TURBULENCES IN THE ARAB WORLD: TOWARDS A NEW ORDER?

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the revolts in the Arab world, leading to demonstrations that are appearing in the media as a powerful and instructive warning sign that the ballyhooed project of a New Middle East, designed by Bush and redesigned by Obama, has been discarded by the "Arab street". The political regimes that previously used Islamic fundamentalism are quite shaken. With the successful mobilization of the "Arab street", a third way appears. Additionally there are the rentier states, sustained by multilateral foreign aid payments, such as military development or assistance aid, now also called "strategic incomes". Nationalism and Islamism are key points throughout the paper. It is demonstrated that the revolts in the Arab world go far beyond the alleged messianic manipulation of the masses, and the waves of protest in every Arab country are powerful. The social media, in turn connects in real time with international public opinion.

Keywords: Middle East; revolutions; geopolitics; nationalism; Islamism.

RESUMO

O texto trata das revoltas no mundo árabe, que estão aparecendo na mídia como um poderoso sinal de alerta de que o alardeado projeto de um novo Oriente Médio, projetado por Bush e reelaborado por Obama, foi descartado pela "rua árabe". Os regimes políticos que antes usavam o fundamentalismo islâmico se mostram bem abalados. Com o sucesso da mobilização da "rua árabe", surge uma terceira via. Ademais, há os Estados rentistas, os quais se sustentam com pagamentos multilaterais de ajuda externa, tais como ajuda ao desenvolvimento ou assistência militar, agora denominadas também de rendas estratégicas. O nacionalismo e o islamismo são pontos fundamentais ao longo do texto. Demonstra-se que as revoltas no mundo árabe vão muito além da alegada manipulação messiânica das massas, e que as ondas de protesto em todos os países árabes são poderosas. As mídias sociais, por sua vez, conectam-se em tempo real com a opinião pública internacional.

Palavras-chave: Oriente Médio; revoluções; geopolítica; nacionalismo; islamismo.

1 INTRODUCTION

The popular mobilizations that occurred in several cities of the Arab world, shown live by television networks and internet channels to the entire world, are a powerful and enlightening alert that the touted project of *a new Middle East*, projected by Bush and reworked by Obama, has been discarded by the "Arab street".

There is strong evidence that revolts are making the institutional foundations of the Arab political regimes convulse, regimes which have, for decades, used the threat of Islamic fundamentalism – in the domestic sphere, as with the Al-Qaeda, and in foreign relations, as with Iran – to justify both the existence of repressive institutions and their military alliances with Western countries. The success of the mobilization of the "Arab street", which, for a long time, was seen oscillating between two poles (authoritarian secularism and Islamic radicalism), showed it was far beyond those two options, and indicated the existence of a third way, which has surprised almost everyone (HROUB, 2011).

Although it is not surprising to reveal the authoritarianism of Arab States and the participation of Western powers in this power structure, the insurgents manifested, publicly, that what was at issue was the political and economic model, not who ruled it. The images in the streets no longer corresponded to the clichés frequently associated with Arabs: they are demonstrators of all age groups who, peacefully, spontaneously and without any ties to any ideology or charismatic leadership, adopted extreme measures to demand the end of tyranny and the collective championing of universal values. Those who assured that any mobilization of masses in the Arab world could only be led by Islamists were foiled. The mobilization was initiated and maintained by a new generation that does not call for sharia (Islamic Law) or theocracy as the solution to their problems, though many of them are religious. The new demonstrators are a population increasingly informed and connected to the outer world, wishing to send a message to the whole world: unconditional rejection of dictatorships and their respective economic models.

However, the mainstream in the United States is still trying, desperately, to fit these revolts – although recognizing their merit – into their strategic planning. In this sense, the statement by the influential international analyst Fareed Zakaria is very significant. He said, in fact:

> Both George W. Bush and Barack Obama deserve some credit for what has happened [the uprisings]. Bush put the problem of the Middle East's politics at the center of American foreign policy. His articulation of a "freedom agenda" for the Middle East was a powerful and essential shift in American foreign policy (as I wrote at the time). But because so many of Bush's policies were unpopular in the region, and seen by many Arabs as "anti-Arab," it became easy to discredit democracy as an imperial plot (…). Obama has had a quieter approach, supporting freedom but insisting that the United States did not intend to impose it on anyone (ZAKARIA, 2011).

Despite Zakaria's powerful rhetoric, it is difficult to sustain this thesis.

The first official comment of the United States government on the protests in Egypt came from the American vice-president, Joe Biden, who stated in an interview to the program News Hour, on PBS, that the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, was not a dictator and should not leave his post. He complemented his explanations by recalling that he "has been an ally of ours [the United States] in a number of things and he has been very responsible on, relative to geopolitical interests in the region: Middle East peace efforts (…)" (LEHRER, 2011). In the very beginning of the revolts, the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that "the Egyptian government is stable as seeks ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people" (AWAD and ZAYED, 2011). On January 27, 2011, Hillary changed her tone a little, but continued defending the permanence of Mubarak: "We believe the Egyptian government has an important opportunity at this point in time to implement political, economic and social reform, to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people". According to an article published by the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* (BARAK, 2011), Israel is supposed to have sent a confidential message to the United States and European countries, requesting that they support the stability of the regime of the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, stressing that the maintenance of stability of the Egyptian regime is "in the interest of the West" and of "all the Middle East". Hillary Clinton appealed to all the political heads of the regime to put in place a set of policies that would placate popular rage. Clinton insisted:

> We want to continue as partners of the Egyptian government and people. As partners of Egypt, we appeal for restraint by the security forces, that there be no hurry in imposing very restrictive measures that are violent, and for there to be dialog between the government and the people of Egypt (GRANADO and NEVES, 2011).

As a sign that the Obama administration was not yet ready to let Hosni Mubarak fall, the Pentagon decided to go ahead with the meetings with the highest leadership of the Egyptian military, which began in the end of January, in Washington. Among the interlocutors of the United States Department of Defense was the Chief of the Joint Staff of the Armed Forces, Sami Anan. A few days later, on February 6, 2011, even with the intensification of protests, the Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, insisted on the thesis that keeping the president of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, in power, was a guarantee that elections would be held.

Zakaria regrets that North American actions are seen as rhetoric and that one of their effects has been allowing the Arab revolts of 2011 to be "totally controlled by Arabs", in such a way that the success of these changes will be seen as something purely endogenous, and will probably lead to a revival of national movements (ZAKARIA, 2011.) In this point, there can be no disagreeing with the analyst, for the revolt that began in Tunisia and spread throughout the entire region surprised not only external observers but, above all, its own protagonists,

who discovered the strength of popular movements. Through action without violence, they challenged decades of dictatorship, leading to the abdication of a few chiefs of State (Egypt and Tunisia) and the ferocious resistance of others (Syria, Libya, Bahrain and Yemen) and the concession of salary increases and subventions, such as in Saudi Arabia.

The unpredictability of the revolt is obviously not exclusive to the Arab world. It was not different in 1989, during the fall of the regimes in Eastern Europe, even for the dissidents who pointed out communist vulnerabilities. Days before the Iranian revolution, in 1979, the CIA, the intelligence service of the United States, issued a report characterizing the Iranian monarchy as an "island of stability". Even one of the greatest revolutionary leaders in history, Lenin, made predictions, shortly before February 1917, that the revolution in his country would occur in a distant future.

