

WHAT IS HAPPENING TO THE ARAB UPRISING

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The Arab Uprising is no longer what it was. Its complexion is changing.

One of the outstanding features of the first phase of the Uprising was its peaceful, non-violent character. The ouster of both the Tunisian dictator, Ben Ali, on 25 January 2011 and the Egyptian autocrat, Hosni Mubarak, on 11 February 2011 was largely peaceful. But the protesters in Libya resorted to arms within a day or two of their uprising in Benghazi on 15 February. It is well known that one of the leading groups in what has evolved into a full-scale rebellion is a well-armed militia, the National Front for the Salvation of Libya (NFSL). The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) is another militant outfit, some of whose founders were veterans from the struggle against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, that is playing a critical role in the rebellion. It is reportedly linked to Al-Qaeda. In Syria too, right from the outset, militant organisations had infiltrated peaceful demonstrations and fired upon civilians and security forces alike, killing more than 80 senior military personnel. Some elements in the protest movement in Yemen which at the beginning was peaceful have also begun to resort to violence.

Interference

The other trend which has tarnished the Arab Uprising is the interference of regional actors in the revolts and rebellions that are occurring in individual states. The most blatant was of course the entry of troops from Saudi Arabia at the head of a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) military force into Bahrain on 14 March 2011 to put down a popular uprising supported by the majority Shiite population against the Sunni Bahraini monarch, Shiekh Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa. The brutal suppression of a peaceful movement for basic human rights and democracy --- 52 civilians were massacred ---- has been a severe setback for the Uprising as a whole. But Saudi officials insist that it is Shiite Iran that is instigating the protest in Bahrain. Turning to another kingdom in the region, Qatar has been giving military and financial assistance to the rebels in Libya. It is alleged that Syrian protesters are being armed and funded by Bandar Sultan of Saudi Arabia and Saad Hariri in Lebanon.

The motives behind interference and manipulation by individuals, groups and states are not difficult to discern. The Saudi-GCC move into Bahrain was to preserve the status quo in Bahrain for fear that democratisation of the Sheikdom would undermine the Saudi Ruler's absolute power in his own kingdom especially since there is a restive Shiite minority in his eastern province. Qatar's role in the Libyan rebellion has nothing to do with democracy since Qatar is an absolute monarchy with the Emir exercising total suzerainty over the Emirate's oil. By supporting the rebels, Qatar is actually acting at the behest of Western powers that are determined to affect a regime change in Libya. Qatar is after all a close US military ally whose air-base is used by the US for its operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Qatar also has commercial ties with Israel. It is partly because they are pursuing the agenda of Western powers and Israel vis-à-vis Syria that Sultan and Hariri are actively engaged in fomenting unrest in that country. For Hariri in particular it is also a question of hitting back at Syrian President, Bashar Assad, for allegedly manoeuvring him out of office in Beirut.

Western Powers

If manipulations and manoeuvres by regional players have impacted adversely upon the Arab Uprising it is largely because they are intertwined--- as we have seen--- with the interests of certain Western powers. This is the third negative trend that should concern us. It is alleged, for instance, that the NFSL is funded by the CIA and French Intelligence. France, Britain, the US and other Western countries such as Italy, Spain, Portugal and Canada have gone beyond imposing a 'No Fly Zone' upon Libya to attempting to eliminate Gaddafi physically. His youngest son, Saif al-Arab, and three grandchildren, killed in a NATO air-strike on 30 April, have become the tragic victims of this

diabolical assassination plan. In Syria, evidence has surfaced to show that the US has been financing opposition groups, "including a satellite TV channel beaming anti-regime programmes into the country." The London-based Barada TV channel which began broadcasting in April 2009 is linked to a London-based network of exiles, the Movement for Justice and Development, which has received as much as US 6 million dollars from the US State Department since 2006. In Yemen, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco and Algeria, where there is--- or there was --- unrest in some form or other, Western powers are involved, directly or obliquely, in ensuring that the eventual outcome would be in their favour. As a case in point, in Yemen, the US, it is alleged, is trying very hard to persuade the President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, an ally, to step down and hand over power to a leadership inclined towards the US. The GCC, a grouping that is closely aligned to the US and the West, is helping the US in this scheme. Even in Tunisia and Egypt, the US, working through individuals and groups in various institutions and segments of society, is determined to ensure that its interests and the interests of Israel will be preserved and perpetuated in the emerging democratic scenarios in the two countries.

