



**THE ARAB UPRISINGS OF 2011:
IBN KHALDÛN ENCOUNTERS CIVIL SOCIETY**

By Theodore Friend

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The journalistic notion of an “Arab Spring” is faulty on two counts. Climatologically, from Morocco to Yemen, it is absurd; there is no such season. It is also misleading, because analogy with the “Prague Spring” of 1968 runs into the unhappy fact that protests by Czech citizens against their imperial masters were crushed by Soviet tanks. The Cold War did not thaw out until two decades later.

In speaking instead of the “Arab uprisings,” I find much cause for hope in the current regional dynamics, especially in Tunisia and Egypt. Even if strangled by armed force (Syria) or suffocated by money (in Saudi Arabia, the \$130 billion unloaded into the social economy was described to me by a Turk as a “royal bribe”), present time in the Arab world is unforgettable. In many places it remains open-ended. But what is being *risen against*?

ARAB DYNASTIC CYCLES

Ibn Khaldûn is of help here. This 15th century North African traveler, scholar, diplomat, and judge reflected on the troubles of his own times. Going far beyond customary chronicles, he attempted to show the dynamics of social organization and urbanization that underlay them. So doing, he generated an Arab philosophy of history three and a half centuries before Vico and four centuries before Gibbon produced works in Europe of equal ambition. Key to the thinking of Ibn Khaldûn is the concept of *asabiyyah*: group solidarity or social cohesion. It was vital to overcome the savage pride of the Bedouins in order to generate cooperation, establish dynasties, and cultivate urban civilization, as distinct from the raw survival of desert life. Once the principle of group solidarity was established, Ibn Khaldûn saw dynasties going through predictable cycles of five phases: (1) successful overthrow of a royal predecessor; (2) gaining of complete control; (3) leisure and optimal expression of rule; (4) contentment succumbs to lassitude and luxury; (5) squandering breeds hatred in the people and disloyalty among the soldiers, and dynastic senility becomes an incurable disease.¹

Ibn Khaldûn’s cycle helps to describe the authoritarian continuities found in recent Arab history: three rulers across sixty years in Egypt; two across fifty years in Tunisia; one for more than forty in Libya; one for more than thirty in Yemen; father and son for more than forty years in Syria. The most continuous line of authority in the region of course is in Saudi Arabia, where the clan of Al-Saud has been preeminent for over a hundred years, testing the elasticity of Ibn Khaldûn’s theory and buying the patience of the people with social subsidies.² In contention with royal modes of ruling are democratic recognitions that all leaders are flawed; and that term limits both minimize the chances of peculiar flaws becoming endemic, while they also

¹Ibn Khaldûn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, Frank Rosenthal, trans.; N.J. Dawood, ed. (Princeton University Press, 1967); *asabiyyah*, xi; 152; stages, pp. 140-42 and *passim*.

²Excellent articles: Peter Turchin, “Scientific Prediction in Historical Sociology: Ibn Khaldûn meets Al Saud,” in Peter Turchin, Leonid Grinin, Andrae Korataev, and Victor C. de Munk, *History and Mathematics: Historical Development of Complex Societies* (Moscow, Kom Kniga, 2006); pp. 9-38; William R. Polk, “Encounters with Ibn Khaldûn,”

www.williampolk.com/pdf/2001/Encounters...

maximize the chances of systemic flaws becoming identified and treated.

Egyptians grew alarmed when they recognized that Hosni Mubarak was attempting to create an actual bloodline dynasty. Now he must answer for ordering the shootings of protesters that marked his last days in power; and his sons in jail cells must also answer for the greedy amassing of wealth that characterized the last years of that regime. The Egyptian revolt will be the most important model for the rest of the Arab world, even though the Tunisian one, which preceded and inspired it, may reach a further point of development and stabilize at a more secure level of democracy. But here we broach an idea that was unknown to Ibn Khaldûn. The sovereignty of the people would have struck him as a wondrous and dangerous extravagance. But precisely because that idea now exists, the Arab political dynamics in our own time do far more than replicate royal cycles. Beyond democracy they summon other modern concepts—human rights, rule of law, pluralism, transparency, and accountability. These define health and disease in the body politic, attention to which may allow continuous renewal rather than recurring declines into the senilities that Ibn Khaldûn predicted.

