

“HAIL THE DAWN OF A NEW ARAB NATIONALISM”

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Events in the Arab world will evolve is of course uncertain. What is certain however is that we in the west have to adjust to a new reality: an Arab world that will be more nationalistic. For now, the west is frightening itself with the spectre of political Islam. It is premature to say a solution has been found to avoid moving from the overthrow of authoritarian regimes to sinking into Islamism and there may be surprises on the way but no expert on the Arab world foresees a scenario à la Iran which had taken everyone by surprise, including the Iranians themselves. Islamic parties will emerge stronger from free elections, but the chances they will seek to hijack the democratic process are slim. And there is a counter-example to Iran – Turkey. Rather what we are most likely to witness now is the revival of Arab nationalism coming particularly from the new Egypt and extending around it. This will be a non-chauvinistic, legitimate nationalism, based on a new-found pride. Egypt is historically the heart of the Arab world but it was de facto neutralised for over 30 years and left the Arab world paralysed. Now a democratic Egypt will inevitably seek to reassert its influence. It will not question its peace treaty with Israel nor will it take an aggressive posture. But it will cease to give credibility to a pseudo peace process and stop obliging others by hosting summits of convenience in Sharm el sheikh! This should neither surprise nor alarm the west which will need to avoid the temptation of inventing a new enemy for itself – Arab nationalism! – and should stand ready instead to deal with this new Arab world as a real partner. The long and comfortable era for the West and for Israel has come to an end. We will just have to forgo the cozy relations we had and adapt intelligently. This is also true of other Arab countries especially those in the Gulf who benefitted from Egypt's absence and will now have to adjust to its return. Eventually, a more democratic Egypt as it is emerging will be a more solid partner for peace, that is if Israel agrees to make the compromises the whole world agrees are necessary and which a majority of its own public opinion accepts as long as its security is guaranteed. While it is true the west leaned on the Arab governments and sought their support for its own initiatives, the west did not bring those regimes to power and had no role in their demise. They were overthrown by the revolts of young Arab men and women from Tunisia and Egypt. Others will follow. American neo-conservatives and their followers in Europe have no reason to take credit for any of these revolts. They did not predict them – otherwise why did they develop those theories under George W Bush about the need for military interventions to achieve change? In fact, they only brought disrepute to the notion of democratisation by using it as a pretext to justify the war on Iraq a posteriori. It is fair to ask whether the neo-conservatives did not delay democratisation of the Arab world. That an international coalition intervened in Libya does not change this equation; no one outside Libya predicted let alone fomented the uprising of Benghazi. Libya is an extreme case where the responsibility to protect the insurgents overrode all other considerations. This international engagement under a UN mandate does set a precedent however that will need to be treated carefully. No doubt the Tunisians, Egyptians and others will face daunting problems. Libya's future is fraught with uncertainty. Building a cohesive democratic society after the legacy of Muammar Gaddafi might take longer and be harder. Yemen and Syria each present unique challenges. There will be moments of regression, but there are also hopeful prospects. Morocco is one of them after the king announced sweeping reforms. How these Arab processes will evolve will not be our decision, which does not exempt us from imagining and formulating a smart and sophisticated policy to support them and help them succeed. Whatever turn events might take, the Arab world is back as a full actor. It is in the interest of the West to bet on its future now while it is emerging. There should be a Euro-Arab partnership for democratisation with countries who ask for it, but this has to be driven by their demands rather than our assumptions. Arabs have become autonomous actors on the stage. We have to cease over-estimating our role in shaping their fate. As they move to build democratic institutions, Arab states will likely take a more assertive profile and pursue their national interests with stronger self-confidence. Egypt is already setting the tone by signaling to each of the three major powers of the region (Turkey, Iran and Israel) and also Sudan that it seeks to open a new page in its relationship with them. Other countries will likely follow in its footsteps though each will define its own terms. This new nationalism has little to do with the pan-Arabism of the 1950s. It reflects a yawn for increased sovereignty in managing foreign policy interests. Objectively, we have no reason to fear it.



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29/03/2011