In the beginning of the revolts, the great majority of international commentators argued, skeptically, that what had occurred in Tunisia was incidental. Even afterwards, when the demonstrations in Egypt already showed signs that something greater was under way, there was still those who considered the demonstrations episodic. Although the eruption of each crisis can be identified individually, if they are placed in historical perspective one realizes they are attempts at change that have had significant repercussion throughout the entire region.

Despite the ever present risks of speculating about the long term meaning of recent events, it can be plausibly stated that the current revolts may be as important for the region, in certain aspects, as were the events that resulted in the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, beginning the current organization of the Arab inter-state system.[1]

Other important periods of transition that became veritable traumas for the Arabs were: 1945- 1949, with the British and French retreat, in formal terms, from the region, and the establishment of Israel; and the Arab defeats in the wars of 1949, 1956, 1967 and 1973. The course of events in the Middle East from the end of the Cold War (1991) to the beginning of the 2000's was framed, above all, by four regional events, with their impacts upon the world: the invasion of Iraq

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1. The redesign of the modern Middle East map or began during the period between 1918 and 1926, through the colonial delimitation by the British and the French, on the one hand, and the appearance of the first independent Arab countries (Arab Republic of Yemen and Saudi Arabia), on the other. It was also this event that framed the structures within which the modern nations in the region were created, based on a heterogeneous set of preexisting peoples, geographical conditions, myths and ideologies. Actually, the "great war" of 1914-1918 concluded a process that began in the 19th Century, when colonial Europe installed itself in the peripheries of the Ottoman Empire: the French and Italians in Northern Africa, the British in Egypt, Cyprus and Aden, and smaller states in the Persian Gulf. But it was after the Ottoman defeat in the great war that French and English properties invented what later became Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Palestine (HALLIDAY, 2007).

by Kuwait in 1990; the signing of a peace treaty between Israelis and Palestinians in 1993; the attack of Al-Qaeda on the United States on September 11, 2001; and the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq in 2003 (ROY, 2008).

With the international response to the invasion of Kuwait by Iraqi forces in 1990, an opportunity was opened for the United States to constitute a new international order after the fall of the Berlin Wall, using the Middle East as an experiment. Freed from the paralysis that reigned during the Cold War, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) met quickly and effectively to impose sanctions and authorize military action. This led to the belief, later widely diffused by Western political leaders, that a new world order, based on American-Soviet cooperation in the United Nations (UN) and on the effective maintenance of international peace and security, was being put in place. For the first time, the accomplishment of the UN's role, foreseen in the Charter of the United Nations, became possible. This optimism was even greater because of the feeling of failure that had surrounded the security function of the UN. However, "winning the Cold War" did not solve the constant entanglements of the United States foreign policy in the Middle East. When the Cold War ended in 1991, the United States began enjoying a privileged condition, mainly due to its unquestionable military superiority. Since then, all political leaders of the United States, democrats or republicans, have tried to preserve the United States as the "only superpower", avoiding at any cost the appearance of another power that might challenge its supremacy. However, at the same time, these same leaders have started to realize that military superiority is not the exclusive determinant of world supremacy, and have become increasingly concerned with the growing dependence of the country on imported petroleum, especially from the Persian Gulf. Klare (2008) recalls that, during World War II, the American military consumed 1 gallon of oil per soldier/day. During the first Gulf war, in 1990-1991, the rate increased to 4 gallons of oil per soldier/day; in the wars of the Bush government in Iraq and Afghanistan, in leaped to 16 liters per soldier/day (KLARE, 2008).

If the Cold War has been defined, mainly, as a competition for the domination of international politics between the Soviet Union and the United States, then, to a great measure, as noted by Hallyday (2005), it ended a decade earlier in the Middle East, with the Iranian revolution and the beginning of the war between Iran and Iraq (1979-1980). An examination of the global consequences of the end of the Cold War requires, therefore, an accompanying more specific analysis of the regional trends in the 1990's. The combination of issues like petroleum, regional conflicts and cronyism was instrumental in calling Washington's attention to redefining a new strategic environment with its closest allies (Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel) in a new regional configuration, and to the opening of new sources of profit, mainly from the pillaging of the petroleum wealth and from selling weapons (HALLIDAY, 2005, p. 193).

In a world in which so many analysts insist of recurring to explanations in terms of ancient history, sacred texts, "clash of civilizations", or "Oriental despotism", one must go back to interpretations that place sociological, economic, and political variables in the forefront, as claims based on legitimacy, social inequalities and arbitrariness are in the order of the day.

Mohamed Bouazizi's act of self immolation may have gone unnoticed, but it was captured by a cell phone camera and, immediately, Tunisia – and the whole world – became aware of his drama. Activists used Twitter and Facebook to mobilize people and spread announcements about concentrations and police actions. Confidential reports from diplomats and political authorities, diffused by WikiLeaks, showing the corruption networks, fed, even more, the population's feeling of revolt. Reporters from the Al Jazeera Arab TV made live newscasts, making known the demands of demonstrators. Thus, the role played by means of communication in these events is undeniable, but should not be overestimated. The press, the telegraph, radio and television also represented threats to the existing order, but governments were able to repress them, as well as employ them to motivate their partisans. In other words, social networks make popular mobilizations more effective, but, depending on the correlation of forces, can also make them less probable. Therefore, no matter how influential new means of communication have been, they will never be an effective force to promote ruptures in the order without a favorable revolutionary situation (PELLETREAU, 2011).

For a revolution to be successful, a series of factors must converge. The government's attitudes must seem so unfair that they become a threat to the future of the country; the elites (particularly the military) must no longer be willing to defend the State; the different strata of the population, encompassing ethnic and religious groups and socio economic classes, must promote a broad mobilization; and international powers must either refuse to intervene to defend the government or stop it from using maximum force against the demonstrators. Revolutions are, therefore, a rare occurrence, because these conditions rarely coincide (GOLDSTONE, 2011).

It is understood that the Arab revolts are, at first instance, a product of the historical and social conditions of the *rentier states*, governed by elites dependent upon income from oil exports, which keep the immense majority of the populations in informal and marginal economic activities. The power of the mass movements in the Arab street became the most explicit face of a new political space in which diverse political and social forces, new and old, have called into question the structure of political power and the standing economic model.

The goal of this article is to place the insurrections, as well as the several crises in the Middle East, in their own context, and try to understand how they

are intimately related with the main problems faced by different social groups. One must, above all, understand the most prominent issues, which culminated in these uprisings, as well as the perceptions and attitudes of society, to understand some important changes. Many analysts tend to concentrate exclusively on what they consider as peculiarities in the Arab social formation to explain current events. However, these same regional and national specificities are not immutable and have developed historically in constant interaction with the dominating trends in international economics and politics.

