, and potentially the emergence of failed states in Egypt, Syria, Libya or Yemen.

Tunisia -- the birthplace of the Arab revolution -- is the only Arab Spring nation that seems to preempt such failure by rebalancing its political trends and governing coalition. And there are many lessons to be learned from it.

Counter Counter-Revolution

In the final analysis, neither of the two protagonists, the military and the Islamist camp, will win the day or be able to lead on its own. Rather, both could end up losing if their political and ideological polarization continues to cripple their nations. They will lose materially and in terms of credibility, legitimacy and morality.

If somehow they could spare their nations more suffering and find a middle ground that meets the basic demands of the revolution and allows them to coexist once again within a new

framework of transitional power-sharing, a certain stability might allow for a third way to emerge on the long term; one that reflects the very ideals of the revolution. This, however, seems less likely with every passing day. The antagonism and deadlock between the military and their opposition, notably the Islamists, will eventually lead to the emergence of new, decentralized and violent groups as witnessed in Syria. It's the ultimate sign of a "failed state."

The proliferation of segmented and polycentric counter counter-revolutionary groups in Libya, Yemen and potentially in Egypt, Lebanon and other Arab countries, would be devastating to their societies.

That's unless those who led the revolution in the first place rise once again and return to the political scene -- albeit with more realistic expectations -- to save their revolution from the jaws of civil war and to pull their nations back from the brink.

Easier said than done? Yes. Is there a better alternative? No. As I have written in my recent book, *The Invisible Arab: The Promise and Perils of the Arab Revolution*, this is a generational cause that will consume more time, and unfortunately, more blood.