

## Power Transition: The Arab Spring and Contestations of American Hegemony

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### Abstract:

The Arab revolutions that had been triggered from Tunisia in 2010, with the self-immolation of *Bouazizi*, and then were spread in many countries of the Arab world, took the authoritarian regimes in this latter but also the international community by surprise, which made the Arab Spring the most critical and crucial event in the modern history of the Middle East.

The complexity and surprising political developments of the Arab Spring, made regional politics trespass the American hegemony. Thus, the United States found itself since the inception of those events, in the sidelines; incapable to manipulate the rising regional forces, and avoiding to take part on local issues, such as the case of Egypt.

Therefore, if the U. S. power is less efficient and less willing to intervene, the rising regional powers (Iran and Turkey) will seize this opportunity to reorder the regional affairs according to their own priorities, and this goes against U. S. vital interests in the region.

### ملخص:

إن الثورات العربية التي انطلقت شرارتها من تونس في 2010، من خلال حرق بوعزيزي لنفسه، وانتشار هذه الشرارة بعد ذلك في الكثير من دول العالم العربي، أخذت الأنظمة الإستبدادية في هذا الأخير ولكن أيضا المجتمع الدولي على حين غرة، مما جعل الربيع العربي، الحدث الأكثر أهمية وحسما في التاريخ الحديث للشرق الأوسط.

إن تعقد وفجائية التطورات السياسية للربيع العربي، جعلت السياسات الإقليمية تتجاوز الهيمنة الأمريكية، وهكذا وجدت الو.م. أ نفسها ومنذ بداية الأحداث، على الهامش، غير

قادرة على التعامل مع القوى الإقليمية الصاعدة، متجنباً التدخل في القضايا المحلية، مثل حالة مصر. بالتالي مادامت القوة الأمريكية أقل كفاءة وأقل استعداداً للتدخل، فإن القوى الصاعدة الإقليمية (تركيا وإيران)، ستغتنم هذه الفرصة لإعادة ترتيب الشؤون الإقليمية وفقاً لأولوياتها، وهو ما يتعارض مع المصالح الحيوية الأمريكية في المنطقة.

### Introduction: the basic arguments

It is believed that revolutions have no specified time, and cannot be expected, that is why Karl MARX compared the revolutions with the mole, which dig tunnels underground discreetly, and when we least expect it, it suddenly shows its head on the surface to take a breath of air.

This act of the mole's breaking out on the surface could be compared with the spectacular emergence of the revolutions, but the most important part in this comparison is not the hidden aspect of the revolution, but rather its preparation; the least prepared revolution, is the easiest to defeat, that is to say a revolution needs to produce organizations that can withstand the counter-revolution. <sup>(1)</sup>

The Arab revolutions that had been triggered from Tunisia in 2010, with the self-immolation of Bouazizi, and then were spread in many countries of the Arab world, took the authoritarian regimes in this latter but also the international community by surprise, which made the Arab Spring the most critical and crucial event in the modern history of the Middle East.

The complexity and surprising political developments of the Arab Spring, made regional politics trespass the American hegemony. Thus, the United States found itself since the inception of those events, in the sidelines; incapable to manipulate the rising regional forces, and avoiding to take part on local issues, such as the case of Egypt.

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The Middle East had been a geopolitical key region since the 90's, and it is still the most important part of the world, although Asia is stealing the spotlights, and would be the next geopolitical center of gravity in the coming years. <sup>(2)</sup>

The objective of this paper, is to address how the United States responded to the Arab Spring events, under the ongoing circumstances, while a non-polarized world is taking place, and with the rise of the rest, such as the rise of China as a regional hegemon in Asia Pacific, and the rise of Iran and Turkey as regional powers seeking hegemonic position in the Middle East, which means as Barry BUZAN argues, that the great powers gap which opened up between the west and the rest in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is closing.

So, the United States still is a superpower, but Barry BUZAN advances that the U. S. is not going to remain one for too much longer as others rise, and that we are going to live in a world with multiple great powers, where each great power will dominate its own region.

And according to that perspective, this paper will address the following question:

**Why cannot the United States accept the power transition in the Arab world, associated with the ongoing changes of the Arab Spring?**

In order to answer the problematic above, the power transition theory will be used, a theory applied in the context of an ongoing power transition between great powers; America's relative declining power from one hand, and the rise of the rest from the other.

