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THE DEATH OF THE ARAB SPRING IN EGYPT

The times when we applauded the so-called Arab Spring – because we considered it a breath of democracy for the Arab world – are long past.

The Arab Spring began in Tunisia, then spread to Egypt, Syria, Libya and elsewhere, riding the wave of popular demonstrations and revolts which were met with repression by the various threatened regimes.

If we were called to take stock of the progress since its beginning in 2011, we would have to say that the result is clearly negative.

Exception made for Tunisia – where there was a partial liberalization of the political and social system, albeit at the price of instability – in the rest of the Middle East the situation has remain substantially unchanged.

The most glaring example of this is Egypt.

Popular uprisings; the toppling of the military regime; the US supporting the rise of the Muslim Brothers; the failure of the latter in leading the country, revealing just how incompatible political Islam and social freedom are; the coup d'état which reinstated the military regime.

A parable where the beginning coincides with the finish line and where the final result is the exact opposite of what was intended: today Egyptians have less freedom than they did in the past and their political system has suffered a further involution.

The attempt – failed – to ferry Egypt towards democracy has in fact justified the later military repression. This is obvious when we look at the mock trials against the exponents of the Muslim Brothers; the indiscriminate arrests; the disappearance of many opposers; the tortures; the freedom given to the secret services, as in the case of Giulio Regeni's brutal murder.

The deposed president, Morsi, is undergoing a long trial: he was first sentenced to life in prison for spying on behalf of Qatar, then he was struck with 20 years for the repression of a demonstration in 2012 and is still waiting to be judged for collaborating with foreign powers (in this case Hamas) and for being held in contempt of the court. Morsi and other members of the Brothers, including the Supreme Guide Mohammed Badie, have managed so far to avoid the death penalty thanks to the scrapping of a sentence for the incidents caused during a mass escape attempt from the Wadi al Natroun penitentiary. A gesture of leniency? No, just international pressure.

Yet if Morsi is now in prison, Mubarak is getting out. He was arrested and sentenced to life in prison in 2012. He was then found innocent and absolved from the accusations of murder and corruption. He is now left with a three-year sentence for embezzlement of public moneys which he has already served during the past six years of detention in the Cairo military hospital. Since March 2017, Mubarak lives outside, in his Heliopolis residence.

The legitimization of power in time

General Abdel Fattah Al Sisi is now trying to legitimize his claim to power with a number of actions that should ensure him continuity in time.

In February the Egyptian parliament approved a first reading of amendments to the constitution allowing the president to serve two more six-year terms in office. His current mandate expires in 2022 but the amendments give him a chance to remain in his seat until the year 2034. Granted, he will need the sort of popular consensus which we are sure he will find. The presidential elections in 2018 were just the first taste of this consensus, seen that there were no credible alternatives to his rule.

Al Sisi is presently 64 years old and he will be able to remain in office until his 79th birthday. After all, Nasser was in power for 24 years, until his death, Sadat reigned for a mere 11 years before being murdered (otherwise he would have continued to reign), and Mubarak was at the helm for almost 30 years before being booted. Egyptian presidential terms seem to depend solely on the ups and downs in the life of the presidents themselves.

An overwhelming majority of Al Sisi's own parliament decided to extend his presidential mandate. Maybe some further amending of the constitution could be approved in time but it seems likely that Al Sisi too is destined to reign for life.

Who's boss in Egypt

In Egypt, since the times of Nasser, power has been administered by the military hierarchy. The brief stint in the hands of the Muslim Brothers was just an accident in history. The real story is that the military must govern and that the Muslim Brothers are to be imprisoned, persecuted and condemned.

The military lobby also manages the country's economic resources. It is a State within a State. It controls security and finances. After the ousting of the Muslim Brothers – whose power base was founded on charitable organizations and mosques – there exists no countervailing power that can threaten that of the Egyptian military.

International legitimacy

All things considered, the putsch in Egypt should have at least fueled the resentment of the nations that consider democracy and freedom unalienable rights. But this did not happen because of mere expediency.

The conscience of foreign nations were made less sensible by the thought that a stable Egypt in the hands of the Army is better than an unstable mess headed by a group of Islamic orthodox leaders. In the Mid-East, where terrorism develops around religion, a military regimes is way more reassuring than a theocracy.