TUNISIA AND EGYPT

Such multiple values came suddenly into play in Tunisia, which had been the first Arab nation to outlaw slavery (1846, a year before Sweden did so), and among the first to enact women's suffrage (1959). There, on December 17, 2010, a 27-year-old fruit vendor in the town of Sidi Bouzid had his wares confiscated. He was allegedly slapped in the face by a female inspector and beaten by her aides. After being denied interview by the town governor, Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in the town square. He died in a coma, January 4, 2011. His dramatic suicide was picked up by Al Jazeera and became a national symbol—a furious expression of frustration with a regime going rapidly from Ibn Khaldûn's fourth stage (hateful luxury) into its fifth and final condition (incurable senility). Demonstrations mounted rapidly. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, twenty-four years in power, fled his own country with his family on January 14, 2011 and took refuge in Saudi Arabia. Tunisia, backed by Interpol, issued a warrant for his arrest, and the arrest of his wife, on multiple and grand counts of illegal seizure of properties; and dozens of other charges. Swift conviction in absentia led to 35-year sentences for each and \$66 million in fines.

The Tunisian example of revolt, despite its 300 deaths, gave courage to the young-and-fed-up as well as the under-fed and angry in several countries, most notably Egypt. Controlled as that great nation was, its media had some grasp of critical reality and were allowed occasional gasps of truth. A presidential election in 2005, although marred by low turnout and many irregularities, was won by Mubarak with 89 percent of the vote. Ayman Nour, runner-up, obtained only 7 percent and was then jailed for a five-year term, apparently for the effrontery of opposing the autocrat. His example of daring nevertheless sank into popular consciousness.

For January 25, 2011, not long after Ben Ali fled Tunisia, a protest in Cairo was scheduled on National Police Day—intentionally targeting police abuse. The killing of Khaled Said had stirred thousands of young people for many months, and now they could focus their feelings. Said was a 28-year-old who had filmed police in the act of profiting from the sale of drugs. In retribution, two policemen repeatedly slammed him against stone steps and an iron door just one block from his home, and dumped his body in front of an Internet café. The bloody visage of his corpse in the morgue with its fractured skull and broken bones, snapped by his brother on a mobile phone, went viral on Facebook.

Young leaders of many kinds brewed up revolt, such as Asmaa Mahfouz, a 26-year-old female activist who, in eloquent videos, urged a turnout in Tahrir Square. As one Egyptian who responded emotionally observed, the protests gathered momentum, calling for dignity (the freedom *to be*), freedom (the opportunity *to do*), and social justice (things that *must be done*). Egyptians began to break through their fear and to end it with growing demands like “drumbeats...you start soft, then go louder.”³

For eighteen consecutive days, they protested massively and nonviolently in Tahrir Square. In retrospect, a young activist summarized new lines of communication: “We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world.” A Google executive, Wael Ghonim, was critical to administration of the social links that expressed desires for a better life, while summoning righteous anger as a motivation. “We are all Khaled Said” became a powerful slogan.

The masses protesting in Tahrir Square and elsewhere—later estimates put their accumulated total at six to eight million – hit at unemployment, food prices, corruption, and outrages taken as insults to personal dignity. They were unappeasable, and further aroused by Mubarak himself in two condescending and rambling speeches on TV. On February 11 he resigned. During many of the days of protest Wael Ghonim himself was in jail. Abroad, however, he stood for the revolt to a degree captured in a remark by President Obama. In answering a question from a staff member, Obama said, “What I want is for the kids on the street to win and for the Google guy to become president....”⁴

In fact, the young crowds in Egypt found Obama's own posture indistinct and insufficiently supportive; and American public

³Heba Ramzy, e-mail correspondence with the author, 28-29 June 2011.

⁴New York *Times*, 12 May 2011, p. A10.

opinion influenced them little. When Obama sent his personal representative, retired Ambassador Frank Wisner, to talk Mubarak out of office, he came back instead urging continued support of the dictator. Thus Wisner clouded his own previous reputation by failure to understand what was going on in Egypt, and what had to happen there.

The eventual tally of the Egyptian dead went well over 800, mostly civilians. Those who died did not intend to pay a price for a Gandhian principle of nonviolence. It was common sense to see that a weaponed regime led by an ex-general could not be overthrown by ordinary demonstrations. The uncommon sense that made history was to maintain civil discipline in resistance to that regime, returning to the squares not in an idolatry of peace, but in determination to win major goals by unarmed struggle in solidarity. Resort to even minor acts of violence would have played into the hands of the regime, which seemed to entice such an error. Discipline prevailed.⁵