In fact, the so called Arab revolts are part of a social and political process related both to circumstantial – social networks and the economic crisis of 2008 – and structural factors – political-economic regime and the foreign policy of Western powers for the region. For this reason, an analysis of this new activism cannot be dissociated from a discussion of the main sociological concepts that allow one to understand the importance of acquiring resources (economic, political, technological and military) in a society in convulsion. It is fundamental not to restrict oneself to a purely economic perspective, but to analyze them based on the sociology of power, which allows for the identification of the determinant actors in the fight for power, their objectives and how the resources within their reach are used.

2 RENTIER STATES: ECONOMIC REFORM AND ELITES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Rentier states are states strongly sustained by multilateral payments of foreign aid, development aid and military assistance, now also called *strategic incomes*. The high level of national income and the absence of income distribution are based on an implicit social contract among the elites and a strong positive correlation between the real income and the strength of the state's system. The notion of "buying" popular consent – which, on the other hand, gives popularity to the regime – is the cornerstone of this system. The state directs society and creates a system of inclusion and exclusion, building a patronage relationship between the class of the "non productive", considered as citizens, and the rest of society, which is not benefited from the income and does not enjoy full citizenship.

The greatly touted peace and stability in these states are founded on a very clear distinction between the members of society. Loyalty towards the local dominating elite is accepted as far as individuals' economic interests are acquired directly from the state. Thus, "leaving" local or national community is translated into huge economic costs. Also, the distribution of oil revenues is used as a tool for policing, through deportation or deprivation of citizenship, against those opposed to the dominating elite.

The concept of rentier state began in the 1970's and was conceived, at first, to aid in the understanding of the Pahlevi Dynasty's Iran. It referred, in general

lines, to the states that appropriated themselves of some type of resource to generate external income, in this case the appropriation of the extraction and sales of petroleum. It was Halem Belawy who applied the concept of rentier state for the first time to Arab countries where there was a pronounced dependence on foreign income, either through petroleum or through aid consignments (WILSON, 1998, p. 239).

It is based on these considerations that Vandewalle (1986 p. 30-35) made an important observation relative to the political implications of a rentier state, based on the Libyan case. Vandewalle considers that the concept of rentier state incorporates two dimensions, one economic (income) and another political (state). In productive economies, the state procures most of its revenues through a bureaucracy that administers the system of rules and procedures that assure collection (taxing citizens, goods and services) as a whole. In this sense, rentier states can avoid interaction and commitment towards social actors, through negotiation around taxation. The apparatus for negotiation between producers and external buyers, such as investors and corporations, requires few professionals and a minimal workforce, which, ultimately, discourages the strengthening of institutions that demand the commitment of the state towards its citizens (VANDEWALLE, 1986, p. 31). Insofar as there is room for negotiation between the state and society in respect to taxation of internal economic activities, an autocratic regime is configured. Based on external revenues, then, the rentier state is able to build a broad security apparatus, relatively autonomous from society.

Another author, Moore (2004, p. 6-308), also dedicated to the theme of rentier states, made a summary relative to a series of political "pathologies" inherent to their formation.

1) Autonomy before the citizenry. The state refrains from commitments towards its citizens, since it does not need to tax them to obtain its income.

2) External intervention. Petroleum, as it is a commodity considered strategic for security and for supplying energy to productive sectors of other countries, causes such countries to support unpopular or scarcely legitimate governments.

3) Coups and countercoups. The practice of political violence among involved actors to take over power.

4) Lack of incentives for civic policies. The dependence on revenues from petroleum removes all economic motivations related to civic action. The absence of questioning related to taxation transfers political conflicts to matters of morality and social values.

5) Vulnerability to subversion. As there is no effective taxing system, as well as no regular civil bureaucracy, the state becomes vulnerable to other armed organized groups who are able to increase their income and confront the state bureaucracy. Additionally, during a possible conflict, the state, while trying to increase taxation, becomes even more vulnerable to insurgents. Therefore, there is conflict over the control of the export-led productive sector, the petroleum one.

6) Lack of transparency in public expenses. Since there are few companies managing economic activity, in this case petroleum, the states' control bodies, when there are any, find out they are incapable of analyzing public expenditures. This happens because, since petroleum is a single sector, the agency that oversees its management is closed upon itself, and ends up becoming a quasi-state within the state itself.

7) Ineffective public bureaucracy. Since the state depends almost exclusively on income from petroleum, there are few subjects around which it is possible to create an environment that will propitiate meritocracy in the state bureaucracy, considering the aforementioned problems.

The image conveyed by Moore elaborates on problems presented by a rentier state, based on the assumption of a scenario in which its exportation commodity maintains high profitability in international trade. However, after the clashes over petroleum in the 1970's and the recession in the 1980's, a new experience began, with important sociological and political implications for the maintenance of rentier states. In this sense, it became evident that these countries, if they wanted to maintain a pace of economic growth, should promote other economic activities and not depend only on the income from petroleum.

Throughout the 1980's, the world watched an economic crisis that seriously impacted the development policies in the region. The causes of this crisis were the fall in international prices of petroleum, the lower demand for immigrant labor, the reduction of financial remittance and a more competitive financial environment. This financial crisis was essential for the relative autonomy of these states, in relation to their own societies, to be shaken by the decrease in the appropriation of externally obtained income. Economic regulation discouraged private investment and prevented the development of industrial sectors aimed at exportation, impeding the integration of the regional economy in the global market. In face of the decrease in the appropriation of externally generated income, governments in the region made an effort to tighten the wages of the public bureaucracy, down to the levels of the private sector. However, even then, the deficit continued to increase (YOUSEF, 2004, p. 98).

The persistence of the crisis of the 1980's provoked an attempt of response lead by a few countries, such as Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia, for the adoption of some type of program for economic stabilization. In the entire region, governments cut subsidies, reduced public expenditure and reformed exchange-rate regimes. In the beginning of the 1990's, these changes began to take effect. The fiscal deficit was reduced and inflation placed under control. Thus, governments programmed a gradual transition of structural adjustment, strongly impelled by Western governments and international financial institutions, including the privatization of state-owned enterprises, liberalization of trade, deregulation and strengthening of institutional foundations in favor of market autonomy (YOUSEF, 2004, p. 99).

However, despite indicating that the private sector of the economy may demand responses from bureaucracies, in the sense of economic and political liberalization, the private sector, as an assessment indicator, showed fragilities. Since groups belonging to the governments in the region had to survive politically and economically, there was an attempt by bureaucrats to incorporate the activities of the economy's private sectors. Therefore, fell apart the idea that the fiscal sociology of the rentier state can allow negotiation between the social productive sector and the bureaucratic sector, that takes over this production, as both come from the same elite. In this sense, just the measurement of the participation of the private sector in the economy, taken as an independent variable, does not allow for inferences about its capacity to create institutions, even if taking the necessary precaution of identifying the relationship between the interests of public and private sectors. The autocratic character of the rentier state became materialized in collaboration between governmental sectors and private initiative, maintaining the structures of authority and power of political regimes practically intact, without this making it impossible to place these economies in the global market. Hence, the advance of the modernization process, in rentier states, resulted in the formation of a bureaucratic-bourgeois state (EHSTESHAMI e MURPHY, 1996, p. 753-772).

