

ARAB SPRING: EMERGING IMPLICATIONS

The first Strategic Forum of the Italian Institute of Strategic Studies “Niccolò Machiavelli” was held Tuesday December 13th 2011 at the Filippo La Mantia Restaurant, within the historical Hotel Majestic, in Rome.

**The guest of honor was Her Majesty’s Ambassador to the Italian Republic
H.E. Christopher Prentice.**



To the lunch briefing, held according to the Chatham House Rule and organized by the IISS Machiavelli as a permanent gathering for strategic thinkers, participated over 60 national and international decision-makers, diplomats and professionals from several sectors. The symposium examined some of the “pre-history” of the Arab Spring, with a short comparison to Iraq, offering some thoughts on the nature of the different manifestations of the Arab Spring which we have witnessed across the region, concentrating on what they have in common and some corresponding conclusions on how the outside world should respond. The dialogue among the participants focused briefly on the issue of religious intolerance and drew some conclusions on the way Europe should view the rise of political Islam within the emerging Arab democracies. Finally, the influence that the Arab Spring has had on various international and regional organisations and on the role of some individual countries was analyzed.

THE ARAB SPRING A SURPRISE BUT NO SURPRISE



The UNDP Arab Human Development Reports since 2002, devised and drafted by Arab experts within the UN system, represent a catalogue of the many gaps opening up between the Arab world and much of the rest of the international community, particularly in the fields of education, human rights, employment, justice and equal opportunities.

There was a sense that something must change; that the governmental systems then in place across the region were not supplying the answers and faced increasingly serious

challenges; but there was little sense of how that change might come or when.

In Jordan in those years, King Abdullah attempted to introduce administrative and political reforms. Clear awareness on his part of the demographic and economic pressures building up. Handicapped by entrenched social and political elites and institutional resistance. Also as ever constrained by regional events; developments in Gaza, Lebanon and of course Iraq.

EMERGING CONCERNS



The outside world watched with amazement the extraordinary series of events spreading throughout the region and triggered by just a single act of despair and defiance in rural Tunisia. Why did we find it so inspiring? Because it was rooted in human values and aspirations which we all share. These are universal human “goods”: dignity, respect freedom of expression and assembly, economic opportunity/jobs, equality. These can be described in many ways – they are not “ours” or “theirs” but universal. Rule of law and good governance are one good summary description.

The analysis of the IISS Strategic Forum classifies the strength of the Arab Spring as indigenous: a linked series of local initiatives, sharing many common motivations and objectives. Each of these movements has been rooted in local circumstances, local grievances and seeking local solutions. Even

in Libya, where the international community’s involvement has been most extensive, through the NATO operations to implement UNSCR 1973, the lead role has always been local, first in Benghazi and then more broadly throughout the country.

The wide-ranging work undertaken by the UN and EU to analyse and plan for Libya’s post-conflict stabilisation has to be delivered through the institutions now emerging from the complex intra-Libyan consultations led by the TNC.

Very many Libyans are grateful for the help they received from the international community in overthrowing Qadhafi but they above all want to determine their own future. If any of the external actors who helped them were now to try to insist on how Libya should act or develop, that would meet strong resistance and be counter-productive.

The Arab Spring has underlined the diversity of Arab societies and the necessity to treat each country individually: there is no template for human or political development in the Arab world.

So the international community cannot, and should not, expect the more conservative societies in the Gulf suddenly to accelerate their social and political development. Other nations should respect local judgements on how far and how fast each individual society and system can develop.

One reality to which many Governments seem to have difficulty adjusting is that many societies in the region are more socially conservative than the European and the western general public culture. It is natural that this will be reflected in their future political governance, with the electorate giving political support to parties which reflect those more conservative values.

Each society has to find its own balance on these issues. This will inevitably take a long time and produce bumps along the way. In this respect, Egypt both affords not just the most grounds for concern but also reasons for hope. The Moslem Brotherhood are the region's most prominent historical Moslem political movement. For decades they have survived in the artificial political world of Egypt under dictatorship, often in open confrontation but sometimes in one form or another of uneasy compromise or collaboration. Since the fall of the Mubarak regime, like the rest of Egypt, they have had to adapt to the new political challenges and opportunities. This has brought to the surface tensions and divisions within their own ranks which they had not had to confront in the period of dictatorship.

As a result there are now several competing political trends within the Moslem Brotherhood, covering a spectrum from conservative to near-liberal. And the whole MB movement are aware of the challenge to their overall leadership of political Islam in Egypt from the more fundamentalist Salafist trend.

The strong showing of the Egyptian MB political front party, the FJP (Freedom and Justice) in the recent first phases of the parliamentary elections in Egypt have also burdened the movement with real responsibility to offer

leadership and practical solutions to the Egyptian people, all the Egyptian people. This is part of the birth of real politics in Egypt.