This theory is widely applied by IR researchers on the U. S-China power transition issue, which been lately the centric issue in world politics. The theory was initiated by Kenneth ORGANSKI in 1968, it postulates that the structure of international relations is hierarchical, and that there are four levels of power between states: 1. The colonies, 2. Small powers 3. Middle powers, 4. Great powers. And on top of the Pyramid comes the dominant nation. <sup>(3)</sup>

Therefore, the power transition theory suggest that the rising powers become challengers for the dominant nation, challengers that are

conflict-prone as long as they are catching up the gap in terms of power, with the declining hegemon.

Power transition theory will be applied in this analysis on the Middle East-U. S. relations, in the context of the Arab Spring and the rising regional powers that represent both Iran and Turkey, and the challenges associated with these ongoing changes for the U. S. vital interests in the Arab world.

This paper holds the following propositions:

First, the Arab democratic shift resulted from the Arab Spring events, put the western powers in general and the U. S. in particular in an unexpected political impasse, pushing them into a corner where they would have to reformulate their relations with the Arab world, based on fair bargaining, which would not serve the American interests in the region.

Second, the threat that the Persian hegemonic ambitions and expansionist policies represent, in the light of the Arab Spring repercussions and political Islam empowerment, would incite the U. S. A. to intervene along with its allied Arab countries, in order to put Tehran in a vulnerable position.

Third, Turkey is a role model for democracy in the region, and a potential regional hegemon by excellence; with the leadership of Rəcəp Tayeb Erdogane, Turkey has gained the support of many political currents within the Arab world, and Turkey may gain much more leverage in the region.

The importance of this paper lies in addressing the Arab Spring revolutions from the perspective of power transition theory, to understand what the associated transformations mean for the relationships of the U. S. A with the Arab world, and the adopted American reactions accordingly.

#### **I. The distinguishing features of the Arab Spring:**

The origin of the Arab uprisings is wide known to have started with the immolation of Mohamed BOUAZIZI on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010 in Tunisia, which turned out into a popular upheaval that overthrew a 23 years old regime. This revolt shortly stretched to Egypt, where

Mubarak's decades old regime was removed forcibly from power, after the revolution of January 2011 in Tahrir Square.

The fall of Mubarak quickly spread the revolution syndrome across different parts of the Arab region. As a result, people protested in many Arab countries, challenging their authoritarian regimes, from North Africa to the Middle East. <sup>(4)</sup>

Dr. Hani Bin Mohammed –Mayor of Jeddah- described this situation in February 2010 as follows:

“What is happening in Egypt is a historical transformation which has not been witnessed by the Arab world in its modern history. What the demonstration of the youth are demanding is not less than a complete break with the current era at all political, economic, and social levels. We nowadays, are witnessing a radical transformation in the history and geography of the Arab world. Hence the Arab world, after these days, will not be as it was previously”<sup>(5)</sup>

Nevertheless, the impacts of the Arab revolutions were not even throughout the Arab region; the most troubled uprisings were witnessed in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria. Whilst Tunisia succeeded to achieve a real democratic transition away from the despotic rule of Ben Ali, it was unfortunately not the case of Egypt, where the democratic transition was reversed by a military coup d'état; while the regime of Bashar Al-Assad withstood the civil war, and thousands of casualties, supported by Iran and Russia against western countries and the U. S. A overly supporting the opposition.

From the other hand, Jordan, Morocco, and Oman, where only modest protests been observed, have been immediately contained by their regimes, through the initiation of some reforms (political, economic, and social). Whereas the upheavals in Bahrain and Eastern province of Saudi Arabia, had been severely restricted by the governments. <sup>(6)</sup>

However, those insurrections all over the Arab countries, share the same characteristics, especially in Tunisia and Egypt: <sup>(7)</sup>

- Number one, the fall of four despots Arab leaders, was a first in the modern Arab history.

- Number two, the political and economic requests of the protestants were very alike through the Arab countries.
- Number three, the transnational media had been strongly present, covering and broadcasting the events step by step all over the Arab world; in addition of the social networks such as Facebook and Twitter which played a role in highlighting people's grievances.
- Finally and most importantly, those revolutions, particularly the Tunisian and Egyptian ones, proved that the authoritarian regimes in the Arab world were not supported by their populations.