And there are geo-strategic assessments as well: Egypt is a first-rate power in the region and one that's very useful to have on your side.

It's useful to Israel in their attempt to isolate Gaza and to downsize the Palestinian's bargaining power. It's useful because it fights terrorism in the Sinai peninsula.

It's useful to the Palestinians as well, because Egypt is the only mediator between Hamas and the Palestinian National Authority.

Even the Sunni countries don't mind the regime in Egypt, because of the growing Iranian hegemony in the Gulf. In fact, the Gulf monarchies are very generous with the financial problems of Egypt, which in turn offers it's troops to fight the war in Yemen.

It's useful to the United States as a counterweight to the Iranian and Russian presence in the Middle East and it's also useful to Libya for its support of Haftar. Relationships with president Obama were not so relaxed but they improved considerably with president Trump whom, differently from his predecessor, is more sensible to convenience and less to principles.

Surely Russia sees the Egyptian army as a useful ally in the fight against Islamic terror. Last year the head of the Russian external secret services SVR, Sergej Naryshkin, visited the Cairo where he enacted synergies in intelligence and security sectors with the Egyptians. There is now a tendency for the Egyptian management to side with Moscow, both as an alternative to the sometimes difficult relationship with Washington, and in the light of the fact that the destiny of the Middle East will be in Russian hands in the near future. The support given to Libya's Haftar is also a product of converging Russian and Egyptian interests.

Iran is also favorable to the Egyptian military junta, despite the latter's connections to Riyadh. Recently the Egyptian minister of Energy visited Teheran to sign contracts with its' Iranian counterpart. A demonstration of political equilibrium that was well received by the Shia theocracy.

Egypt also officially supports Assad in Syria, where they recently sent military observers/instructors (which shows further alignment of Egypt with Russia and Iran).

The ousting of Morsi and of the Muslim Brothers and the advent of Al Sisi increased the tension between Egypt and Qatar, Turkey, something which the Saudi's must have appreciated to no end.

But Egypt also plays a central role in Africa, where it mediated between North and South Sudan, one of the many crisis zones across the continent.

At any rate – and most importantly – unbiased Egyptian foreign policy is appreciated by the most important nations around the globe.

Useful Egypt

Despite the Egyptian regime being a negative example from the political and social point of view, its role in the region is so important that it overshadows all other considerations.

After all, the Middle East is filled with authoritarian regimes without democracy where human rights are systematically violated. If human rights were the meter of international relations, there could be no talks whatsoever with anyone in the region.

The criminalization of dissent, limitations and restrictions to freedom of press and assembly, repressive laws that limit the activity of NGOs, the jailing of journalists; all of this bears no importance in the eyes of the international community. The Egyptian regime can do whatever it pleases. The terrorist emergency can justify any kind of restriction and violation of people's human rights. The rest doesn't really matter.

During a recent meeting between the European Union and the Arab League, Al Sisi was rather explicit with the people who accused him of violating human rights. He said: "We have our own humanity, our own morality and our principles. Please respect them".

WAR: BUSINESS AND TECHNOLOGY

Every war brings with it two important aspects: the testing of new weapons and the sale of arms. While the first concerns the technological aspects of new generations of weapons, the latter is only about the business. Sometimes the two issues overlap: an armament is sold, perhaps it is even quite advanced, to then see how it works on the battlefield. On the other hand, arms producing countries distribute defense funds which, of course, are then transformed into arms purchased from the financing country. But it also happens that armaments are given away to make proxy people, armies, militias or states fight in your stead or at your side.

In any case, it is never about altruism. It is not money handed out for free. The interest of those who bestow and the need of those who receive always prevails. Weapons given to other nations generally feed what are called "proxy wars". They are linked to geo-strategic assessments, hegemonic intentions, sometimes even to issues of survival.

This is why the Middle East is today the most flourishing market for those selling arms and the most appropriate laboratory for the testing of new armaments. All that is relevant to the trade or the trafficking of arms has occurred and takes place in that region.

Saudi Arabia has recently signed a contract worth over 100 billion dollars with the United States, Qatar has commissioned helicopters for its armed forces worth over 3 billion dollars. A business that feeds on declared or threatened wars and that enriches the arms supplying countries.

But when a new generation armament is sold it is important, especially for the seller, to ascertain its effectiveness on the battlefield.