The real question for Egypt became what further goals could be achieved after Mubarak was gone, and his ominous subaltern, Lt. Gen. Omar Suleiman, was refused as a successor. The crowds achieved a civilian prime minister at last. But that still left the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, thirty-six generals, at the apex of power in Egypt. Accommodating in tone but paternal in determination, they accepted as national strategy that the constitution must be rewritten and elections held. But entrusting such matters to a council of generals is not the same as handing it over to Jeffersonian yeomen. The referendum submitted to the populace in March 2011 contained a necessary minimum of constitutional change, while scheduling parliamentary elections for the following September. That is not time enough, many protesters declared; not adequate to organize and educate the electorate. The military did not budge; they likely did not want and do not want an electorate overeducated.⁶

For upper-middle class Cairenes, longer deliberation appeared the better course, so that Egypt would lay down surer guidelines for the future. By one account, listening to his employer's family dinner table conversations convinced their chief manservant, who had to return to his rural village to vote. He persuaded a great majority of the village to his views. Then the Salafis, hyper-traditionalists of the neighborhood, began to sound off. They said, "A 'no' vote is *atheism*." They threatened fines of thousands of Egyptian pounds to those who so voted. What regulation they pretended to did not matter. Nor did invasion of the secret ballot matter. "We will *know* if you vote 'no.'" The servant came back to Cairo and told his employers of pressures that could not be surmounted. He and his followers in the village had chosen to abstain.⁷ Nationwide the result was 77 percent "yes."

Such powerful manifestation of Salafi opinion will affect the probabilities for September's national election. [This is written in June 2011.] The neutered NPD, the tame majority party for Mubarak, will get new life and credibility from context alone, rather like ex-Communists in post-1989 Eastern Europe.⁸ The oft-penalized Muslim Brotherhood has declared that it will not seek the presidency, and will not offer candidates in more than half of the races for parliamentary seats. But this apparent forbearance is a careful calculation. In many constituencies they can make a deal *not* to run, and thereby affect the outcome. Their organization, developed since 1928, gives them power far beyond the impact of their social service organizations. Under three authoritarian regimes they have aimed to Islamize society from the ground up. Now they are ready to reap their rewards.⁹ They appear likely to win, or otherwise to "own," at least 40 percent of the seats. In coalition politics they can be imagined to ally with blocs of Salafis (perhaps 10 percent of the electorate) and with progressive Muslims (perhaps 5 percent), for clear working control of the national legislature, which will generate a new constitution, followed by a presidential election. Thus Hassan Al-Banna's dream will in some manner be realized seven dozen years after he founded the Muslim Brotherhood. The chance for an Obama option, some variant of a "Google guy" being elected president, is of course none at all.

THE MILITARY

We cannot yet see the outcome of the numerous and momentous movements in the Arab region, which are greater even than the Nasserite upheavals half a century ago. But enough is evident to note some patterns. One-party governments, despotic at

⁵ And prevailed despite enormous national frustration, already symbolized in 2010 by the performance artist Ahmed Basyony. He had publicly run in place an hour a day for thirty days, while sensors on his suit used his sweat to project a flush of colors on video screens around him. On January 30, 2011, in Tahrir Square he was shot dead. His artistic career subsequently became the centerpiece of the Egyptian exhibit at the Venice Biennale, breaking the tradition of previously academic submissions by Egypt. www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/egypt-displays-an-artful-legacy-at-the-venice-biennale

⁶Lally Weymouth interviewed generals for washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/Egyptian-generals-speak... 18 May 2011. The evaluative language is mine.

⁷Interview, Heba Ramzy, 19 May 2011.

⁸I am grateful to Ambassador (ret.) Adrian Basora, Director of the Project on Democratic Transitions at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, Philadelphia, for his essay, with Jean F. Boone, "A New U.S. Policy Towards Democracy in Post-Communist Europe/Eurasia," January 2010; and for his personal notes, "Arab Revolutions of 2011 vs. Post-Communist Transitions of 1989-91."

⁹Here I owe perspective to three scholars who presented a seminar on "Egypt, Regime Change, and the Muslim Brotherhood" at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, Philadelphia, 24 May 2011: Samuel Helfont, Aaron Rock, and Eric Trager.

their worst, feel threatened by localized protests. From tear gas to rhetorical kisses there is a great range of options, in which the military and police are critical, and not always coordinate. The army may be deployed systematically and brutally with tanks and helicopter gunships (Syria); or it may take sides with the people (Tunisia); or it may shatter along tribal and geographic lines (in civil war, Libya; or in anti-establishment anarchy, Yemen).

There is no true or sustained neutrality possible for an army in such times. Egypt's military was not charmed into democratic solidarity with demonstrators by the popular chant, "The people and the army are one." No: a conscript army simply did not wish to fire into large crowds, because their own relatives could be there; and officers were unwilling to give such an order. The top senior generals finally judged Mubarak, one of their own, to have become unsupportable. They removed him to his villa at Sharm al-Sheikh and later put him under custody in a hospital nearby. Then they consented to a trial beginning in August 2011. Though it would mask their own complicity in previous oppression, it would promise to give the public symbolic satisfaction for long-felt injustices.