The debt crisis in the 1980s served as an opportunity for international financial institutions to impose a process of economic restructuring in the form of structural adjustment programs (SAPs). The eight years of war between Iran and Iraq, the reduction in oil revenues, the high levels of debt and the crisis of the balance of payments propelled many countries in the region to submit to the recipes prescribed by those institutions. One of the results was the massive reduction of state subsidies, and the progressive transformation of a paternalist state model towards governments with minimalist activities. However, these countries remained far from any political reforms: Arab elites made use of economic liberalization as an opportunity to transfer responsibilities over social actions to the private sector, establishing new standards of patronage politics and privatization by giving it access to big deals and investments. The final result was cronyism capitalism with high levels of corruption and public services in bad conditions.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank paid many complements to the economic reforms made by Ben Ali, in Tunisia, and by Hosni Mubarak, in Egypt, which, in the last decades, abandoned any element of more egalitarian and well-being focused policies, in favor of economic opening and deregulation. Both countries were well rated in the Global Competitiveness Index in the 2009-2010 period.[2] Tunisia was in the 32nd, position, above Lithuania, Brazil and Turkey, while Egypt was in the 70th. In the Globalization Index, which assesses the implementation of governmental policies, Egypt and Tunisia were respectively in the 12th and 35th places, among the 35 countries researched (HEYDARIAN, 2011).

However, as noted by Schwartz, rentier effects are not limited only to oil exporting countries, but should be extended to the increase in revenues from other strategic resources, such as the Suez Canal, investments abroad, remittance from migrant workers and foreign aid (humanitarian aid, development aid or even military aid) (SCHWARZ, 2004, p. 14).

In sociological terms, this rentier economy is translated into a governing class organized around actual clans who confuse public and private property. The State, in reality, is constituted, at the top, by their families, and, in the intermediary tiers, by their political retinue, comprised by members of the military, tribal chiefs and technocrats. Access to higher positions is restricted to selected members of the family clan or dynasty and a reduced number of individuals who can accumulate wealth in service to the ruling class. Consequently, there are no national enterprising capitalists or what could be called a middle class. Those who appear to belong to this sector are public employees (teachers, police and military employees), who depend on the submission to the power of the ruling elites, with no possibility of ascending to the upper echelons or creating economic opportunities for their descendants (PETRAS, 2011).

The ruling rentier class, in order to compensate for these huge social inequalities and preserve its position, tries to establish alliances with arms corporations and remain under foreign military protection, especially of the United States. As compensation, they offer territories for the establishment of military bases. Although Libya has been an exception in terms of military approximations with the United States, with the end of its diplomatic isolation in 2004 began a vast coalition of interests of the most powerful petroleum companies and the arms industry, who were able to intensify the trade and political relations between the two countries (BARAM, 2011).

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2. The Global Competitiveness Report (GCR), published annually by the World Economic Forum, covered the main 133 economies of the world in the 2009-2010 period.

As a consequence of the economic reforms in the Arab world, food subsidies for the poorest have been suppressed, with the reduction of public employment, which results in blocking one of the few existing perspectives for young university students – considering that 60% of the Arab population is under the age of 30 – who are relegated to the informal economy, with no type of social protection. Also, in the discerning observation of Petras (2011), the economic crisis caused Europe and the United States to be more rigorous with immigration, blocking the mass run of young Arab university graduates in search of work abroad.

Additionally, the liberal reforms induced from abroad, combining modern international exploitation and traditional forms of national domination, eroded the paternalistic bonds and the trust in the loyalties that united the middle, lower and ruling classes, making it difficult to isolate urban social movements that become more effective in delegitimizing the authority of the state. Privatization and the reduction of public subsidies (unemployment, food, cooking oil, gas, health and education) have severed the paternalistic ties with which leaders appeased the discontent of the young and the poor, as well as the clerical elites and tribal chiefs.

With the unbridled deregulation and the opening, the commodity prices in Tunisia and Egypt are increasingly determined by variables beyond national borders. The Arab world has the highest level of unemployment in the globe, with astronomic unemployment rates among the young – an average of more than 23% in the region. The absence of democratic institutions prevented people from constructively airing their basic complaints about the economy. In both countries, Tunisia and Egypt, the minimalist doctrine of regulation imposed by international financial institutions prevented the state from becoming a central agent in the implementation of trade and industrial policies that would foster industrialization and sustained economic growth.

3 THE VOICES OF THE ARAB STREET

One of the explanations found by the most impatient to understand the current revolts is that most Arabs had kept the reasons for their complaints in the private sphere. Fearful of persecution, they did not turn against their rulers in public, expressing themselves only in private conversations with friends. It is therefore essential to resort to the research conducted by James Zogby, president of the Arab-American Institute, published in the book *Arab Voices* (ZOGBY, 2010). The author reveals that the main motivation for his research was to reveal what the Arab street was saying. *Arab Voices* is neither a reexamination or interpretation of history nor a group os personal conversations, but a collection of data from a decade of research conducted in the entire Middle East on the attitudes of Arabs in regard to the United States, their most important political concerns, their attitudes towards women and a series of other perceptions. The data were organized by country, city, gender and class.

This research is greatly relevant for the understanding of the Arab world and its societies, often obscured by stereotypes and myths that mold thinking and policy strategies for the region. One may highlight five myths that were questioned by the results of the research.

1) There is an image of Arabs as being all alike and, therefore, reducible to a single "type". However, research showed an extremely varied reality in the entire Arab world. In addition to the existence of several subcultures that make Egyptians different from Saudis and Lebanese, there are also differences among generations. For example, young Arabs (approximately 60% of the population in the region) express concerns and aspire to goals different from those of their parents.

2) Another myth, opposite to the first, is that Arabs are so diverse that they constitute not a world, but something large and amorphous. Once again, research revealed precisely the opposite. In the first place, those interviewed identified themselves as "Arabs", connected to each other by a common language and history. In the second place, there are common political concerns to all generations and countries. A good example of this is the great concern with the Palestine issue and the military presence of the United States in the region.

3) The stereotype around Arabs that feeds the idea of "clash of civilizations" is that they hate Western values and way of life. However, the results of the research indicate that Arabs not only show respect for education, science and technology, but also appreciate the values of "liberty and democracy". On the other hand, the interviewees expressed themselves against the policies of the West towards the Arab world. That is, it is not Western culture and values that are rejected, but the foreign policy of some Western countries.

4) The myth that Arabs are propelled by religious fanaticism was also approached by the research. According to the results, it can be concluded that Arabs' values, as those of many in the West and in other countries of the world, are molded by their religious traditions. Thus, the indices that measure attendance in mosques, in all the Middle East, are approximately the same as those of the churches in the United States, in the same way as the list of the most popular TV programs in the Middle East is as varied as the one selected by North American watchers. In Egypt, Morocco and Saudi Arabia, the most voted for programs are films and soap operas, while religious ones are among the less popular. Also, the most important concerns for those interviewed did not differ from those of "Western" men: the quality of their work and their

families. Hence, in contrast with the mythic notion that Arabs go to bed at night hating America, wake up hating Israel, and spend their days watching the news or listening to preachers of ire, the reality is that Arabs go to bed at night thinking about their work, wake up every morning thinking about their children, and spend every day thinking about how to improve the quality of their lives.