S-300

Russia, for example, has provided Syria with a new mobile air defense system, the S-300. It is a missile system that is of great concern to the Israeli air force when it carries out its raids against Damascus. This supply was initially blocked by a tacit bilateral agreement between Russia and Israel. The downing of a Russian aircraft carrying military personnel to an airport near Latakia in September 2018 blew up the agreement.

The S-300 defense system has undergone several changes over the years and, in order to prevent the most important technologies from being discovered abroad, every improvement has been conceived under two versions: one for export and one for domestic use. In the Syrian case, it is probable that the latest version (obviously the one for export) was put into service in 2014 with a range of 300 km. In practice, it could hit an Israeli plane in both Lebanon and the Syrian border.

S-400

These missile systems will be supplied by Russia to Turkey in 2019 and represent a supply with purely political characteristics, as it puts Ankara's membership in NATO into question.

It is a mobile air defense missile system, more sophisticated than the S-300. However, its supply collided with that of the F-35 fighter planes of American manufacture. Turkey

participated and financed the Stealth version of jet, already tested by the Israelis on the Syrian theater.

There are two problems: the logistics of the Russian weapons system does not integrate with the other NATO armaments supply. Not only that – and this is the most relevant issue – it should be reset and inserted into the allied radar system. This last aspect creates a vulnerability in favor of the Russians, who are already testing a new series of missiles, the S-500s, that can reach a target over 500 km away.

Bomb competition

The Americans had first bragged about and then used, in Afghanistan in April 2017, a large bomb weighing about 10,000 tons that had devastating effects. Technically called "MOAB" ("Massive Ordnance Air Blast"), its acronym was then changed to "Mother Of All Bombs". In practice, it is the most powerful non-nuclear device now in circulation.

The Iranians wanted to follow the US and the Pasdaran air forces have also developed a similar bomb that can be flown over the targets by the Russian Ilyushin planes. In this case, rather than the military aspect, propaganda prevailed as it was dubbed "Father of All Bombs".

But there is also a strategic reason: the MOAB is bunker-buster and this means that Iran's underground nuclear facilities could be destroyed. So the Iranian message is very simple: if someone uses the bomb on our territory, keep in mind that we can do the same elsewhere.

Missile competition

Recently the Israeli government has commissioned its military industry to supply a stock of new missiles capable of striking within a 30/300 km radius. The supply can act as a deterrent to Hamas, Hezbollah and Syria. The Israelis have greater problems developing ballistic systems capable of striking at greater distances and, in this case, capable of affecting nuclear structures Iranian.

On the other hand, Iran is also gearing up to counter Israel. It has supplied medium-range missiles to Iraq, which can potentially hit Israel and Saudi Arabia, missiles with a range of around 300 km, and continues to deliver tactical missiles to Hezbollah.

As for as ballistic missiles, Tehran has also developed a missile, the Shahab 3, a modified version of the North Korean Nodong missile, that has a range of over 1000 km.

The message is clear: we can strike you, every attack will see retaliation.

The drone war

The Americans use drones to control the Syrian theater, the Russians have blocked the GPS system of unmanned aircrafts thus preventing them from operating.

The circumstance highlighted a vulnerability that has set in motion, on the American side, an improvement in remote control systems. This is because any interference in the control and communication system of drones can make them fall or break down.

But the sky in the Middle East is full of drones: there are the American ones, the Russian ones, the Chinese ones (supplied to Jordan, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Iraq) and also those produced directly by Turkey, Israel and Iran.

The latter has developed a new drone, the "Saeqeh", which can hit up to 4 targets with smart bombs. It was built on the basis of the experience gained by capturing an American drone in December 2011, a "RQ 170 Sentinel".

Drones represent a new weapon system that is revolutionizing the battlefield. The drone listens, captures, sees, strikes, kills. It is the instrument of the war of the future.

In the second Gulf War in Iraq, unmanned aircrafts had become the largest source of information on the enemy for for the US. Each Armed Forces used their own and it happened that the aircrafts collided in the sky.

A technological war is underway around the use of drones, which is developed on several fronts: making them invisible, making their performance more efficient, increasing their flight autonomy (all offensive features) and blocking their remote control or transmission of data (defensive activities).

A technological war.