Comparison with Indonesia is interesting. There, too, in the crisis of 1998, the army finally tilted against its own three-decade autocrat, but afterward protected Suharto at home in Jakarta until he died ten years later. Even now, they guard his reputation, as part of a massive national syndrome of undigested history. Indonesia, nevertheless, would be an excellent standard were any Arab nation to care about Muslim Asia. After toppling their dictator, Indonesians proceeded to constitutional revisions, administrative reorganization, and to two free, open, and direct presidential elections (2004, 2009). They also achieved some curbs on corruption, and between 2000 and 2010 increased per capita income from \$500 to \$3000.

CIVIL SOCIETY

One of the most broadly informed American experts on Islam observes summarily that "Civil society in Egypt has never been—and I would argue, can never be—free from significant government interference, constraints, and outright oppression."¹⁰ Although Islamist activists and secular intellectuals both have been allowed their latitudes in the last sixty years, there was always an implicit leash by which the authoritarian regime (whichever one; the characteristic in Egypt is by now innate) could yank them back or even, metaphorically, strangle them.

Nowhere in the region is civil society in the North Atlantic sense guaranteed. Tunisia may be the closest, but Ben Ali trimmed it back.¹¹ In fully flowered development, civil society is guaranteed by a constitution, unhindered by police, and defended by a military. With a constitution supplying the skeleton of national organization, and laws in continual play and counterplay more important to its protection than the muscle of weaponed forces, then civil society may complete the anatomy of an evolving nervous system. It must be free to inquire into whatever it chooses, and manifest whatever it legally can, so that the creativity of a people will count more than its capacity to be policed. At an opposite extreme, the nervous system barely matters at all, and the armed muscle of the organism can break its own bones.

With regard to civil society, social networking may be seen in proper perspective. Its prevalence in Egypt and elsewhere is important, and the late, failed effort of the Mubarak government to suppress it proves its consequentiality. The grim successes of the Assad government of Syria in keeping out foreign reporters and shutting down the Internet demonstrate by absence the importance of such communication. Social networking may further become key to the nervous systems of civil societies; but talk of "Facebook revolutions" is exaggerated and misplaced. The motivations for what occurred in Tunisia and continues to happen in Egypt come from the gut; from humiliation and the desire to connect in fighting against it. Social networking then provides *speed* in connection, and in this year of tumult it has massively surprised some despots. But swiftness of communication does not transform the persons that for a while it brings together in common motivation and constructive action. The nodes of the network are still human beings. The long-term impact for peace of new techniques in communication may be judged by asking: Did invention of the telephone prevent World War I? Did invention of the radio prevent World War II?

The norm of North Atlantic societies is peculiar to itself and revealing in its origins. In the era of the Holy Roman Empire, perhaps, state and church and society could be said to have been inseparable. But Western Europe developed in a manner that made state and church distinct and contending entities. The Protestant Reformation then added another dimension of society in which individual conscience became preeminent.

Islam and the Muslim world, however, proceed from different premises. There is no "church." Regardless of the state to which one may pay taxes, the broadest entity to which one owes allegiance is the *umma*, or the global community of believers. Invoking "civil society" therefore does not have the muscle tone historically developed in France or the United States, nor does it have the same powerful claim on personal values. Nonetheless, educated persons in the Arab worlds, professionals and

¹⁰Bruce B. Lawrence, "Islam and Civil Society – Perspectives from Egypt before and after Mubarak," talk prepared for Philadelphia, 2 May 2011 (but not formally given, displaced by news of the death of Osama bin Laden), p. 2.

¹¹Christopher Alexander, "Authoritarianism and Civil Society in Tunisia," Middle East Report, October-December, 1997.

intellectuals often proclaim “civil society” to justify and advance their vision.

As they do so, they may or may not be aware that the present currency of the term derives from its use before and after 1989, in the Eastern European countries throwing off Soviet imperial rule and internal exploitation by Communist autocrats and elites. Its use was meant to signify votes that counted, consciences that mattered, and organizations—both for business and not-for-profit—that were allowed independent roles in creating a new national vitality. Not all the nations that redesigned themselves are stories of success; the best may not yet be exuberantly productive, and the worst still contain some police repression. But none would seek to return to the Communist era, with its citizen-automatons, glorified bureaucrats, state-controlled media, and schools with dogmatic curricula. Something new has emerged: not error-free by any means, but in principle tolerant of error, and willing to proceed by the public contest of opinions.¹² Those are essential characteristics of society becoming civil. Whatever the historical background or the present circumstances of the Arabs desiring something new, they are not wrong to express their yearning as “civil society.”

