



countries “*are at a decisive stage, which supports neither compromise nor complacency*”.<sup>1</sup>

Attempts to discount this observation were made by reducing it to the threat of abrupt, uncontrolled political changes and specifically that of the Islamist movements, considered in their entirety as enemies of the West. For fear of seeing them take power, democracies have thus preferred to ally themselves with authoritarian regimes in the region, seeking to promote greater stability and security rather than the respect of human rights and the establishment of democratic regimes. But against all expectations, and far from having been led by Islamist organizations, street demonstrations, which began in Cairo and Tunis, were the outcome of dynamic and courageous societies and, above all, were a-religious. An actor who seemed to have evaporated from the Arab political scene since the boom period of independence has resurfaced, namely the “people”, all social classes and communities combined. Their claims, appearing on signs everywhere, were simple and clear, devoid of any ideological reference or demagogical slogan. Roughly speaking, the explanations for the protests can be summarized by discontent around three basic issues: a lack of accountability, a lack of democracy and a lack of jobs. Naturally other factors have to be considered, some being structural, others more directly causal: we have to keep in mind that Arab regimes differ markedly in structure and character and that every country of the so called « Arab system », considered as an under-system of the global one in the study of international relations, has developed its own specificity, history, culture and national vision.

### **Demography, economic pressures, social networks and western support to dictators as fuel for change**

The protests were for the most part started by young people under the age of 25, representing in most of the countries of the region 45 to 55 percent of the population – this youth was increasingly qualified, frustrated in its search of employment, open to the outside world and able to mobilize

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1 **Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations.** United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2002.

effectively, especially through use of the Internet and social networks.<sup>2</sup>

Then, we have to take into account the global economic crisis, which started in 2008. It had a deep impact on the Arab financial sector, with a loss of 2.5 trillion dollars as a result of the global financial meltdown. It aggravated a situation, which was already very difficult, especially for non-oil producing countries: one-third of the region's population lives today on less than two dollars a day and the combined GDP of the 22 Arab countries is less than that of Spain; this means that expectations for the future remain very low in the Arab world. The financial crisis also caused emigrants to return, causing significant cash losses for the countries concerned.

Finally, the international community was wrong in supporting dictators and their undemocratic governments, in not putting any pressure on them. It turns out that some of the most authoritarian regimes -- notably those in Egypt and Saudi Arabia -- were, or are there because the West has propped them up, over the fierce opposition and suffering of their own people. If we want to pinpoint responsibility for the lack of democracy in the Middle East, maybe we might stop trying to find defects in the Arab soul and start looking in the mirror. The idea of "Arab exception" was wrong and offensive because of the historic Western view that Arab nations were socially unfit to democracy. Thus, the superpowers, and the U.S. in particular, played a direct role in triggering the "Arab Spring".

### **Transitions at risk, unpredictable perspectives**

February 11, 2011 (when Mubarak stepped down) was the culmination of the Arab revolution. But the day after, on February 12, the counterrevolution began. Indeed, the mood has rapidly shifted from elation to pessimism.

In Egypt, once vote counting, and not the size of the crowds on Tahrir Square, has allowed us to assess the actual political orientations of the population, what has emerged is an ominous bipolar split between the military and the Islamists. In Libya, the tyrant has been killed, but in the

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2 Research has shown a striking correlation between such youth bulges and political conflict. A youth bulge can be an asset when coupled with sufficient economic growth, but this has not been the case in the Arab world in general, since youth unemployment is endemic: MENA countries face the world's highest youth unemployment rates in the world.

absence both of state institutions and of a structured civil society, power is largely in the hands of armed and aggressive militias. In Tunisia, the most promising case, but also the easiest, given its size, cultural level and secular traditions, the jury is still out on the possibility to withstand, without infringing the rules of a still budding democracy, the onslaught of radical and intolerant Islamists. In Syria, popular discontent toward the Assad regime has turned into a bloody conflict, with a heavy human cost and unclear prospects for a democratic solution.

Developing a form of politics that can accommodate different ideologies and values within a larger framework is the central political challenge facing all the Arab transitions. Most of the countries in North Africa and the Middle East are emerging from decades of authoritarian rule in which political competition was either severely restricted or unknown. There is little political culture of negotiation, compromise, or responsible opposition on which these countries can draw. Naturally, there are liberal groups, that believe the state should allow broad scope for individuals to live according to their own values, but they do not have enough popular support at this point to prevail in political competition.<sup>3</sup>

Arab countries may follow paths similar to those taken by Turkey and Indonesia, where socially conservative Muslim parties play active roles in electoral politics within democratic systems. They could experience something like Iraq’s fractious identity-based politics, where sectarian affiliation plays a strong role but where the prospect of an Islamist *system* is dim. The turn away from authoritarianism could, however, open up space for groups to promote Islamist forms of government. The parameters of political Islam in Arab countries undergoing political change have yet to be defined.

