



## **The Arab Spring: The Worst of Times and Best of Times**

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On December 17, 2010 Mohamed Bouazizi got up, as he did most days, to sell vegetables and fruit. This might sound like the typical story of a poor Middle Eastern shopkeeper. Instead, Bouazizi was and is one of thousands of unemployed college graduates in Tunisia. That day police confiscated his produce because he did not have a license. In response Bouazizi set himself on fire. Stories immediately circulated on Facebook. He survived with burns over 90% of his body until he died two weeks later on January 4, 2011.

While Bouazizi and the men of his generation lived in educated poverty, scrounging money and unable to marry without it; Tunisian president, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, who came to power in 1987 lived a life of conspicuous opulence. Under Ben Ali's leadership inflation and unemployment grew while freedom of expression shrank. Bouazizi was a handsome young man in his 20's, his whole life ahead of him, except that it wasn't due to the corruption, poverty, and suppression of the Tunisian government and President.

Bouazizi never recovered consciousness to learn that his violent action began what has come to be known as the Arab Spring, influencing protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Iran, Iraq, Algeria, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and other countries. So far the leaders of Tunisia and Egypt have stepped aside due to mass, unexpected protests that have escalated for five months now. Libya is split into civil war, with the followers of Muammar Gaddafi fighting rebels looking for change, reform, and freedom. Countries like Yemen and Syria have daily, violent demonstrations over autocratic and repressive rulers who will not leave (Presidents Salah and Assad respectively). But honestly, who elected these men President? They have the titles of a democracy but not the activities. And that, is finally international news. For a full accounting, please go to the interactive timeline available online through *The Guardian*. It is entitled "Path of Protest" and is a clear, thorough, and easy way to catch up on what has happened where.

The protests are astounding. Tunisia began protesting in December. Less than a month later (January 2011) their President, Ben Ali, fled the country. On January 23 protests began in Yemen. Two days later the historic protests began in Tahrir Square in Egypt. Shortly thereafter protests began in Algeria over food prices. An Algeria man set himself on fire, as did a man in Jordan. Amidst all this protesters gather and have been fired on (dying) across the Middle East, media outlets have been closed, workers

who help the injured have been targeted, as has an Al-Jazeera journalist killed in Libya (by Gaddafi's soldiers), Bahrainian women have been taken into custody to shame their male family members into silence (a great humiliation in Bahrain – NPR report), and there is a report that soldiers in Syria who would not fire on their countrymen were themselves killed.

Bouazizi's self immolation protest reminds me of these words by Frederick Douglass "Find out what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice which will be imposed upon them. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress." The limits of tyrants are also prescribed by the fear of the people they oppress.

It has taken enormous courage, spurred by desperation, for the protestors to continue. As Ed Daley wrote to me about the people in Iran who protested two years ago (and were ultimately stifled) "Those people were immensely courageous, taking their lives in their hands when they repeatedly took to the streets." Protesters (and their family members) in the Middle East are regularly targeted for arrest, torture, and disappearance. We regularly uplift our 5<sup>th</sup> UU value "the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large," but we often forget that for many around the world this values is an unobtainable luxury. What we take for granted as a right is unknown by millions around the world to the extent that they "do not have the right" to protest when they don't have food. This tyranny is a form of human slavery, and yet to defy it one must accept suffering and death. The protestors are courageous, and I have been impressed how often they are women in a society where women are not regularly vocal. The presence of women, though dangerous for the women, and controversial to some, adds a deep legitimacy and cohesion.

The role of fear in suppression and poverty in the Middle East was brought home to me when I spoke with my friend, Aaron, who was a correspondent living in the Middle East from 2002 to 2010. Aaron lived in Israel and Lebanon, and during his time there travelled to Syria, Palestine, the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. His great regret is that he never made it to African or Gulf State countries like Tunisia or Bahrain (not what most of us hope for, but that is Aaron. He was very disappointed he could not get to Libya when the fighting broke out).

Aaron said to me "It was obvious that people were very angry and upset. Translating that into action just didn't seem possible. The amazing thing about dictatorship is that when you drop in for a visit for two weeks for a story you learn that some things do or don't work. But you don't see the insidious nature of it (being watched and followed). That is left for the people after you leave."