The brutal fall in 2011 of presidents Ben Ali (Tunisia) then Mubarak (Egypt) and Gaddafi (Libya), probably sealed the end of a historical cycle, that of the "authoritarian stability", resulting in the overthrow of decades-year regimes, and leading to the establishment of new political systems, still in transition.

Obviously, the fall of Ben Ali brought down the "wall of fear" in neighboring countries and generated a blast across the Mediterranean. This "Arab Awakening" has in common the rejection of authoritarianism increasingly weighing; the increasing economic and social frustrations, favoring the emergence of Islamist forces; and new aspirations of educated youth and massive fan of social networks - even if it is excessive to speak of "Twitter revolutions" or "Facebook"<sup>(8)</sup>.

## II. The American vision of the Arab Spring:

The Arab uprisings took the United States by surprise, and messed all its calculations and perspectives, even more than the 9/11 events, which did not lead the U. S. to update fundamentally its policy towards the Middle East, the way the Arab Spring did.<sup>(9)</sup>

The answer to the question about whether the U. S. would accept the power transition in the Arab world or not, may be found in the Strategic importance of the Middle East, which is the most vital region for America. And it would be a mistake to think that Washington could support the Arab democratization process, unless it is convenient for U. S. interests, because if the Arab countries embrace democracy, this would require the de-securitization of the American

approach with the Arab countries, including the reduction of its military presence in the region, letting the Arab transitional democratically elected regimes lead their countries according to their own decisions, and manage to agree on a real fair compromise to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. <sup>(10)</sup>

The United States have been focusing a lot on promoting democracy to justify its interference in the affairs of the Arab states, and the absence of any experience of democracy in the Arab world has made it easier for the United States to claim the inability of Arab people to achieve change in the field of democracy.

Nevertheless, the breaking out of the Arab uprisings, marked the eagerness of Arab people to democracy away from dictatorships, and this was a sign of quantum leap in contemporary Arab politics, and an indication of the coming change in the relationship between the Arab world and Western powers in general and the U. S. A in particular.

And as we mentioned above, if the Arab countries embrace democracy, it will lead inevitably to a paradigm shift in the U. S-Arab relations, based on mutual interests and self-determination; the Arab governments would put the national interests above everything else, because if they fail, they will lose the support of their people, whom will withdraw confidence from those governments, and replace them by others much more efficient, through pure democratic elections, and this kind of development would have regional and international implications.

The democratization of the Arab states, will put the elected Arab governments in a better bargaining position to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict in the name of freedom, which is one of the key principles of democracy.

This shift in Arab politics, will put the U. S double standards policy at stake, and complicate the traditional U. S approach in the region, putting it in front of a fact which is difficult to reject: Democracy cannot be applied selectively. And this would intrinsically diminish the American influence in the Arab world, and since nature does not

tolerate a vacuum, regional rising powers (Iran and Turkey) will gain leverage at the expense of U. S core interests.

### III. The Emergence of Regional Powers (Iran and Turkey)

As Iran is seeking to be a regional power, the government attempted to take the chance and gain advantage from the Arab Spring, by trying to compare the Arab protests by Iran's revolution of 1979. Thus, the Iranian regime eagerly declared that a new wave of Islamic awakesness is overcoming the Middle East, through popular uprisings, overturning Western backed tyrants in favor of an empowered Islam, and that was a good scenario for Iran, to get the Middle East within its sphere of influence. <sup>(11)</sup>

The hegemonic aspirations of Iran and its project to dominate the Shiite crescent –from the Atlantic to the Gulf- has always been an open secret, causing wide concerns from the neighboring Sunni Arab countries, that's why although Saudi Arabia supported the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt through its media, it has vividly gone against any political change in Bahrain, arguing that the unrest in this latter was plotted by the Iranian regime in order to make their imperial perspectives in the region come true. Which is why Saudi Arabia also led the opposition to the Iranian nuclear programme, a programme that raises the concerns of Western powers too, especially the United States.