By being youthful and peaceful, the majority of those participating in present uprisings radiate more hope than Nasserite pan-Arab nationalism ever contained. Their peacefulness conveys promise to non-Arab nations, and their youthfulness supplies promise to their own cultures. What matters still more are the concepts of society they bring forward to their citizenry. The best of those are anti-dynastic, non-patriarchal, and democratic. They reflect Alexis de Tocqueville far more than Ibn Khaldūn. They may be based on neither, but instead arise from a 20th century vocabulary of hope. They ignore the elite lockjaw that shuts down argument, and plunge instead into a pluralistic discourse that will engage whole populations.

SHI'ITE ABSOLUTISM, SUNNI ROYALTY

Some societies of West Asia (“Middle East”), nevertheless, are markedly averse to concepts of civil society, most notably Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran, of course, projects Persian values, and is therefore unlikely to adopt Arabian trendlines. More basically still: the ideology of its revolution against the Shah in 1979 has replaced a hereditary secular autocrat with his ecclesial equivalent, a Grand Ayatollah. Jurist-theologians are ascribed a Shi'ite infallibility, supreme in faith, practice, and policy. Their Supreme Leaders have consigned thousands to death in the 1980s (Khomeini) and treat articulate liberal democrats today to prison and torture (Khamenei).

Faith and the state are also interlocked, but differently, in the richest kingdom of the region. Saudi royalty and Wahhabi theocracy linked up a quarter of a millennium ago. No parliament threatens to contest the king; consultative councils are royally appointed; petitions come less from subjects than from those who might be called “abjects”; and women, half the population, have no legal standing at all. King Abdullah and his government have pumped the equivalent of \$5000 per person into the social economy. While upheavals proceed elsewhere, the Saudi people appear lulled or even stupefied. When adventurous women proclaimed June 17, 2011 a day for themselves to drive in defiance of custom and police, only thirty or forty were estimated to have done so across the country. Twenty years previous, more women—47 exactly—had gone briefly to jail in Riyadh for taking the wheels of their cars.¹³

These two neighboring absolutisms, Iran and Saudi Arabia, loathe and fear each other. Upon the Persian/Arab divide is built Shi'ite/Sunni antipathy; and upon both is loaded national competition for regional influence. Their tensions recently came to a head in Bahrain, when the majority Shi'ite population arose to protest felt discrimination by King Isa Al-Khalifa and his Sunni elite advisors. Fearing that the meager freedoms already allowed would become the basis for further agitation, the government shut down the media, closed off the social networks, and physically obliterated the Pearl Square monument, so that no symbol or place might remain for the dissidents who camped there. Twenty-eight Shi'ite mosques were completely leveled, of which ten had been counted as historic structures.¹⁴ Saudi troops and forces from the Gulf Cooperation Council were invited in as reinforcements where an estimated 100,000 people—one-seventh of the native population—had demonstrated. Even though organizers like Muniro Fakhro, with decades of feminist experience, stressed national unity, many of Bahrain's Sunnis and neighboring Saudis want no event like Tahrir Square in the Gulf, fearing it would play to the advantage of Iran.

In the vortex of the Arab uprisings, royalty itself began to project its concerns. The Gulf Cooperation Council, a nest of rich familial kingdoms, extended invitations to membership far beyond its region, to Morocco and to Jordan. This hope of turning the affinities of monarchy into a wider political solidarity may be reckoned as one of the effects of the uprisings of 2011. But it appeared to have less potential as a decisive trend than piquancy as a defining moment in the endangered history of Arab royalties. The most effective monarchical coping comes from King Mohammed VI of Morocco, who from the beginning of his

¹²My outlook here was informed by numerous trips, as President of Eisenhower Fellowships, to Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria, 1985-1992.

¹³The figure “47” comes from my own interviews in Riyadh with two female drivers of 1991. Other information: [//www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/17/Saudi-arabia-women-drivers-protest...](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/17/Saudi-arabia-women-drivers-protest...)
[//English.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/06/201161694746333674.html](http://English.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/06/201161694746333674.html).

¹⁴On mosques: www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/05/30/114980/bahrain's-official-tally-shows.

reign in 1999 has tried to anticipate the people's needs, liberalizing the family code and rights for women, and incrementally devolving his powers under the constitution.