Transition should mean that we know not only where we are coming from, but also where we are headed. Can we really say we know? The soundest forecast may be that the future course of these unpredicted changes is, and remains unpredictable.

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3 Anthony Dworkin, « The Struggle for Pluralism After the North African Revolutions ». The European Council on Foreign Relations, London, March 2013.

**Civil society: from where and how far?**

The Arab revolts have left societies with a broad groundswell of support for the idea of democratic government, but no consensus about how democracy should be instituted. The crucial question for these societies is whether a critical mass of political forces will come to mobilize behind the key elements of democratic pluralism including: the acceptance of the alternation of power, a separation between state institutions and political parties, the ability of all groups that accept democratic principles to participate in political life on fair terms, and a political system that respects the variety of different beliefs and affiliations in society.<sup>4</sup>

Like many terms in political science, civil society has many different definitions and interpretations spanning across time. Early thinkers began to develop a working definition of civil society. Hobbes and Locke see the state as originating in civil society. Montesquieu and Tocqueville conclude that civil society exists partially in opposition to the state, a sort of check to state power. Gramsci and other Marxists place civil society outside the power structures of the state. This historical context helps to provide some context to proceed with. While the list of literature debating the finer points of defining civil society can go on for volumes, it is best to define the term in a way that is consistent with the scope of this paper. Civil society can be defined as the realm of spontaneously created social structures separate from the state, which underlie democratic political institutions. Or reduced to its elemental meaning, 'civil society' refers to the zone of voluntary associative life beyond family and clan affiliations, but separate from the state and the market. The central debate in the civil society literature is essentially whether civil society develops before or after the actual process of a democratic transition. There are those who argue that civil society develops after a transition. For most democratic theorists, who tend to see democratization processes and outcomes as contingent on the confluence of international and domestic actors and developments, a democratic civil society develops after the actual process of transition from an authoritarian to a democratic state has taken place. There have been others, however, arguing mostly from sociological and cultural perspectives, who maintain that civil society frequently develops before, and is in fact a main cause of, the transition to a democratic system. In either case, both camps agree that civil society is one of

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4 Anthony Dworkin, *ibidem*.

the crucial phenomena that take shape and become influential during processes of democratic transition.

One of the profound developments now taking place in the ongoing Arab uprisings and transformations is the breakdown of these neat categories we have long used to understand and analyze. We have today this new phenomenon of “street politics”, that shapes developments in virtually all Arab countries – both the six Arab countries that experienced major change (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain) and other countries where unprecedented political action in the street or on the Internet do not reach the level of calling for regime change (Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia). Then, the continuous spectacle of large numbers of people in the streets demonstrating against some policy, or some person or political group, represents not only a new kind of politics, but perhaps also a new center of gravity of political action at the local and national levels.

So can we refer to this phenomenon of street politics as part of “civil society”? I have doubts, because the activism of millions of people has been challenging established autocratic orders without creating stable new orders. The masses of demonstrators were –and are- not organized into clear groups, with expressed aims and with clear programs and leaders. The crowds have been often spontaneous gatherings, merely a mass of many individuals rather than an organized association of members. They have certainly been giving form to that valuable space in the public sphere where real political contestation takes place in today’s new world. Maybe and hopefully, they could become tomorrow’s civil society.<sup>5</sup>

### **Some suggestions on what the West could (or should) do to promote democracy and support civil society**

Focusing on societal engagement, economic reform, and military confidence building, the West should break with its questionable past and respond to the Arab uprisings by taking bold action to improve its reputation. The uprisings in the Arab world have attracted support and sympathy from citizens all over the world, and these revolutions are an opportunity to embrace our Western values by supporting the uprisings.

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<sup>5</sup> Rami G. Khouri, “Rethinking Civil Society”, **The Daily Star**, August 23, 2012.