Aaron recently participated in a panel discussion with other experts and he was interested in the Arab human rights activist who said "It was not a question of would it happen, but when. People had to not be afraid." The human rights activist also said technology was not required for the Arab Spring to transpire, but Aaron is not so sure.

Aaron notes that 90% of people in Egypt have cell phones and the elite use Twitter, which was widely used when protests in Tunisia influenced protests in nearby Egypt. He also said that "Satellite television – the pan Arab stations – have greatly hastened the Arab spring. When people saw what happened in other countries (Arab countries) they started to ask questions. Why are the roads in Jordan good and the roads in Egypt so crummy?" Aaron explained to me that this revelation, on the condition of roads, went down hard on Egyptians who pride themselves on being a cradle of

civilization.

People who had been struggling in isolation with poverty, unemployment, job loss, and oppression, saw the same in other countries through satellite television, or saw something different and began to want different possibilities. Aaron also explained to me that satellite television is banned (in “theory”) in Iran. For dictatorships, keeping people in the dark has its benefits in keeping people quiet. But Aaron also explained to me that the protestors in Egypt learned from the protestors in Iran two years earlier. That protest was squelched by the authorities who silenced the one or two leaders. Egyptians in 2011 divided leadership and misled police about where they were gathering in order to be successful. I think Ed is right that the Arab Spring began two years ago in Iran (Persia, a Shiite Muslim, non-Arab country).

It is interesting to me, though, that the very first article on Bouazizi’s self immolation that appeared in the *The Guardian* (an English newspaper) noted that within hours the event had been reported in Facebook and was flying across the world. More recently a 13 year old boy, Hamza al-Khatib, was separated from his family during a protest in April. A month later his bullet-riddled, mutilated body was sent back to his family. Instead of remaining silent about this, as Syrian authorities suggested, the family made careful videos and displayed his body for the world to see over the internet. Three male family members were immediately arrested for this act of defiance. Protests in Syria have escalated, chanting the boy’s name, and Secretary of State Hilary Clinton stepped forward to denounce Syria. It is terrible to look into a photo of Hamza as a young boy and consider what has been done to him.

Initially internet providers wouldn’t allow the footage because it is so brutal. But when several human rights groups asked them to reconsider, they did. I have not had the heart to look at the footage. It is deplorable that a 13 year old boy was murdered this way by his own government and now the world knows the emperor has no clothes (in this case President Assad of Syria) and he is a violent, cruel, broken tyrant for the world to see. It has been easy for us on the outside to forget that Syria is in the midst of 48 years of emergency law. How could any country “need” emergency law for 48 years?

Technology has changed the playing field, and exposed many of the Middle Eastern leaders. We are in for a time of painful transition. On the one hand I am relieved because I was so tired of the former stalemate and hostility left over from a legacy of first colonialism that arbitrarily divided areas of the Middle East, second the establishment of Jewish Israel in 1948 which inflamed the Arabic world, and third then the Cold War that re-divided Middle Eastern countries on political lines (West vs. Soviet Union). It is a relief to find Osama bin Laden a sideshow. Even his capture and murder could not override the Arab Spring for long. His complaint is from a passing era and the Arab Spring heralds something new.

So many decades of Middle Eastern dictators have been propped up by countries (including the United States – think the Shah of Iran, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and the House of Saud in Saudia Arabia – that’s all us) for purposes of geo-political influence. Of course many old Cold War loyalties are still a problem for the US and others (think how little we criticize Saudi Arabia which does not even let women drive, because they allow us to have strategic military bases in their country, and then of course there is oil . . .). Too often America acts as a hypocrite in the Middle East, espousing freedom but turning a blind eye to allied oppression.

American intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq has riled up anti-American sentiment. And as often as we intervene and act as hypocrites, I have also thought that no one was discussing the elephant in the room, the tyranny of so many Middle Eastern leaders that leads to failed economic policy and development. For decades it has been convenient for Middle Eastern countries to encourage their citizens to protest against meddling by the West – and we are chronic and unhealthy meddlers. It is true. Yet, yet, there are so many national problems, like economic development, within Middle Eastern countries, and I have not heard them regularly discussed until now.