The arms trade

Between 2013 and 2017 arms sales in the Middle East have increased by 103%. One third of all weapons sold each year in the world is for the exclusive benefit / use of Middle Eastern countries. It is a business that sees in the forefront the American military industry, the English one and the European consortia and, on the opposite front, China and Russia.

The United States provides the world with 34% of the weapons sold. Russia "only" 22%. The turnover is around 400 billion dollars annually.

But any sale of weapons implies a dependency from suppliers. It is in fact a loss of sovereignty because the country that receives arms must be trained to use them, depends on the specific logistics of the counterpart and, by doing so, exposes its own security system.

In the Middle East each country is in some form conditioned by this type of relationship with external powers.

Technology

When an Israeli F16 was shot down in Syria in February 2018, an acceleration of those projects to defend fighters during flight missions was immediately triggered. The solution studied by the Israelis was to connect, or rather to tie with a wire, an apparatus - called EII-8270 - equipped with a transponder and to attract any missiles thrown at the aircraft.

But the Israelis are already testing the Stealth version of the American F-22 fighter in Syria while, not coincidentally, on the other side Russia has deployed its own Stealth aircraft, the SU-57.

The Israeli Iron Dome missile defense system has also carried out updates and improvements after various attempts by Hezbollah from Lebanon and Hamas from Gaza to

strike Israeli territory. The system was also extended to the defense of naval objectives, integrating the radar system of the various armed forces. A need that has become urgent for the protection of offshore oil and gas facilities. But if the Iron Dome operates against short-range missiles, the "Slingshot of David" deals with the threat of medium-range missiles while the Arrow 3 against ballistic threats that travel in the stratosphere. Here, too, experience and innovations go hand in hand.

In practice, every evolution or experience on the battlefield is immediately followed by an improvement in weapon systems or security systems. The only limit to employing an increasingly sophisticated weapon system is the danger that the enemy may appropriate the specific technology.

The paradox of a war is that, if on one hand it produces victims and suffering, on the other it increases the development of a technology that, many times, apart from the specific military uses, also has positive effects in the civilized world and in the progress of humanity.

GADDAFI'S SON'S CONSPIRACIES

In Libya only the military feats of Khalifa Haftar, the political weakness of Fayeze al Sarraj, the militias of Misurata who oppose Haftar without supporting the Sarraj are under the spotlight. We debate over who has control over the rich oil wells, the unclear role played by the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Russia, France, Italy, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United States. Much credit is also given to the peace negotiations that have yet failed to produce any result: Skirat, Paris, Palermo and now Abu Dhabi. We insist on a UN sponsored agreement between Sarraj and Haftar in order to hold free elections in a country that is in the hands of gangs and factions, with no security and where the democracy has never existed.

But behind all this there is the elephant in the room, a character that has disappeared from the media's narrative and who, instead, is present in Libya, moves and cultivates contacts both within the country and outside: Seif al Islam Gaddafi. Since his release by the Zintan authorities was official, the dictator's son has resumed his personal political activity, albeit in a hidden form. The acclaimed release is, in fact, a rehabilitation in the eyes of the Libyans, or at least for a large part of them. Since June 2017, the son of the late dictator has not given interviews, has not appeared in any official event, refuses any contact and, for security reasons, does not even reveal where he resides. There are those who say he remained in Zintan, others speculate he moved to Beida, where some of his relatives reside.

Seif is 47 today, the first son of Gaddafi's second wife. In the power system of the family he was the one who had to take over his father in running the country and had been prepared for it. He studied in London at the London School of Economics, he knows the western world and, as the designated heir, before the civil war broke out he was the bearer of a progressive agenda, he showed openness to issues such as human rights and alienated his father's old guard.

He was certainly not a warmonger like his brothers Mutassim and Khamis who both died during the fighting. He was and is above all a political figure. But in the role of first male child he had decided to fight alongside his father and follow him in his destiny. Because of his commitment to the civil war he was immediately accused of crimes against humanity, as happens every time to those who lose, but, to be fair, he did not deserve those accusations. He only carried out his duty as a son.