Interests

What are those interests that the US elite and other Western elites are determined to protect at all costs? They are not homogeneous though they revolve around some recurring themes. In the case of Libya, for Europe, more than the US, the desire to control the country's huge oil and gas reserves is a factor. For the US, which has denied vehemently that it harbours any strategic designs vis-a-vis Libya, the latter's critical role in facilitating China's access to its own oil and gas and the energy resources of other African states is an important consideration. Since access to energy would be *sine qua con* for China's ascendancy as a global power, the US which fears this new reality is going all out to control the flow of oil and gas in China's direction. According to Paul Craig Roberts, a former senior US government official, "China has extensive energy investments and construction investments in Libya. They are looking to Africa as a future energy source." Besides, Gaddafi has, in recent months, intensified his mobilisation of African states to form a sort of United States of Africa which will resist Western exploitation of the continent's vast natural resources. This would run counter to the Pentagon's idea of an African Command (Africom) launched in 2007. With Syria, US and other Western elites are unhappy that the Bashar Assad government remains a "resistance state" opposed to the unjust Israeli occupation of Arab lands. Because it has close ties to the Hezbollah in Lebanon which is now in the driver's seat in Beirut, and is also an ally of the Iranian government ---both of which are in the crosshairs of Washington and Tel Aviv---- Syria has become a threat to the US and Israeli drive for hegemony over the region. Israel and the West would prefer a government in Damascus that would be more accommodative of their dominance. The US's primary concern in Yemen is to ensure that the strategic port of Eden is under the watchful eye of a reliable ally while it would like to see Bahrain remain in the grip of the Khalifa family mainly because the island is the home of the US fifth fleet. Saudi Arabia is of critical importance to the US and Israel not only because of its mammoth oil reserves but also because it is a huge importer of US weapons. This is why the US is determined to keep the King on his throne. Some of the same considerations--- albeit on a lower scale--- apply to Qatar and Kuwait. Egypt and Jordan are crucial because both have signed peace treaties with Israel.

Oil, Israel, China, geostrategic interests, and weapons are the five reasons why the US and its western allies are hell-bent on shaping the Arab Uprising to fulfil their agenda. This is why there is so much meddling and interference on their part. It explains their military intervention in Libya. Some analysts would argue that the West is staging a "counter -revolution" to the Arab Uprising, with the connivance and collusion of their Arab allies and clients.

Suggestions

How should we respond this challenge? More and more governments and civil society organisations should speak up and make it lucidly clear to the US and its NATO allies, the Gaddafi government and

all the opposition groups that there is no military solution in Libya. A ceasefire should be declared at once. It should be observed by everyone under the supervision of international observers. The African Union and Turkish peace plans which have many similarities should be revived with some modifications, and merged. Apart from opening a humanitarian corridor in the country through which aid will be transported to all those in dire need, the emphasis should be upon building institutions for a viable, sustainable democracy. At the same time, the merged peace plan should contain provisions for the departure of Gaddafi and his family. Given the terrible atrocities the dictator has committed against his own people and others over decades--- atrocities which now outweigh the good that he has done--- there is no other option. One hopes that after the exit of the Gaddafi family and its cronies, a free and fair election in Libya will produce a leadership that is not only honest and accountable but also one that will defend and protect the nation's sovereignty and independence. It should not be subservient to Western powers or other powers for that matter.

In the case of Syria too, the citizens of the world have a role to play. They should demand, in unequivocal language, that the US, Britain, France, Israel, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia stop immediately their machinations and manipulations. It is the people of Syria who will determine the destiny of their nation. The Bashar Assad government for its part should hasten the meaningful reforms it has promised the people in recent weeks. Many of these reforms have not been translated into action. Other laws that are in the offing related to local administration elections, the formation of political parties, and the freedom of the media, should be expedited. Indeed, Bashar should go beyond these reforms and announce publicly that there will be a democratic Presidential Election before the end of this year and he is prepared to defend his presidency in an open contest. At the same time, he should realise that while he has the right as Syria's legitimate President to act firmly against murderous militias, his security forces should exercise maximum restraint when faced with peaceful, unarmed protesters. The killing of such protesters is totally unacceptable to the human conscience. It is this that provides fodder to Western governments that are so eager to intervene in Syria in pursuit of their own nefarious agenda.

These humble suggestions on how we can respond to the challenge posed by a "counter-revolution" engineered by certain Western powers and their Arab allies, especially in the context of Libya and Syria, are being made in the hope that the Arab Uprising can still be saved. If the Arab Uprising can be returned to its pristine ideals, it will emerge once again, as a genuine struggle by a people determined to re-affirm their dignity and their humanity.

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