

How quickly did the Arab “Spring” turn into an Islamic Winter? Or Did It?

The short answer is that there was never an Arab Spring but there sure is looming an Islamic Winter. However it appears that it is not going to turn out to be as bad as the pessimistic pundits (by the necessity of selling their story) predict. Where is the Middle East headed? Once again the short answer is that nobody really knows and it is far from being trending in a definitive direction. However, short answers to such complex questions are not the answer either. An informed analysis of what has taken place in the Arab world since a Tunisian shopkeeper by the name of Mohammed Bouazizi, set himself on fire on December 17, 2010 may shed some light on where things may be headed in the near future.

Last Thursday (December 22, 2011) I listened to just such an analysis, in a closed forum, delivered by the former head of the Israeli Mossad Meir Dagan. His analysis was comprehensive, informed, in my opinion highly reliable and most importantly apolitical. Most importantly it answered some questions that are on the mind of many who are interested in the future of the Middle East region. Were the events that have taken place in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Bahrain and for that matter Iraq and Iran part of the same phenomenon misleadingly labeled the Arab spring?. When the dust settles, and it may be a long time before it does, would the Middle East emerge as a fundamentalist Islamic dominated region or conversely as some in the West would like to believe moderate democratic regimes will sweep the region?

In order to answer these questions and differentiate the uprisings in the various countries of the Middle East a few factors need to be considered.

The **first** differentiating factor is the nature of the regimes. They can be divided into two categories: a *Ruling Monarchy or Sheikdom* or a *Military Dictatorship*. Dagan explains the difference: a *ruler* (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain) is one who operates within the law and a *dictator* (Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Tunisia) is someone who operates above the law. Therefore the aim of the popular rebellion in the first instance is to bring about *Reforms* and generally involves non-violent populist protests. In the second instance the population challenges the very legitimacy of the regime with an aim to bring about a *Regime Change* and generally involves violent resistance.

The **second** major factor is that the societies in all these countries are sectorial where loyalties are based on patronage with no meritocracy and no upward mobility. Furthermore in a sectorial society the population is divided by two anchoring values: shame and humiliation for the masses, honor and respect for the elite. As a result the “opposition” is incapable of waging a consistently coherent challenge to the regime.

The **third** factor is that all countries are *Islamic* and Islam is not just a religion it is also a political and cultural movement.

The **fourth** significant factor is that most if not all the countries are *Failed-States* meaning that their economies are crumbling or non-existent, or in the case of the oil rich countries the wealth is concentrated in the hands of the ruling regime and never trickles down to the masses.

The **fifth** factor is the fact that in many of the countries there exist(ed) a minority rule over an oppressed majority (e.g. Suni over Shia in Iraq, Alawites over Sunis in Syria, Hashemite (Bedouin)

over Palestinians in Jordan etc.) which explains the iron fist dictatorship style in many of the countries and the discontent of the oppressed minorities.

Understanding of the significance of these factors helps facilitate a more granular analysis of the nature, development and (actual or predicted) outcome of the uprisings in each of the countries:

Tunisia is the first and so far yielded the mildest outcome of all others and appears to be stable or stabilizing.

Libya is a perfect example of deeply rooted tribal rivalry between the Tripolitarians and the Cyrenaicans long before the Gadhafi revolution in Libya. Gadhafi took advantage of the tribal divide to solidify his power as a dictator. In many ways the uprising in Libya was the “simplest” of all countries. Everyone wanted Gadhafi out including the U.S, Europe and the rest of the world. He has become an embarrassment to his own people and the world community and his base of support was eroding quickly as soon as the Bengasi rebellion began emboldened by events in Tunisia. This also explains the determined response by the European led by the French to accelerate the regime change in Libya in order to avoid a bloody civil war next door and also protect against the “mad man” unpredictability from a possible blow up of the oil fields. It also explains why the Americans let the European do the job paying lip service to the cause but reluctance to expand any currency in the outcome.