5) Lastly, there is the myth that Arabs reject reforms and will not change unless the West propels them. This has been a fundamental principal of North American neoconservatives, derived mainly from the writings of Bernand Lewis, this being one of the justifications for the Iraq War. The research shows, however, that Arabs want reform, but a reform that is made by them. Their main domestic priorities are: jobs, better health conditions and educational opportunities. Also, the research shows that most Arabs do not want foreign countries to intrude in their internal matters, although they are open to international aid to develop their capacities for provision of services.

4 NATIONALISM AND ISLAMISM

There is a growing fear, fed, to a great extent, by the conservative elites of the West and the East, that future events in Egypt may follow the same paths of the revolution occurred in Iran in 1979, which elected Israel as the great enemy, became involved in anti-American action throughout the world, and deprived women and minorities of their rights. In a region replete with examples of armed actions that frighten Israel, the United States and their allies, arose the idea that the best way of fighting Islamic activists (false or true) is a secular dictatorship, for, according to this theory, the nature of conflicts in the Middle East, as well as the ideology of anti-Americanism, result from the clash of civilizations between Islam and the West.

The new social movements appear precisely as a questioning of these secular and dictatorial states, supported by Western powers. For this reason, to understand the Arab Spring, it is necessary to return to the social and political process, from the fight for independence to current times, which resulted in these states.

Despite the preponderance of the perceptions about the Islamic threat in the debate on security in the Middle East, the nature of the conflicts in the region has always been in permanent transformation, since the end of the Cold War. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the influences of the great powers were reduced, which caused a series of questionings about religion and identities to appear in the forefront. This scenario remained after the Cold War, revealing that the character of the structure of political and

economic domination refers more precisely to the link between the ruling classes of the Middle East and the major powers. The impact of globalization on these states places them in a veritable dispute between Arab nationalism, traditional and political Islam, within the limits of a nation-state incapable of satisfying its populations, due to its particular traditional and antidemocratic structure.[3]

With the struggle for independence, two political and social forces appeared in the Arab world, which would determine the conduction of the historical process: Islamism and Nationalism. There has always been a dispute around which should be the true factor to substitute imperialism and unify the ethnic, tribal and religious diversity in Arab societies. Military factions, bearers of a secular nationalism, would substitute the old oligarchy as a panacea for all evils of colonialism, including underdevelopment. Thus, both lines tried to construct their legitimacy almost exclusively based on an anti-imperialist position, which became articulated with the rejection of the state of Israel, but was entirely deprived of economic reform programs, and mechanisms for political participation and integration that allowed for integrating their respective societies or solidifying the feeling of an Arab community that is transnational in character.

Consequentially, both the Islamic and the Arab nationalist projects failed. Instead of progress and military victories, most Arab states – monarchies and republics – were transformed into corrupted family enterprises, surrounded by opportunistic factions, and protected by security apparatus with the support of major powers. Corruption has not spared any aspect of the social, political and economic life.

In the initial years after independence, the task was to align the new territorial identities with the local identities along the inherited colonial borders to, later on, dissolve them in a pan-Arabic feeling. This development strategy allowed rulers to place Arab nationalism ahead of democracy. Some even called upon the fragile notion of "cultural specificity" to allege that democracy was inadequate for Arabs. Additionally, the ever present prospect of a war against Israel was used to place any hope for political opening and democracy under suspicion as a deviation from the main cause.

Thus, for almost a century, Arabs were divided into artificial nation-states, with a fragile historical, cultural or linguistic basis for the constitution of a national identity, which kept them precariously viable, thanks to the political, economic and military pacts made between their local chiefs and Western powers. These agreements were basically materialized in the exchange of foreign security and legitimacy for concessions for the extraction and distribution of oil, through

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3. See Halliday (2007).

contracts ranging in the billions. The Arab nationalist secular movement in the 1950's, which tried to destroy these agreements, was successively defeated in the wars against Israel (1956, 1967, and 1973), allowing the ascension of Islamic movements in the 1970's.

The Islamists' success is also due to the sudden disappearance of the socialist system and the failure of development programs in most Third World countries, which counted on the Soviet influence. This showed the fragility and weakness of the Arab nation-states in waging wars, protecting the national territory and providing education, health and employment to its citizens. Also, regional and world events seized from Arab regimes their ideological legitimacy, preventing both Islamists and nationalists from offering alternatives.

The myth of fundamentalism as the cause of civil wars and the threat to peace and stability in the region was reinforced in the beginning of the 1990's with the civil war in Algeria, which caused the death of, at least, 80 thousand people. One type of interpretation that does not take into consideration socio-economic conditions and their intellectual and religious context contributes to feeding the false belief in the clash of civilizations between Islam and the West. The economy in the Arab world suffered the consequences of the sharp fall in petroleum prices in the 1980's, in addition to a demographic explosion that generated a very young population – 60% of inhabitants are under 30 years of age – and a 75% employment rate among men.

It is therefore necessary to place fundamentalist Islamic thinking and its correspondent movements in their due international, regional and local context. Islamic movements are an important part of Arab political and social life and impregnate all its spheres. Their goals are numerous and their methods quite diversified. Some have metamorphosed into political parties, preferring to participate, in the legal framework, of the State's legitimate institutions. Others have converted into social organizations, filling the void left by the state in the provision social assistance.

Showing no sign of rejecting the Islamic presence, but emphasizing the claims for freedom of expression, human rights and socioeconomic improvements, the new movements are, probably, the best antidotes against the sectarian identifications that lend justification and legitimacy to secular dictatorships. The current revolts have once again placed in the order of the day the possibility of reappearance of a new pan-Arabism that does not claim for a unified Arab nation, as did the former nationalism, but resists all attempts to incorporate it into religious and sectarian divisions of identity. Although activists claim the right to participation separately in their countries, their ideas cross religious and state borders. The domino effect in the region demonstrates that the idea of an Arab

political community is still alive. Although detached from the former nationalist project, the imagery of an Arab identity continues vigorous and can be the potential unifier against possible trends towards disintegration and foreign intervention in the region. These promising prospects of democratized civil society, turning its attention toward the well being of the masses, are strong, although the elites remain in place during the process of transition.

Arab nationalism has lost its deep roots which, for a long time, were an encouragement for political action as a source of legitimacy, but there is still a very fine, yet resistant, thread that ties the religious aspirations of these peoples to the demands for representative democracy and a more equitable distribution of economic resources. Even the Turkish state, which has, for almost a century, served as a model for many secular nationalists, has gone back to discussing the question of religion.

There is, therefore, no denying that religion is an essential principle of identity of the peoples and a crucial component of the dynamic development of societies in general, and particularly the Islamic world. As correctly observed by Mark Levin, the photographs publicized in the great media of the United States, on the occasion of the demonstrations in Cairo, can help understand better the differences from the Iranian revolution, in 1979. On that occasion, the images of youth showed revolutionary impetuosity, allied to a feeling of rage, supposedly fed by religious fervor. They seemed very strange for citizens of Western countries, which held other revolutions as a parameter. The photographs from Tahir Square showed religious women and youth bowing in prayer before the military armored cars, claiming a type of "peaceful Jihad", which has always existed in the history of Islam, but which never received due attention from the Western media.