Remember these protests started because of unemployment. These protests continued because of high inflation and food prices, basic national issues shared by many Middle Eastern countries. Tunisians struggle with unemployment, as do Egyptians, Algerians, Libya, and others. There has been a deplorable lack of economic development, particularly in some of the oil richest countries. Libya has an unsustainable economy created by Gaddafi's favoritism and internal looting, yet lacks many basics like roads, school, and good health care. It's a disaster in the making.

I have been astonished by the Arab Spring, and heartened by these mass movements of regular people for change. I was not expecting the Arab Spring. Few of us were. Aaron was not expecting it either, and he lived there and interviewed citizens and leaders. But my biggest question is what happens a year from now or ten years from now? What are the trajectories of these protests? I asked Aaron if he thought these protests would lead to more war or peace in the Middle East, and he said he did not know. His biggest concern is that the Middle East could descend into latent (and not so latent) tribalism, sectarian violence and civil war.

I should mention the largest lesson Aaron came away with after living in the Middle East for eight years; he despairs of human nature. He has said to me over and over again that people are so tribal, sectarian and clannish. When all is good we will "accept" different people and work with them. When times are tough, like they are in the Middle East, people hunker down and stay close to family and friends, easily distrust outsiders and those who are seen as different. And in the Middle East, there are lots of people seen as "different" – Shiite and Sunni Muslims, Druze, Copts, Christians, Jews. I remember when Yugoslavia fell apart in the 1990's one commentator said "Well it will be interesting to see what bats fly out of the caves." We are looking at a similar situation here.

There is hope that some of these countries have an opportunity to develop and democratize. Aaron is optimistic for Egypt because it has a long history and sense of national identity. It is more progressive and many of its dissidents are returning. But you may recall that in the last month Copts (Egyptian Christians) who are a minority group within the country, have been attacked. Seventy Eight Copts were injured in attacks in one day last May. Within a few days of this Israel opened fire on pro-Palestinian protesters, killing twelve people. Aaron describes Israel as terrified by all the change. As he puts it "The devil you know is better than the devil you don't know."

The day after we talked Aaron sent me a link to a *New York Times* article about ethnic violence that occurred last year after the authoritarian leader of Kyrgyzstan was ousted. According to the article the Kyrgyz majority was elated by his departure, but angry after the minority Uzbeks who live there demanded more rights. Kyrgyzstan attempted to keep the violence secret, but reports now indicate that 470 people were killed, 1,900 injured, and 411,000 were forced from their homes. In an indication of how justice challenged countries can be, 80% of those arrested for violence are Uzbeks, and 74% of the

victims were also Uzbeks.

Few Middle Eastern countries have the experience, skills, or leadership in participatory government or conflict resolution, let alone in economic development and stabilization. Police and military are used to operating under the order of tyrants. Many of them, like the military in Egypt also have an actual financial investment in areas of national business. That is not always a great incentive to change. And some leaders, such as Assad and Salah (Syria and Yemen) seem unmoved by change and willing to engage in daily murder, ordering soldiers to fire on the crowds, to keep their power intact.

Here is the best of all possible worlds, taken from a *New York Times* article noting that many countries have artificial geographic divisions, and that people have more, not less, in common.

Across the region, the Arab revolution has inspired a rethinking of identity, even as older notions of self hang like a specter over the revolts' success. In its most pristine, the revolution feels transnational, as demands of justice, freedom, and dignity are expressed in a technology driven globalism. It echoes even in Turkey, where religious and national divides are increasingly blurred. Selcuk Sirin, a professor at New York University who has done extensive polling in Turkey, especially among youth, calls this the emergence of "hybrid identities." "Young people don't buy into this idea of a clash, and they don't buy into this idea of fixed identity," he said. "They know how to negotiate these so-called polar opposites, and they're looking for something new."

This would be the best of times. I hope for this time, and we may just see it in some countries. I am just concerned we have not seen the end of the worst of times.