In **Syria** the ruling Alawites originated in the French rule over Syria. The French recruited the Alawites to become their colonial army. The Alawites who are a 13-15% minority in Syria have taken power after the departure of the French and have been exercising it ruthlessly ever since. This minority rule created discontent and historically when such discontent “gets out of control” the regime acts as under Hafez el Assad rule in the 80s by killing off the opposition as they did in Hama. (30,000 or more killed).

Unlike most talking heads, academics and politicians in Israel and the West, Dagan is not willing to so quickly bet on the imminent fall of Basher el Assad. The reason is very simple – he and the Alawites have no place to go and no options to resolve the conflict without the intervention of an outside element which at the moment appears to be the Arab League. This in many respects explains why the U.S, Europe, Russia and China as well as the U.N. are all reluctant to intervene on the Syrian front. Assad commands (despite recent defections) a powerful well equipped modern Army, and will likely be fighting for his and the Alawites survival to the bitter end. The Syrian case is further complicated by the fact that the opposition is not well organized but is beginning to form under the influence of mainly the Gulf States and Turkey. In summary –Assad’s fall is a desirable outcome as it will constraint the Iranian influence over Syria and to some degree over Hezbollah who are bound to lose Syrian support in the post Assad era. Dagan dismisses the fear of an Islamic regime succeeding Assad. He believes that Saudi Arabia and the Gulf State are likely to exert their influence over Syria to counter the Iranian ambitions. In all, the Assad fall is viewed as a good thing for Israel and the Middle East although that outcome is not yet inevitable

Egypt is altogether a different story. First of all since the ouster of Mubarak the regime has not really changed. The Mubarak regime continues to rule Egypt. All the central figures in the administration including Tantawi are all Mubarak appointees. It is important to note that not until Abdul Nasser’s officers’ revolt there has been a true Egyptian ruling Egypt. Since the officers’ revolution of 1952 then succession has not surfaced as an issue. Nasser died at a relatively young age of a heart

attack, his successor Sadat was murdered also in his prime. It is only when Mubarak who survived, albeit now terminally ill, to old age did the question of succession of an Egyptian ruler surfaced for the first time. Mubarak made the fatal mistake that more than any factor led to his humiliating ouster when he attempted to position his son Jamal (Jimmy) as his successor. Jamal had no military background and was associated with the corrupt Egyptian elite that manipulated the Egyptian economy to their own benefit. Many of Mubarak loyalists did not approve of Jamal Mubarak not to mention the Muslim Brotherhood who were just waiting for an opportunity to exert their well organized opposition.

It should be noted that over the years of Mubarak rule the Muslim Brotherhood has literally taken over the government responsibility for the civil society and social services in Egypt. As a result they enjoy wide popular support as seen in the recent elections. The convergence of all these factors plus the uprising in Tunisia is what lit the match that brought down Mubarak. Dagan's view is that despite the recent (partial) election results it is not clear that the Muslim Brotherhood and their Salafist ideological partners will rule Egypt. The independence of the Army and its domination in Egypt has not been decided yet. It is hard to see how the Army will relinquish power if for no other reason because of the dire consequences facing Egypt due to the potential loss of 3 billion dollars in military aid from the United States. It is for that reason that Tantawi is determined to suppress the recent uprising in Tahrir Square by force this time whereas the army stood by and did not use force against the citizen in the "first" Tahrir Square uprising. Dagan points out that the original uprising was not limited to Tahrir Square and took place in cities all over the country whereas this latest uprising is limited only to Cairo as symbolized by Tahrir square. Dagan is quick to dispel another Western media myth. He claims that the success of the original Tahrir Square uprising is not to be attributed to the organizing power of the Internet and Social Networks. Most of the people who went out to Tahrir Square are not people who have Internet or TV or read newspapers. They were the poor, the deprived the ones who had nothing and thus nothing to lose. They were influenced if not incited by their religious clerics and went out to protest after Friday prayers at the mosques. With the encouragement of the clerics they lost the fear instilled in them by the Mubarak strong arm and decided that it is their time to be heard.