Of all the Gaddafi family members who survived the war, Seif is certainly the most qualified one. His brother Saadi is still detained and on trial in Tripoli even though, during the regime, he was mainly known for his footballing ambitions. During the war he held the rank of Colonel, but he was the first to escape and take refuge in Niger, from where he was later extradited and returned to the rebels in Tripoli. His other brother, Hannibal, was instead known for his excesses around the world. He had been convicted by a French court for beating his wife, he was implicated in illegal activity on the Cote d'Azur, he had had problems in Switzerland and even in London. He has been jailed in Lebanon for the past 4 years.

Lebanon had very difficult relations with the Libyan dictator, accused of the disappearance and murder of Shiite leader Musa Sadr during a trip to Tripoli in 1978. Hannibal had taken refuge in Damascus and was apprehended there - probably by Hezbollah - and later extradited to Beirut. Hannibal has no knowledge of the Sadr affair, but once again he behaves badly and is now in jail for contempt of the Lebanese judiciary. The rest of the Gaddafi family now lives in Oman: Safiah Farkash, the dictator's second wife, the favorite daughter Aisha and the son of the first wife Mohammed who was never involved in the affairs of the regime and is a businessman.

Muammar Gaddafi was certainly a dictator who was guilty of many crimes, had many enemies, but also many followers in his country. He governed by being generous to those who supported him and ruthless against those who opposed him. He held onto power with the support of some tribes, which in Libya are called Kabyle, against the hostility of other kabyles. The civil war highlighted this division with the only variant that the weakest kabyle - those who would have lost in an armed confrontation with the dictator - then won thanks to international armed support. And when this circumstance occurs the result is obvious: civil war.

The negative consequences of this war that still looms over the country have inevitably led to a re-evaluation of the figure of the dictator. People realized that, in the end, life under Gaddafi wasn't so bad, while what followed was certainly worse. This mood potentially favors the reappearance of a Gaddafi in the Libyan landscape. Seif is a high-level politician. He knows that it will take some time before the return of a Gaddafi as a political leader in Libya is accepted. This applies both domestically and internationally.

Domestically, all the main political players competing for power, from al Sarraj to Haftar, know that having Gaddafi on their side, and with him that part of the population that supported the dictator, is important both in terms of political, social and, last but not least, military support. Since Seif was set free, both contenders have been fighting for his influence. And if and when elections are held in Libya, it is possible that Seif will also be a candidate. He will come forward if he is sure he can win or, at least, be in a position to dictate who the winner is. It is not excluded that he may also decide to stay out of the competition and wait for better times.

On an international level, the subject is even more delicate. An international military intervention led by a global coalition intervened in 2011 to oust the Muammar Gaddafi. Eight years later one of his children now risks taking over the country again, or playing an important political role after decades of finger-pointing against the Gaddafis. As of today, Seif avoids playing a visible political role. He does it out of prudence, he does so, as some assume, because Zintan's militias have imposed some restrictions on him, but he does so also to give his domestic and international counterparts enough time to accept his return to the scene.

Although Seif doesn't appear in person, he works through a set of envoys. Even before his release, he had sent a loyal man known as Kashkar to Italy to test the reaction of local politicians in case he decided to reappear on the Libyan political scene. He recently did the same in Russia, this time using another emissary, Mohammed Gallush, who delivered a

letter to Putin in which he announced his support for the UN mediator Ghassam Salame's plan to convene a national conference in Libya.

So far the international community has ignored or pretended to ignore the fact that a Gaddafi can still play an important role in Libya. So this is why the name of Seif al Islam Gaddafi never appears in the various negotiations or conferences that seek to restore peace in Libya. This is a way of exorcising a danger. But this doesn't mean the peril will disappear. The name of Gaddafi is embarrassing for some, but still has its charm in the Libyan political landscape. It only remains to be seen if Seif is actually capable of converting the attractiveness of his name into social and political consensus. Seif know he cannot rely solely on the support of those who want revenge for the wrongs suffered as a result of the civil war. It would be like wanting to revive a social model that has had its day.

But Seif is patient, he knows how to wait for the right moment, has both personal financial resources (not everything that belonged to the family has been seized) and those of his supporters. He can count on a large diaspora of loyalists sheltered in Egypt and who are putting pressure on Abdel Fattah al Sisi. He can also rely on the subtle complacency of many Gulf countries (revolutions are always a bad example for autocratic regimes) and, since he has a direct channel with Moscow, he also enjoys the consideration from Russia.