The West should:

1. support the formation of pro-democracy political parties; in other words, strength the democratic trends within societies and help political forces from different ideological backgrounds to develop « rules of engagement » in the democratic process;
2. channel the social demands: there is space for sustained collaborations with networks of labor and professional unions;
3. accompany the democratic transition process with constitutional safeguards that mitigate the risk that one force reaching a majority government seeks to change its democratic nature, also with laws that don't magnify anyone's electoral weight (as happened in Algeria);
4. recognize Islamist parties as legitimate partners the moment they abide by democratic rule;
5. get a new approach to development; this is a challenge that the transitioning countries cannot face alone; they will need the support of the North; outside actors should however focus more on empowering actors than policies, actors who can carry agendas and be partners in negotiations with governments.

Engagement with and support of civil society movements should be a priority for the Western world, because transformations in the former USSR and Eastern Europe have shown that the strength of such movements is critical to democratization processes.

Western-led democracy initiatives in the Arab world will face a credibility issue, so the West will need to take a careful and culturally sensitive approach to civil society engagement. This approach should include a wide range of pro-democracy groups and religious organizations as well. For example, ignoring groups who do not mirror Western values in favor of those we agree with will not be compatible with democracy promotion. Success can only be guaranteed if these initiatives are shaped by local realities. In this context, it is important that the West engages in dialogue

with all the actors, including the Islamist groups.<sup>6</sup>

### **About the Swiss engagement in the region**

Even though Switzerland is not bordering the Mediterranean Sea, its fate is intimately intertwined with the Arab world. It is interconnected with this region in numerous ways, ranging from population, language and religion to economy and energy. With many countries of the region, Switzerland shares the French language as a widely used language.

Since the beginning of the uprisings, Switzerland has been actively involved in providing support to the peoples and countries of the region. In the context of the Libyan and Syrian crisis, for example, it provided humanitarian assistance to refugees and migrants stranded in the region. In Tunisia, it supported the holding of the 2011 elections. Another important priority for Switzerland has been to return illicitly acquired assets of the former leaders back to their countries. In Syria, due to the recent developments, Switzerland has decided to release additional funds for humanitarian aid.

The Swiss strategy in the region has laid down three priority courses of action:

- Support of the transition to democracy and the respect for human rights. These goals will be achieved, for instance, by promoting the rule of law, electoral processes, and structural reforms (particularly in the domains of security and the judicial system) as well as by strengthening civil society and the free media.
- The second priority is to foster programs for economic development and job creation.
- And finally, Switzerland will seek to protect those population groups that are most vulnerable, and to enhance its cooperation in the domain of migration.

Switzerland will be pursuing its activities and engagement in the whole region, because it believes that there exists great potential for mutually

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6 “Arab Spring: The West’s Chance for a Fresh Start ». **Atlantic Memo** 30, <http://archive.atlantic-community.org/app/webroot/files/articlepdf/Memo30.pdf>



beneficial relations and exchanges with the Arab world. This is the role the Mediterranean Sea has played since times immemorial, and the Arab Spring has only increased its importance in this regard. To unlock this potential, however, there is a constant need to build and strengthen bridges between the Western and the Arab world.

We have a shared history. The Arab revolutions are writing a new page today. And we have a duty to write it together, in friendship and partnership, and we have also the duty to turn this new page of history into a flourishing area of cooperation and mutual benefit. By working together, in particular with the civil societies in the whole region, Switzerland will succeed to create the best possible conditions for a peaceful transition.

### **Conclusion**

Daunting challenges clearly lay ahead for all the Arab countries. Prognosticators cannot be certain: Will the “Arab Spring” lead to a flowering of democracy? Will loosening of the political systems in these countries unleash dangerous forces of extremism or ethno-sectarian conflict? Will new autocrats replace the old ones? Will surviving autocrats harden their positions or see the need for at least gradual change? The soundest forecast may be that the future course of these unpredicted changes will be unpredictable.

The dynamic relationship between state and society in the Arab world has not drastically improved. Rather, while the rulers who oversee civil society may have changed, the rules under which they operate remain by and large the same. Certainly, the democratization process will be long, difficult and painful. But it is worth to pay the price. Indeed, the “Arab awakening” is in the first stages of creating a citizen-based sovereignty that values social justice and equal opportunity. As mentioned by Rami Khouri, “it is an audacious quest, for Mohamed Bouazizi and the millions of Arabs inspired by him, just as it was for Rosa Parks and the civil rights movement in the American South”.<sup>7</sup>



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7 Rami G. Khouri, « The Arab Awakening », **The Nation**, August 24, 2011.

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