What does the future hold for Egypt? It is important to note that the real power in Egypt is not in the hands of the two houses of Parliament but rather in the office of the President. Therefore despite predictions that the Parliament will be dominated by Islamists when the election process is completed, it is the question of who will be elected president that will determine the nature of Egyptian rule and its direction. It does not appear that some of the names that are thrown around as candidates for the presidency will actually make it. It is more likely that the ultimate candidate will be one who the military and security operations in Egypt trust and that can be seen as one who appears to be moving Egypt toward some form of democratization.

Yemen. Earlier I made mention to the fact that many of the Middle Eastern states are rightly so, classified as failed states. The epitome of this definition is Somalia and not far behind is Yemen where government and civil society institutions virtually do not exist and tribal rivalry may flare up at any moment as a result of the collapsed economies of these countries. Saudi Arabia is keeping a close eye on Yemen and is tempted to meddle in its affairs for fear that the militant Islamists elements may spread into Saudi Arabia.

Sudan is not far behind complicated by the North-South divide of African versus Arab tribes (and not Christians against Muslims as it is being portrayed in the West). The fight in Sudan is going to be over its oil reserves concentrated on the border between the North and the South and on the distribution of the Nile waters between the two.

Saudi Arabia has dealt with the unrest in a classical manner. King Abdullah was in the United States when the uprising started so he released a few tens of billions of dollars to spread around the disgruntled tribes to be “disbursed” to the population. He also offered consideration for some future reforms and solved the problem (for now). There appears no immediate threat that the uprising will affect the Gulf nations with the possible exception of Bahrain where the root cause for unrest is a the traditional Sunni-Shia tensions.

Jordan King Abdullah has been in power now for 11 years. He’s done pretty well by all accounts. He has not yet solved his “Palestinian Problem” (how to get them out of his country), however an interesting development is taking place in Jordan. Jordan accepted over a million refugees who fled Iraq. Jordan is now pursuing a “Jordanization” strategy by absorbing and granting right of citizenship to the Iraqi refugees. This has not yet but may overtime change the demographics of Jordan by creating a block of “Iraqi-Jordanian” who are loyal to the kingdom and are dependent on it for their resettlement prospects in Jordan. It would appear that as long as the Palestinian issue continues to focus on the Israeli conflict the prospect of Palestinian decent in Jordan is not very likely although the influence of Hamas sympathizers and the Muslim Brotherhood continue to represent a potential threat to the kingdom.

Iraq – it would appear that the Americans have done better in Iraq than what they have been given credit for and exceeded according to Dagan his own expectations. First they were able to stabilize a political system within Iraq. It is not yet entirely functional but there appears to be a convergence of interests between the Sunnis, Kurds and Shia in Iraq. This is strengthened by a form of reconciliation between the Kurds and some of the Sunnis and some of the Shia. More importantly the Iranian influence within Iraq is far less significant than what was predicted even by the Israeli security community. It is important to understand that the Iraqi Shia do not automatically and have not traditionally been aligned with the Iranian Shia. First because the Iraqis are Arabs and the Iranians Persian and as importantly the mutual resentment over the 8 year war between Iraq and Iran is still very evident. Also not all Shia are necessarily united. Khomeini’s doctrine of the Iranian Ayatollah being the supreme leader of the global Shia nation is not readily accepted by the Iraqi Shia including Sistani (Himself a Persian). The Sunnis in Iraq are continuing a low grade resistance in co-operation with Al Qaida to erode the Shia ambitions for dominant power and their own risk of ethnic cleansing.

The future of Iraq is of paramount strategic importance to Iran. However their many attempts to increase their influence over the political direction of Iraq have not yielded the desired results. Therefore it may be safe to predict that the current system will stabilize in Iraq with periodic violent flare-ups which have been “par-for-the course” in Iraq even during the reign of Saddam Hussein.