The international community should respond to this not with suspicion or prejudice, as unfortunately did in Algeria in the early 90's, and



certainly not with post-9/11 paranoia, but with open commitment to support Egypt's transition to democratic rule, provided this is based on solid democratic institutions: parliament, the judiciary and a free press, together with an accountable executive branch. Of course the international organizations will have to judge emerging governments by their actions and not just take honeyed words on trust but our starting point, in Egypt and elsewhere should be sincere commitment to deal with any government formed as a result of free and fair elections. The international community needs to "hold the breath" and be patient; accept the inability to influence the course of events to any great extent, let alone direct them; but be ready to find common ground and work together to tackle the region's enormous economic and social problems.

Egypt will be the greatest continuing challenge for Europe in its response to the Arab Spring. It is relatively easier to discern how to maintain coalition support for Libya, for instance. But in Egypt the crystal ball is necessarily more clouded and there are some grounds for concern over the role and intentions of the SCAF and whether the hopes of those who occupied Tahrir Square and forced the departure of President Mubarak will find fulfilment through the processes now in train.

RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE: A PRINCIPAL EMERGING AREA OF CONCERN:

Regardless of the historical and unprecedented political changes involving the entire Arab world it is remarkable how little traction either Iran or for that matter Al Qaeda have had on the Arab Spring. None of the uprisings or even less the more evolutionary changes in the Arab World have been inspired by Iranian revolutionary rhetoric or Al Qaeda's anti-Western rhetoric. The ambition shown across the Arab world for true representative government represents an alarming challenge to Iran's theocratic sham-democracy. Iran has meddled predictably in Bahrain but to no great effect in influencing the political and ideological agenda of the Bahraini opposition.

The incidents giving rise to this concern are well known: the bomb attacks on Coptic churches in Egypt; the apparently discriminatory attitude of the SCAF to Coptic and non-Coptic protesters. Incidents and attitudes which recall the targeting of the Christian communities in Iraq and the long history of inter-communal tensions in Lebanon.

Many governments rushed to offer help and encouragement, both bilaterally but even more collectively, through our main international institutions, the UN and the EU (and of course, in the case of Libya, NATO). But quite rightly international help has not been unconditional. It has and should depend on the sustained commitment of the emerging forces in the region to those shared values, in particular respect for human rights, including freedom of expression and freedom of religion. A commitment to democratic processes and equality under the law. The EU's New Partnership programme

has been designed to offer support where that support is wanted, and only where it is wanted. But the international community has the right to be true to its own values – the core values enshrined in the UN charter and the international conventions on human rights. The outside world is not obliged to give the movements involved in the Arab spring a blank check.

The international community role is to uphold our own values in the engagement with each country and, in Ambassador Ryan Crocker's key phrase, exercise "strategic patience".



THE IMPACT OF ARAB SPRING ON INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL INSTITUTIONS



- The Arab League has developed a most welcome leadership role. The League's appeal for a No-Fly Zone was the key to action at the UN to save civilian life under threat from Qadhafi's regime in Libya. And they are continuing to show similar resolution in their handling of Syria.
- The African Union has not performed with the same energy and clarity of purpose, at least in relation to Libya. Qadhafi's behaviour posed difficult questions for his former friends and clients in Africa.
- The United Nations as the Arab Spring has developed, the UN has properly emerged as the central co-ordinator of the international community's responses in each country. UNSCR 1973, authorising Chapter VII intervention in Libya, was a ground-breaking resolution but was particular to Libya and should not be seen as a precedent for other countries, particularly Syria. The most important continuing role for the UN will be to respond with agility and vigour to all the demands which the Arab Spring has produced, and will produce, for post-conflict stabilisation or capacity-building for elections.

- The European Union is on the right track in its response through the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument but we will have to maintain focus and ambition. Of all regions, Europe has perhaps most to gain from positive political evolution in the Middle East and also the most to give in support but the current crisis in all our economies is of course not a good context in which to commit to the support of Arab reform on the massive scale necessary to make a real difference. Nevertheless, as a recent report from The Trilateral Commission on Europe's Response to the Arab Spring has underlined, the EU has to maintain a high level of ambition in its response to the Arab Spring. The EU cannot and should not aim to direct events. EU can only advise and help where that is welcome.



The EU cannot expect to gain much directly in the short term but the medium and long term benefits for Europe of helping southern partners to deliver the dramatic transformation of their governance and their economies will be enormous. Europe is truly a strong "community of interest" with the emerging Arab democracies but this should be pursued in a spirit of mutual respect.

- NATO delivered a superb professional result in Libya. No military campaign has ever been conducted with more care to avoid civilian casualties. But it was perhaps more significant that the campaign was also undertaken in co-operation with regional partners, which will be an important model for the future in an increasingly networked world in which blocs of power have diminishing influence. The coming NATO summit in Chicago should see a joint NATO – Arab Nation statement emphasising NATO commitment to the region and to practical co-operation.