LIBYA, YEMEN, SYRIA

Libya, Yemen, and Syria complete the list of major national actors in the Arab convulsions. Their civil war, anarchy, and extreme repression respectively do not foster the creative discourse from which modern societies are built. Libya, even though its population of six million is less than a third of the other two countries, has long attracted attention because of the antics of its dictator, Muḥammad Qaddafi. His ruthless killing of protesters triggered an intervention by NATO forces, which remained conflicted in motive and mission. To what degree was the intervention humanitarian (as Obama pictured it) and to what degree anti-immigrant (by fearful European countries)? To what degree protective of Libyan civilians, and in what measure protective of oil flow to the West? After a half-year of Arab uprisings, there was no sure answer to such questions, nor a clear outcome of the struggle. All the elements of civil war were present, including geographic split between status-quo government in Tripoli and rebel government in Benghazi.

Yemen's troubles were embodied in its autocrat of three decades, Ali Abdullah Saleh. When he seemed an obstacle, agreements were brokered by the Gulf Council and encouraged by the United States that he withdraw from power in return for immunity from prosecution. Three different times on the verge of accepting them, he publicly reneged. He finally departed for Saudi Arabia for treatment of wounds received in an attack on his palace mosque. His country was in the grips of urban battle in Sana, Taiz, and elsewhere, colored by tribal divisions between his followers and the allies of the clan Ahmar. Blood feuds persist in Yemen, and are not conducive to solving its problems. At the bottom of the Arab League in GDP per capita, its 22 million people were "awash in weapons" while its oil reserves were emptying out and its water supplies were drying up. "Water stress" has been growing intense as annual demand exceeds renewable supply, with ground water seriously declining. Some urban housewives cannot wash dishes or flush toilets. Here human dignity was challenged in a fundamental way: compromised personal cleanliness. Could a new national culture emerge from the protests? After five months of campout, marches, lectures, and demonstrations focused in University Square, a detectible fusion was emerging of hip, academic, feminist, and liberal oppositionist values. But a similar long-term cultivation of solidarity was going on among nearby pro-government forces, implying continued conflict.

Syria's government has its own unique and uncompromising style in suppressing protest. Saudi Arabia has done so by taming its people with a flow of social funding, while Iran does so again by clubbing and jailing those who demonstrate. Iran, however, has recent historical leverage from its revolution of 1979, by which it can brand any dissident as a counter-revolutionary. This charge benefits from the theological undertone conveyed by being the world's leading Shi'ite power, and the political overtone of having deposed the corrupt Westernizing Shah. The Syrian government has no such psychic resources. It is held together in its presidential family and its top military echelons by Alawites—a religious minority that may be characterized as Shi'ite or syncretist, depending on who is articulating its beliefs. And those Alawite leaders have, instead of a revolutionary heritage to draw on, the ugly memory of the father and uncle of the current leaders stomping down revolt of Muslim Brotherhood members in 1982 with thousands of deaths.

The family clique of Al-Assad, involved in many businesses and entwined in the apex of government, wield power for the interests of the military, intelligence, arms trade, and repression of protest.¹⁵ As a family corporate conglomerate, their form of security-obsessed power replaces the old idea of dynasty. The regime of the Al-Assads does not believe in freedom of information. An American journalist friend of mine, in Damascus during the regime of the father, Hafez, witnessed a failed attempt to assassinate that president, and he accordingly filed a report to his wire service. He was then arrested, interrogated, and told he was disseminating lies. "But I *saw* it," he said. "No, you didn't," was the reply. With rubber hoses they beat the naked soles of his feet until he recanted; then let him crawl into a prison cell with dozens of other men and two buckets, one for drinking water and one for excrement.

Foreign correspondents in Syria have been disallowed since first demonstrations in March 2011. Social networking is severely truncated. Under those conditions, nonetheless, crowds gathered in Dera'a to protest the imprisonment of boys eight to fifteen years old who had scrawled anti-regime graffiti on the walls of their schoolhouse. When a thirteen-year-old youth, Hamza Al-Khateeb, was allegedly tortured to death and his penis cut off, photos of his corpse further stoked the fires of civil rage.

The regime replied through a careful account by the president of the Medical Examiners of Syria, who nervously testified on video that three bullets ("life-wounds, not torture") caused Hamza's death, that there were no signs of torture, and that his penis was undamaged, although the body had decomposed in the weeks that it had remained unidentified.¹⁶ This death has nonetheless been made into a symbol of Syrian protest in the pattern set by the case of Khaled Said in Egypt: "We are all Hamza Al-Khateeb."

¹⁵bbc.co.uk/news/world/middle-east-13216195—"Bashar Al-Assad's Inner Circle," May 18, 2011.