Iran, and more specifically Nuclear Iran. As you know Dagan’s assessment of this situation is quite controversial and definitely at odds with the Netanyahu-Barak muscle flexing approach. Dagan explains that there is some confusion as to what is being defined as “Nuclear” Iran. Possessing a military nuclear capability is a function of three stages. The first stage is to acquire the knowledge and know-how of the development of tactical nuclear weapons. Iran is sending tens of thousands of

Iranian students to the best schools in the U.S and the knowledge base is wide spread and accessible. In other words there is no way to deny Iran that knowledge. The second stage is the acquisition of enriched uranium to a level of 90% plus that is required to produce a nuclear weapons. But more importantly the capability to "industrialize" the enrichment process to be able to produce large quantities. The next stage is the ability to use this material to create the "Bomb" but more so to be able to mount it on a reliable delivery system and launch it accurately on the selected targets. When people talk about the Iranian nuclear "capability", they may well refer to one but not all of the stages that make for a tactical nuclear weapon deployment capability (a-la North Korea or Pakistan). It is accurate to say that Iran has all the knowledge and expertise to manufacture nuclear weapons against which there is no defense. So if you want to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons you have to find ways to slow down or impair their ability to produce commercial quantities of enriched material. Iran is not intent on developing a nuclear bomb. In order to achieve a second strike capability and defend itself from massive retaliation they require to produce many bombs (thus very large quantities of 90%+ enriched uranium). Estimates are that Iran will not get to this level before "the-middle of this decade". The most important fact is that as of this moment Iran has not (yet) arrived at a political decision to deploy nuclear weapons. This fact seems to be "lost" on many analysts and politicians for understandable reasons. Do the Iranian want to acquire nuclear weapons? The answer is most definitely – Yes! Are they proceeding in this direction? The answer is yes! However and contrary to the "mad man" theory personified by Ahmadinejad, they are a rational regime and they are trying to achieve their aim at the lowest political and economical cost. As long as their nuclear program is subject to oversight by the International Atomic Energy Commission (SABA) the ultimate decision to produce nuclear weapons cannot be made. To do so would require Iran to inform SABA that they are no longer welcomed to Iran. That would be a clear sign that their mind has been made. So far there is no evidence that besides the production of significant quantities of enriched material albeit at a low grade that they have moved to the next step in the process of producing a bomb. In other words the Iranian strategy is to do whatever they can in the face of the International community outcry to get ready for the "bomb" and if and when The Decision will be made they will be in a position to sprint to the finish.

Dagan agrees that Nuclear Iran is a strategic threat of the highest degree for the state of Israel. But the real question is what it is that Israel or anybody can do about it? What are the means to prevent Iran from reaching the decision and at what cost? Dagan has gone on the public record with his opinion that any attempt by Israel to destroy Iran's nuclear installations at this time would only accelerate Iran's resolve and will surely bring about an immediate decision and acceleration of their nuclear weapons program. In fact they will claim legitimization of doing so by pointing out that they have been attacked by a nuclear power – Israel ("according to foreign sources"). Beyond this the reaction to such an attack by Israel may well immediately result in a regional war. He warns that the military option is not analogous to prior Israeli attacks on Iraqi and Syrian nuclear targets. Whereas these were single target attacks, the Iranian spread their installations geographically all over the country on and below ground and therefore it will require a next to impossible multi – target coordinated attack.

The international sanctions on Iran created a serious problem for the regime. Their economy is crumbling and they have poured their foreign currency reserves into the economy as a result of which they have limited resources to acquire foreign goods and equipment. Dagan believes that the Americans, for their own selfish interest and not for the sake of the defense of Israel, will not let the

Iranians acquire nuclear weapons. This for the simple reasons that such a development will place 60% of the world oil reserves under Iranian influence which will allow them to increase the price of oil and cripple the already fragile Western economy. Dagan's sternest warning to the Israeli leaders is to beware of even a theoretical interpretation by the Americans that their military option to stop Iran is in anyway disingenuous or worst a manipulative tactic to draw the United States into a preemptive military intervention in Iran. This could result in grave consequences to Israel as a result of a breakdown in trust and let us not forget that Israel dependence on American aid is of ultimate importance to its survival. He believes that Israel should prepare if it does not already have a military option as a last resort but not as a preferred option. Instead, Israel should concentrate on other tactics (covert?) that will slow down the Iranian nuclear program. The internal division within Iran itself and the rival factions who are vying for influence compounded by the international sanctions will make an Iranian decision to acquire nuclear weapons that much more difficult.