In its edition of May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2012, Al-Watan –one of the main Saudi daily newspaper- contemplated the Saudi vision of this matter by arguing that the Iranian nuclear programme reflects the Iranian dream to establish the Persian empire all over the Arab world, and in order to make this dream come true, the Iranian regime adopts different approaches, varying between Shiite expansionism agenda, and supporting the resistance against Israel to gain the sympathy of the Arab public opinion. <sup>(12)</sup>

This approach is a prior condition for the establishment of the Iranian regional hegemony, Iran is seeking opportunities to weaken Washington's allies, and drive the United States out of the region, which is considered as a threat to the U. S dependent monarchies of the Gulf. <sup>(13)</sup>



Nevertheless, no matter how Iran is one of the largest rising regional power in the Middle East, its regime will remain the object of suspicion and distrust, especially aftermath the Arab Spring events, which made the regional environment far less lenient arena for Iranian influence. <sup>(14)</sup>

Moreover, and from the other hand, there is another rising power in the regional system, one that represents a threat to the dominance and influence of Iran. Indeed, Turkey succeeded in establishing its influence in the region, it is considered as a role model with its prosperous economy, and distinct foreign policy, and democratic-secular government, that managed to integrate Islamic parties into Turkey's political system, through the election of the Turkish Justice and Development party (AKP). And since the Arab Spring events of 2011, Iran takes Turkey for its regional rival, whose dealing with the United States and the anti-Iran Arab states to promote the Sunni Islam.

Thus, Turkey has gained the support of many political currents within the Arab world, including the Islamists ones, and when Iran appears to be leading the Shii arc by supporting Nouri Al-maliki in Iraq, and Al-assad regime in Syria; Turkey appears to be leading the Sunni arc, by supporting the secular Iraq movement of Ayad Allawi, and accusing the Syrian regime of crime against humanity, and expelled its diplomats. <sup>(15)</sup>

Not to mention that Turkey benefit of the United States support, as Washington considers it as a model partner due to its impressive economic performance, and stable political system, that allowed her to claim for its membership to the European Union, although this model partnership began to regress after the deterioration of the relations between Turkey and Israel after the Davos Summit incident in 2009.

However, and according to Richard ARMITTAGE –Former U. S. Deputy Secretary of State- Turkey has already won the race of the regional hegemony, over Iran.

#### **IV. Barack Obama's response to the Arab Spring**

Unlike the previous administration of President George W. Bush, that opted for military interventions, rushing headlong in Iraq and

Afghanistan after 9/11 events, Obama administration seems to be much more wiser through taking its time analyzing the consequences before taking any actions, particularly when the domestic crises trouble the White House at high level.

Therefore, the current administration appears to be aware of the deterioration of the American influence at the global level, and that the U. S. cannot afford deploying its military power indiscriminately, especially after the baseless accusations of Saddam Hussein's regime.<sup>(16)</sup>

What Washington fears with the Arab Spring events, is the change that comes from bottom to top, for the first time in modern Arab history, the populations rised against their authoritarian leaders, that have been benefiting of U. S. support since decades, in exchange of their cooperation with Washington, facilitating the securitization of American vital interests in the region, oil in particular.

In his article titled "Renewing American Leadership", Obama stated that the United States is facing a much more complex threats in this century, and the rising powers are one of them, one that could challenge America and its international foundation of liberal democracy.<sup>(17)</sup>

Obama also criticized the policy of George W. Bush administration, and its military approach, he mentioned in his book "The Audacity of Hope", that he couldn't support a dumb war based on passion not reason, and that the "invasion of Iraq without a clear rationale and without strong international support will only fan the flames of the Middle East, and encourage the worst rather than the best impulses of the Arab world, and strengthen the recruitment arm of Al-Qaeda"<sup>(18)</sup> and that the United States should be using its diplomatic capability, coercive inspection, and smart sanctions to restore its international status, and working with others to resolve global and regional problems, because the military power of the U. S. is just a tool among others, and the over use of it by the former administration, demonstrated the limits of American power, and the diminution of the U. S. legitimacy, because it casted America as an imperial state, seeking to secure its hegemonic ambitions by the use of war.