¹⁶This video appears on YouTube as "Hamza Al Khatib-Truth of his Death." I cite it despite its unpersuasive tone and its unpopularity. Several other videos on Hamza are dramatically sympathetic to him, highly political, and much more often visited.

To this the regime's reply is more tanks, helicopter gunships, and loyal troops with machine guns. Elite brigades have gone to rebellious cities west and east along the northern border with Turkey, and "pacified" them with violence or preemptive presence. These heavily Sunni tribal areas mutter darkly against the Alawite leaders of the country, and their own Alawite neighbors.

No city wants the honor of being Hama, where in 1982 government forces under President Hafez Al-Assad's brother, Rifat, killed 10,000 (some say 20,000). As a showdown intensifies a generation later, it is another pair of brothers, Bashar and Maher, poised to do the same, against demonstrators lightly armed or weaponless but willing to look death in the eye. Blood feuds run deep; still deeper when fueled by religion.¹⁷

GENDER JUSTICE AND JUSTICE IN GENERAL

For over a century, feminisms in the Arab regions and across the Muslim world have been produced by women, for whom stakes are higher than men in rethinking gender, religion, and culture.¹⁸ In the uprisings of 2011, women are even more intensely than before registering those dynamics and seeking new definitions. It is far too early for conclusive summary, but not premature to look at specifics.

Tunisia, which abolished slavery more than a century before Saudi Arabia, remains a social leader among Arab nations. Even as their independent electoral commission postpones a national election for three months to ensure adequate registration, all participating parties are required to list as many women as men candidates, and to alternate them on the ballots. The liberal Progressive Democratic Party, with co-leaders, male and female, says it had already planned to field gender in equal numbers. Al Nadha, which is a liberal Islamist party by regional standards, even if conservative in the Tunisian value spectrum, supports the requirement, declaring that it had already developed a strong cadre of women to pursue its work when Ben Ali put many of its party's men in jail.¹⁹

Egypt, with over eighty million people, is by size and length of tradition closely watched, even if the phenomena permitted by the supreme military council are neither supple nor subtle. Young women such as the Coptic physician, Dr. Sally Tooma Moore, were leaders of the youth groups who took over Tahrir Square and made all the world hold its breath. Even a near-octogenarian slept out there, the aged and tested feminist, Nawal al-Saadawi, whose novels and books had been banned. As a physician herself, psychiatrist, and long-time leader (first a victim at age six) in the campaign against female genital mutilation, her eminence had won her international notice. Then by the Sadat regime she was dismissed from her fourteen-year job in the Ministry of Health. When she wrote a memoir about her time in jail, she began it using a prostitute's eyebrow pencil and toilet paper. In Tahrir she knew she belonged. Her American friend, Islamicist Bruce Lawrence, managed to reach her there by cell phone. "Bruce, Bruce," she exclaimed in delight at the young people all around her, "they are *reading my books!*"

There were notable reversals as well. The male mob groping of Lara Logan of CBS was a frightening spontaneous incident. Systematically ugly, however, was the post-Mubarak incident of "virginity tests," as demonstrations continued for diverse causes. Young women were taken in by the military and, as alleged defense against false charges of rape, were stripped, photographed, and required to submit to medical proof (or disproof) of their virginity, restrained by female soldiers while a man in a white coat examined them. Widespread outrage in Egypt moved the military to disown this illogical and humiliating practice.²⁰ Rotten masculine intimidation arose again when a "Million Women March" was planned for March 8, International Women's Day, especially to protest non-inclusion of any women on the constitution reform panel then at work. Fewer than a thousand women appeared, and they were taunted and quickly disrupted by aggressive men.

Libya, in its civil war, has women far more prominent as victims than as leaders. Iman al-Obeidi, who complained of gang rape by Qaddafi soldiers, was then forcibly abducted by agents of the government from a hotel lobby where she was meeting with journalists.²¹ After release from imprisonment, she left the country. A human rights group says that Hillary Clinton has helped arrange a flight to the United States for her and her father. Will the National Transition Council in Benghazi focus on countering such barbarities against women? The Council has only one female member.

A timeline of opposition in Syria bulges with religious contention and brutal repression, but not with female heroes. The government uses Bouthaina Shaaban, a British-educated scholar of Arab women and literature, to reach out to old oppositionists while young ones are disinclined to talk. Who will preserve the "canopy" of religious and cultural variety that

¹⁷For historical ideology and emotion on this subject, see <talismangate.blogspot.com/2007/05/new-syrian-group-delivers-anti-alawite-calling-card>.