The new movements of the Arab Spring cannot, therefore, be explained through theories about the Islamic threat, nor by the category of Arab nationalism. This new form of political activism appears as a reaction, both to secular dictatorships, which have not reached their goals, and to terrorist movements, such as Al-Qaeda (MUSALI, 2008).

As very well noted by Professor Hicham Ben Abdallah El Alaoui, two years ago there was already something that might be called, for lack of another term, "third nationalism", being born in the Arab world, fully aware of the successes and failures of Arab and Western political movements. It defends Arab and Islamic identity and is solidary towards movements for independence and justice in the Moslem world, emphasizing the Palestine issue. Although it has no political program, it condemns authoritarianism and corruption, aspires to the construction of democratic governments, and rejects any type of foreign military encroachment (ALAOUI, 2009).

5 EXCEPTIONALISM IN LIBYA?

The revolt in Libya began with the arrest of a human rights activist, Fathi Terbil, days before the beginning of the *day of fury* (February 17, 2011), and evolved into a civil war with international intervention. Even after hundreds were killed, on the fifth day of repression, the repercussion in the international media was still small and there was no sign of more assertive action from the celebrated "international community", which would have been strange, at the start, since Colonel Gaddafi's regime had been in power longer than any other dictatorship in the Arab world (42 years), and had been responsible for several acts of terrorism in the 1980's. Yet, if one observes attentively, it is still quite surprising. In 2008, the then Secretary of State of the United States, Condoleezza Rice, declared, in a visit to Libya, that relations with the United States were in a new era of cooperation. When questioned about the problem of human rights in that country, Rice said she had respectfully discussed the matter with Gaddafi. The Libyan Minister of Foreign Affairs, on the other hand, said that Rice's presence was the proof that Libya, the United States and the world had changed. One must recognize that he is right, for Libya was rehabilitated from its status as a pariah state in 2003, agreeing to abandon its nuclear program and promote openness to Western investment, especially to large petroleum corporations, with which billion-dollar contracts were signed. By conforming to the UN resolutions, Libya rid itself of the economic embargo and began reestablishing its political and diplomatic ties with European countries and the United States, becoming reintegrated into the international community. In 2006, Gaddafi joined a program to establish a free market and recognized the central role of private initiative in Libya, preparing the way for the implementation of the so-called economic reforms, under the supervision of the IMF and the World Bank. Prime Minister Tony Blair was very active in promoting this understanding, also approving the selling of tear gas, "crowd control" weapons, rifles and machine guns to Bahrain and Libya.

The American Ambassador in Libya, Cretz, in a declaration at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, in 2010, informed there had been great progress during those two years of "normalization" of the United States-Libya relations, and that a significant cooperation between the two countries was beginning (CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE, 2010). Cretz also complimented the efforts for privatization, emphasizing that the United States' trade missions were very well received. In what refers to human rights, the ambassador said there was an open and frank dialog between the two countries, recognizing, however, that the promotion of democracy was a delicate matter and should be approached with care.

Yet the ambassador did not mention that Libya's economy is still extremely dependent upon the fluctuations of international prices of oil and gas. The billions of dollars accumulated over the years were not used to diversify the econo-

my. There is a huge discrepancy between the several social classes and their respective productive sectors. The agricultural sector, for example, employs 20% of the work force, although it contributes towards only 2% of the gross domestic product (GDP). The industrial sector, including petroleum, gas, and petrochemicals, is responsible for more that 60% of the GDP and employs less than 25% of the work force. The rates of unemployment vary between 20 and 30%.

Gaddafi governed through the mediation of a "social leadership committee", comprised by approximately 15 representatives of several tribes, present even within the ranks of the armed forces, each one representing a tribal group. If the rebellions in Tunisia and Egypt called attention for their success in forcing their dictators to abdicate, the prolonged resistance of Gaddafi and other dictators seemed something incomprehensible to Western eyes.

> Why do not Ivorian strongman Laurent Gbagbo, Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi, and Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh take the offers of comfortable exile apparently extended to them and leave? It would probably be better for their physical safety, and for their bank accounts. Following weeks of fighting and bargaining and demonstrations, what more do they have to prove? (KAPLAN, 2011b)

In his understanding, differently from the leaders of Tunisia and Egypt, these dictators do not govern in the Western style, through institutions and bureaucracies. Their objectives in dominating parts of the territory with the aid of relatives and tribal alliances are totally outside the Western pattern of rational action. Yet he recognizes that Gaddafi kept united a country which, during almost all its history, has been devoid of a feeling of state. According to Kaplan (2011b), Gaddafi, Saleh and Gbabo have lived with a "complex and ambiguous reality", a "special type of tribalism", combining tribal politics and acts of repression of their security services. Kaplan concluded that their occasional departures had left a "total void".

This is also the conception of the former United States Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, when he said the revolts highlight the "ethnic, sectarian and tribal differences that have been suppressed for years" in the region (IGNATIUS, 2011). Despite seeing promising prospects in favor of democracy, he asks "whether more democratic governance can hold the countries together in light of these pressures". He also warns that "there's a risk that the political map of the modern Middle East may begin to unravel too, with the breakup of Libya" (IGNATIUS, 2011). That is, the Secretary of Defense emphasizes his skepticism as to the building of democracy in situations of supposed state fragilities that could lead to the fragmentation of the national states in the region. Seen in these terms, the search for stability would be, ultimately, preferable to democracy.[4]

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4. This argument is advanced by Fukuyama (2005).

This insistence of Western analysts in interpreting the Libyan political regime, based on images of leader worship and Gaddafi's eccentric style, as an historical aberration has been completely mistaken and has generated deeply anti-democratic ideological positions, as can be concluded from the statements above. Actually, it was a regime rooted in family networks and whose discourse was strongly marked by the threat from the West. Colonel Gaddafi transformed Libya's anti-colonialist nationalism into a revolutionary ideology, using a language easily understood by Libyans. he regime began with a coup d'état in 1969, promoted by middle and lower class police officers, representing all three regions of Libya, and with the support of a largely rural population. The new government did not have a clearly designed political agenda and based itself much more on a true ideological mix, with traces of Arab nationalism, anti-colonialism, Islamic cultural identity and tribalism (AHMIDA, 2011).

Yet it must be understood that the often-evoked "tribalism" is not an atemporal characteristic of Libyan society, but a strategy adopted by Gaddafi in the old style of governing: dividing and conquering. Gaddafi artificially promoted the rural world through music, festivities and rituals, and recovered old institutions, such as tribal leadership councils, attacking urban culture. The fact is that, regardless of Gaddafi's intentions, the first years of the 1970's brought many benefits to Libyans: generalized literacy, medical care, free education and improved living conditions. However, from the 1980's on, an excessive centralization began, resulting in greater repression by the security forces and in a decline in the rule of law, putting an end to the populist experience. Institutions such as courts, universities, labor unions and civic associations were eliminated. With the crisis of the 1980's and the international economic sanctions in the 1990's, due to the involvement of the regime in terrorist attacks, health and education services deteriorated, unemployment soared, the economy became increasingly dependent upon revenue from petroleum and the corruption in the regime increased (AHMIDA, 2011). Gaddafi's son, Saif al-Islam, in a speech on February 22, 2011, warned that Libya was different from the other Arab states, because it was comprised of tribes and clans, and any type of scission could lead to chaos and civil war. Tribal feeling adds a relatively uncommon dimension to the usual equation of possible benefits and costs that each Libyan individual should take into consideration in his decision in face of the revolts. Considered in these terms, the Libyan case would be, at first glance, very different from those of Tunisia and Egypt, where tribalism practically has not existed, except in isolated points in the desert.