Thus, Obama's vision of the post-American world, is a world where American century is not over yet, but a world where America cannot face its challenges alone, and where soft power and multilateralism become hallmarks of a new strategic paradigm. <sup>(19)</sup>

To put this new paradigm in practice, Obama even expressed his intention to reset the United States ties with the Muslim world; through his speech addressed to the Muslim world, from the University of Cairo, Egypt, on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009, where he declared:

“I've come to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not to be in completion, instead, they overlap, and share common principles –principles of justice and progress, tolerance and the dignity of all human beings”<sup>(20)</sup>

However, this new approach of the Obama administration was hard to apply after the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, particularly with the Egyptian case, where Washington was surprised by the mass protests against Mubarak's regime in Tahrir Square, a regime which been protecting U. S. strategic interests, but also Israeli ones, through supporting the Camp David accords.

Consequently, the White House found it difficult to balance U. S. core interests and the values of freedom and democracy, that America had been the leading model country all over the world, and therefore withdrew its support to its despot ally Mubarak, which led to the fall of his authoritarian regime, and the election of Morsi as the new President of Egypt, democratically elected for the first time in the history of the country. <sup>(21)</sup>

Even so, the empowerment of political Islam in one of the most important Arab country, that plays the role of a bridge between the Middle East and North Africa, raises tremendous concerns to the United States and its allies. By consequences, Washington allowed the military coup d'état on Morsi's democratic-elected government, and the accession of Sisi to rule the Republic of Egypt, once again by a military hand, easily handled by the United States.

This was the results of the wake of a strong Iranian influence in the region, and the emergence of Islamic parties opposed to the American interests in the region. Thus, the Obama administration is facing a crisis of confidence in the Arab world, much more important than the previous administration met after the 9/11 events; leading to the conclusion that Obama's post-America vision, combining hard power and soft power, realism and idealism approach is far away from being practical. <sup>(22)</sup>

**Conclusion:**

The Arab political winds, blow in the opposite direction of the U. S. ships, because despite its pitfalls, the Arab Spring caused the erosion of the first U. S. argument, and put the second one through a hard test, that is to say that Israel is not the only democracy in the region anymore, which means that the democracy argument cannot be a justification for the occupation of the lands of others, and that represents the first strategic mistake of the U. S. (dismissing the reality of the occupation of Palestine), whereas their second strategic mistake lies in the support of Israel at the expense of the Palestinians, and pretending at the same time to be stimulating and encouraging democracy

Thence, the Arab Spring put the United States in an unexpected political impasse, and one of the strategic repercussion of it, would be the re-formulation of the relationships between the United States and the Arab world, on the basis of democracy principles, and this shift would put the U. S. interests in the region at stake, especially when rising powers such as Iran and Turkey are both seeking to be the hegemon of the regional system.

However, the possibility of these prospects is unlikely to happen, at least in the near term, because the forces opposed to such a democratic scenario are several, whether at the Arab level, or regionally and internationally.

At the Arab level, there are countervailing forces, operating secretly and publically, to abort the Arab Spring, through the apostate transition (Egypt), or through the civil war and state militias (Syria

and Libya), because the authoritarian leaders will not allow the fall of their existing regimes.

Regionally, Israel has no interest in the emergence of strategic Arab democracies, because it will deprive it of the democracy argument, politically profitable in its relationship with the west.

Internationally, the emergence of a democratic Arab States, completely independent in their decisions, will force the Western powers to review their traditional policies towards the region, which would not serve their interests.

Therefore, it goes without saying that the Arab Spring is evolving in a hostile environment, and the current scene is characterized by the predominance of the supporters of the “authoritarian stability” against the supporters of the “democratic stability” in the Arab region. And even if Barack Obama announced democratic reforms in this latter, and the renewal of the relationships between America and the Muslim world, he is now facing the specter of an Islamic winter, that threatens profoundly and seriously, the U. S. relations with the Muslim world.

**Notes:**

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- (12) Talmiz Ahmed, *Op. Cit.* , p. 123.
- (13) Shahram Chubin, *Op. Cit.* , p. 8.
- (14) *Ibid.* , p. 11.
- (15) Shahram Chubin, *Op. Cit.* , pp. 41,42.
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- (21) Anthony N. Celso, *Op. Cit.* , p. 8.
- (22) *Ibid.* , p. 10.