¹⁸Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford, Oneworld, 2009), p. 310 and *passim*.

¹⁹New York Times, 9 June 2011, p. A10.

²⁰Isobel Coleman, <cnn.com/2011/OPINION/06/01/coleman.egypt.women/index>.

²¹The abduction appears on <yahoo.com/video/play?p+iman%20%20obeidi&tnr...>. More offensive detail is conveyed, compellingly, on YouTube, "Eman Al-Obeidi to Anderson Cooper (complete)."

has survived, even flourished, in Syria under minority sectarian power?²² Gunships are not good for canopies. Fourteen hundred have already died, activists say, and over 10,000 have been arrested. Perhaps a lost provincial event will have to stand for female courage in Syria. When hundreds of men were rounded up in the villages of Bayda and Beir Jnad, to crush dissent, two thousand women and children the following day blocked the coastal highway, demanding their release. “We will not be humiliated,” they cried. And the authorities freed about a hundred men, some bruised and with apparently broken bones, to cheers and cries of triumph from the protesters.²³

Yemen has been absolute last in the world in the Global Gender Gap Report ever since it was first published in 2006. It is likely to remain there, significantly below Chad and Pakistan. Sixty-seven percent of its women are illiterate. Of its 301 parliamentarians, just one is female. Above this data, a mother of three stands out. Tawakkul Karman is chair of Women Journalists Without Chains, which addresses national issues not just of women, but of unemployment and corruption.²⁴ She has also orated to crowds for four years, in weekly protests against the rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh; and she astonishes men that they are not only spoken to by a woman, but roused by her remarks. One woman does not make a political revolution, nor can one alone spark a gender transformation. Where there is one such as Karman, however, there are many others hoping for change and willing to do something about it. But does Yemen have sufficient cohesion in its makeup to prevail over its combustibility? The prospect of Saleh coming back as president touches in Tawakkul Karman a self-destructive anger. “If [he] returns and is president, people will blow themselves up. We will not care about our lives.”²⁵

Margot Badran has been surveying feminisms in Egypt and throughout Islam across four decades. The eighteen days of protest in Tahrir Square, getting millions beyond fear, have given her “jet fuel” of renewed optimism. Exclusion of women from the drafting committee of the interim constitution was a blow, but female lawyers and judges are freshly energized. She sees senior women as having the networks, standing, and skills for new achievement; middle-generation women as experienced and sensitized in development and human rights; and young women as “hell-bent” on getting things done, working together with young men.

The sequence ahead on the Nile appears to be: elections in September (if Tunisia’s delay does not influence a similar one in Egypt); constitutional matters percolating forward into 2012; with revisions of the Personal Status Law and family law reform only possible after changes in the constitution. Everything is up for grabs. But not everything will be transformed. Politically, Badran realizes, idealists will lose to hard religious forces and stiff patriarchalism if they insist too fiercely on gender justice. But this is the time to determine what is critical and to press for it. In a paper entitled “The Sovereignty of Equality,” she lays out her conviction that the egalitarian readings of Islamic text are the compelling ones. Persons of either gender and of all religions have equal rights.²⁶

Such views, I believe, do not require a miracle to be realized. They require work, today, tomorrow, and the next day. Time has shown that Ibn Khaldûn’s philosophy of history is far from adequate to the present Arab era. *Asabiyyah* may explain how cities and civilization arose from Bedouin savagery. But cities are now a given, and civilization emerges variously in new dimensions. To evolve in the Arab regions, a new and greater cohesion is necessary beyond desert tribalism and between genders; and there must also be a new civil sensibility, accessible to minorities. Accompanying both, to ensure against Ibn Khaldûn’s tedious cycles, probity is required in management of resources and in delivery of benefits to whole populations, not just to narrow elites and self-indulgent princelings.

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²²Quotation from Malise Ruthven, “Storm over Syria,” *New York Review of Books*, 9 June 2011, pp. 16-20. “Women and the Rise of Religious Consciousness,” by Anonymous, is a brave attempt, necessarily controversial, to open up the subject for Syria and the region: Joshua Landis, Syria Comment, 28 September 2010

²³<huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/13/Syria-protest-women-block-highway+n_848475>.

²⁴Alice Hackman, <mideastposts.com/2011/03/03/tawakkul-karman-the-woman-leading-yemens-protests/>. Further on Karman, on Asmaa Mahfouz, and Munira Fakhro, is found in Natana DeLong-Bas, “Women of the Arab Spring...” Common Ground News Service, 20 June 2011.

²⁵New York *Times*, 11 June 2011, p. A6.

²⁶Margot Badran to the author, 7, 8 June 2011.

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