In a tribal society, individuals live within a network of loyalties with different degrees of intensity – family, profession, class, region, ethnicity, political affiliation, religious denomination, and so on. Tribes are frequently characterized as authentic political units a priori, but they must be understood as a principle

of social order, in which loyalties and habitual obligations are "segmented" by a principle of descent from a common ancestor or common ancestors. In general, each one of the tribes in the Middle East is subdivided into clans, which, in turn, are divided into sub clans, and so on, until the level of family units. Traditionally existing outside of the power of the state, tribes in the Middle East maintain order through a complex balance of power among themselves, around alliances and feuds. One result of this system of collective responsibility is that the members of certain tribal groups have a strong interest in policing the behavior of their kin, since any person's actions directly affect the reputation and safety of the entire group.

In the context of the revolts in Libya, Bamyeh (2011), a specialist on Libya, raised a series of questions about how people would behave when they were called upon to decide whether or not they supported Gaddafi. Would the elders of the Warfala tribe, for example, make this decision in name of all, or even most, members of the tribe? Around one million people, approximately one sixth of the total population of the country, belong to this tribe. The continuous process of urbanization in the last 40 years probably weakened tribal bonds, even if most people can still say which tribe they belong to. However, it is important to note that most Libyans are no longer nomads living in the desert from shepherding activities, a lifestyle that helped preserve tribalism, because the system acted as a deterrent element upon potential aggressors.

What has escaped the analysts' attention is the demographic transformation that made the revolt possible. Close to 80% of Libyans now live in urban areas, villages and cities. Today Libya has a modern economy and a high literacy rate. The leaders of the upheaval include lawyers, judges, journalists, writers, academics, women's rights activists, army officers and former diplomats – considerable urban elite that became "infuriated" with the regime. Many of them work in administrative structures inspired by the modern bureaucratic state, which creates other types of authority that negate those of the old tribalism (BAMYEH, 2011).

The fact that the opposition controlled large portions of Eastern Libya suggests the region is also an important factor. Judging by the tribal maps, the East of the country holds a set of tribes that are not currently in conflict, regardless of the position their leaders may have supposedly adopted. If it is true that the presence of a tribal element cannot be completely discarded in Libyan politics, it is also a fact that the excessive emphasis on tribal affiliations is a part of a discourse that is orientalist in character, and that contributes very little towards the understanding of the Arab world. The process of accelerated urbanization in the last years has caused tribes in Libya to become quite heterogeneous, attenuating the importance of ties of kinship in influencing the behavior of their members. These tribes

are increasingly comprised of diverse members with different social and economic backgrounds, reflecting a new reality in the Libyan society, in which intertribal marriages, in all lineages, become common (BAMYEH, 2011).

Also, the apparent exceptionalism of the Libyan revolution should not be understood as something distinguished from the relationship between society and government that prevails in the remainder of the Arab world. As in other parts of the region, society in Libya, in the last decade, has become much more modern and dynamic than the regime. As in Tunisia and in Egypt, a key factor in the revolution in Libya was the "autocratic silence" in hearing complaints from their peoples. As in the other Arab revolutions, this must be seen as a symptom of an established social modernity, strengthened by high rates of education, communication technologies, and a young population, whose economic and political expectations have been frustrated.

Therefore, the extreme violence that accompanies the revolution in Libya is certainly an expression of the huge existing distance between the state and its society. When Gaddafi's son, Saif al-Islam, insisted that Libyan society is "tribal", he was not describing and empirical reality, but reflecting the awareness that a great portion of Libyan society is very distant from the state and is organized in its own way, although not necessarily along tribal lines.

Tribal loyalty in Libya, in its aspects of command and obedience between the members of a tribe, has never been unconditional. Since the beginning of the uprising, several Libyan tribes made numerous declarations about the situation, which, to a great extent, reflect the patriotism that permeates these groups. Mohammed Bamyeh collected 28 declarations made by the tribes between February 23 and March 9, 2011, revealing that the great majority emphasized national unity instead of localized tribal interests (BAMYEH, 2011). The declarations showed also that the tribes in Libya are heterogeneous entities, comprised by diverse members, with distinct social and economic backgrounds, reflecting the nature of Libyan society itself, in which intertribal marriages in all lines are frequent.

The declarations also show the fluidity of tribal solidarities. Only 25% of the declarations were allegedly issued in name of the tribe as a whole; 43% in name of specific or local sections of a tribe, and 39% included a declaration dissociating from the tribe the members who are in high positions in the regime (BANYEH, 2011). Bamieh also turned his attention to the appeals made to the tribes, published by their members during the same period, and was impressed by the fact that none made an appeal to the tribe as a whole, without any specification. Instead, all the individuals who published such appeals directed themselves to specific sections of the tribe, located in the city or region where support to the opposition was most necessary to assure its success in the local community.

The tribal declarations and appeals show how the discourse between their members, during the revolution, became another vehicle for expressing Libyans patriotism and articulating a sense of national duty. They also reveal how this discourse always tries to contextualize and localize a sense of national responsibility, with the goal or producing concrete successes instead of simply registering great symbolic declaration. This combination of a permanent patriotism and a paradigmatic tradition of tribal solidarity moves towards flexibility in the nascent civic and social organization of Libya, which will be fundamental in a possible post-Gaddafi era.

It was against this historic dynamic reality that the Gaddafi regime tried to build a state that consisted on concentrating the Executive Branch, without popular support, in the hands of a few individuals. Far from embracing the Libyan tribalism spirit, Gaddafi subscribed to a mafia style ethics, in which flexible alliances were substituted by a dictatorial and policing style (HALLIDAY, 2011).

The question of how he kept himself in power for so long is perhaps the most interesting in the current environment. The answer can be found partly in the fact that there was practically no modern state in pre-Gaddafi Libya. In general, society was organized around several associations outside the state, including tribal networks, labor unions and political parties. The social cohesion of the Libyan state, largely dependent on foreign aid, until the discovery of petroleum a few years before Gaddafi's coup d'état, rested almost exclusively around the monarchy. The anti-institutional nature of the political regime in Libya, where the state institutions were substituted by an informal police vigilance network, of agitators and informers, may be the main reason why Gaddafi and his family trusted militias and mercenaries more than the regular armed forces in their combat against the revolution. An incident in 2009, involving two of Gaddafi's sons, exemplifies this aspect very well. The two fought among themselves with combat vehicles and military troops, until one was forced to sell his stock to the other during the installation of a Coca Cola factory in the country. Although he held no position in the government, Saif al-Islam represented the regime and spoke in its name. He was the one who made the first official speech to the nation right after the beginning of the revolts.

6 CONCLUSION

One may infer that the self immolation of the young Tunisian university student Mohamed Bouazizi, which triggered the protests in Tunisia, was an act dedicated not only because he could not find a job reflecting his professional ambitions, but also due to a strong feeling of humiliation and injustice in witnessing a police officer confiscating the fruits and vegetables he was selling. Probably, this same feeling of injustice and humiliation was the trigger that led thousands of

people to the streets of Tunis and Damascus. Emigrating abroad ceased to be a viable option for the youth who found themselves facing two alternatives: fighting or submitting. With few opportunities abroad, they found themselves forced to struggle for social mobility in their countries through collective political action, despite their lack of organization and leadership to influence the political game, and, even more so, of a project for a new state.

The revolts in the Arab world are showing they go far beyond the alleged messianic manipulation of the masses, insufflated by the theocracy of the mullahs, the Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafists, which, until recently, were used as an explanatory model for all conflicts in the Middle East, from Palestine to the actions of Al-Qaeda. The protest waves in all Arab countries showed how powerful, in organizational terms, the social media – that connected in real time with international public opinion and showed the fragility of security systems and intelligence services – is. Institutions and security apparatus no longer have the capacity or instruments to suppress social resistance movements in a world interconnected by satellite coverage and social communication media.

These actions opened the doors to a more complex world, with economic, social and political problems that can no longer be understood based on a simplistic division between nationalists, who are relatively secular, on the one side, and radical Islamists on the other. The movements expressed the desire for economic reforms and democratic rights, showing that the economic and political deficiencies of the Arab world are the two sides of the same problem and, therefore, to be fully successful, changes must reach all of these dimensions.

What the apologists of exporting democracy have always ignored is that Arabs and Muslims have never rejected democratic reforms. On the contrary, there have always been movements against despotism, corruption and abuses practiced by those who are in power. Yet the Arab street demanded reforms that could correspond to their values and were implemented in a pace consistent with the social composition and political conditions of their communities.

Those who fear the growth of "radical Islamism" as an instability factor in the region should be more attentive as to the "friendly dictatorships", which, in fact, are the main ones responsible for the insecurity in the Arab world. Mass unemployment, the high price of food and political repression are an explosive combination, more dangerous than terrorism. However, as powerful and consistent as the clamor of the Arab population may be, the support of international forces will be decisive for the changes to go beyond a mere constitutional reform. Increasingly, the United States evinces its incapacity in ordering the international system and maintaining unquestioned hegemony. Despite the pronounced asymmetries in power, they can no longer prevent the presence of other countries.

What happened in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya may still happen in the entire Arab world, revealing the collapse of a post colonial order that lost its legitimacy a long time ago. Probably, if there had been no military invasion, Iraq would also be in this list of countries with social revolts. Inspired by the rebellions occurring in the entire Arab world, thousands of Iraqis have protested peacefully against corruption and the lack of basic services. Eight years after the invasion led by the United States that overthrew the dictator Saddam Hussein, food, water, electricity and jobs lack. The rebellions seem, more and more, to be a reflection of the failure not only of the performance of their leaders, of the form of government adopted (republics or monarchies) or the nationalist project begun in the 1950's, but above all of the essence of these states.

The greatest challenge is the dismantling of the rentier states, in which the functioning of the political system and a substantial part of the revenue comes from income derived from natural resources, especially petroleum. Whatever the dynamic of changes, it is improbable that any of the old Arab regimes will survive in their current forms, in total contradiction to the transformations of their societies. We are in the middle of a revolutionary process which, even if some of its elements are suppressed, will continue influencing minds and actions in an arc of countries, from Morocco to Iran.

Due to the complete disconnect between state and society, the revolt in Libya, so far, has been the first of the current Arab revolutions in which an opposition government was formed before the end of the revolution. Contrary to the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, in Libya, unlimited state violence demanded that government workers abandon their posts and join the revolution. But the revolution was not able, for a while, to obtain the trust of ample sectors of the government to conduct a possible period of transition. At the same time, the success of the opposition in some parts of the Libyan territory created a pragmatic need to build a government structure to execute and manage these areas. So that, paradoxically, the most institutionally developed social movements emerged from a state with a precarious institutional structure. The apparent exception of Libya is not only in regards to violence, but in the example of organization that refutes the Western fears related to the "absence of civil society".

The success of the protests, especially in Tunisia and Egypt, showed also that military alliance with the United States does not necessarily assure the survival of these regimes. These relations may also help garner diplomatic and military support to suffocate movements, as in the case of Bahrain and Yemen, but the United States did not consider, ever, sending troops to squash a revolt that claimed for democracy: the armies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab States did the "dirty work", although the Fifth Fleet was stationed nearby. The idea of stability based on armed security, which ruled for a long period, is currently, at least, a risky option.

One of the probable effects, in the short term, is that when dictators realize they must reduce their foreign dependence in security, the surviving regimes may begin a new large scale arms race, including the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Gaddafi gave up the mass destruction weapons program in 2003, in hopes of improving relations with the West. He might have been thinking that, if he hadn't done that, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would act with more precaution, reinforcing the belief that the nuclear option is the only assurance of security (SHAHIN, 2011).

Kaplan (2011a), considered a relatively moderate voice in the American mainstream, is right when he states that the manifestations against authoritarian regimes that shook the Arab world are more qualified by what they are not: they are not a clamor for the Palestine state, neither are they "anti-West" or "anti-American". Moreover, he adds that, whatever the outcome of these revolts, it seems evident that Arabs have given more attention to the defects of their own societies than to the injustices committed by the international community. Kaplan makes no distinction between immediate objectives and possible long term changes in foreign policy. The new governments may refuse to unconditionally adopt the methods of the United States and Europe in the war on terror, without this signifying they are partisans of Bin Laden. However, not affronting Israel does not necessarily mean any type of agreement with the policy of occupation of Palestinian territories. Finally, new governments may also question whether to maintain the greatly acclaimed political stability in the region it is necessary to spend billions of dollars on Western military equipment.

The recognized specialists in Middle East economy, Richards and Waterbury (2008) changed their opinions about economic reform over the years, suggesting that the versions for the implementation of free trade, advocated by the Washington Consensus, are not the panacea that them and many economists in the beginning of the 1990's thought it was. The long awaited liberal turn of the economies in the Arab world has been partial and hesitating and, even when there was full adherence, was not translated into a significant decrease in social inequalities (RICHARDS e WATERBURY, 2008, p. 408). As an example, they recall that the economic policies of the United States for Iraq, based exclusively on the Washington Consensus, failed completely. The economy practically went into a state of collapse and unemployment quickly leaped to more than 40%. The thesis that free market economy and democracy are mutually reinforcing processes has not been proved valid in the nations' practices. Instead of showing resolute and unconditional support to changes, democratic governments and international institutions did not show the expected fondness for them. Stock markets fell, commodity prices remained high and financial consultants expressed the dread that social convulsions could disturb the recovery from the economic crisis of 2008.

A lot of the popularity and strength of Islamic fundamentalism is fed by socio economic conditions allied to the intransigence and repression of political regimes, which provoke, in turn, feelings of indignation and impotence. Islamic movements know how to convert into moderating and reformist forces when they have enough political space and into radical and destructive forces when they lack it. It can be said that, far before the United States executed Bin Laden, social movements in the Arab world had already excluded him from history.

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