The Arab Uprisings, One Year On

by Robert Satloff **(/experts/robert-satloff)**

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Articles & Testimony

The Middle East begins 2012 much as it began 1949, 1968, and 1980: confident only that uncertainty is the new norm.

It is now commonplace to note that, like 1948, 1967 and 1979, the year that was -- 2011 -- will go down as a year of seismic change in the Middle East. But what sort of change will it leave in its wake?

The term most often associated with the events of the last year -- the "Arab Spring" -- provides virtually no clue. That phrase, borrowed from a hopeful moment in Prague that was crushed by Soviet tanks more than a generation ago, was first used in the Middle East context in 2005. That was when the assassination of Rafik Hariri triggered an outpouring of Lebanese "people power" that drove Syrian troops out of that country and raised hopes of a truly new dawn in Lebanon after its bloody 30-year war.

In retrospect, its usage was tragically apt, in that Hezbollah -- like the Soviets -- eventually triumphed, putting off until another day the potential for truly positive change. One doubts that the Facebookers and Twitterati who celebrate the Arab Spring of 2011 recall this unhappy history.

"Arab Awakening" is the second term whose use is increasing -- not least because commentators have been told that many Middle Eastern countries, especially Egypt, have only two real seasons, neither of which is spring. News outlets as disparate as *The Economist* and Al Jazeera have begun to use "Arab Awakening" to describe the volcanic eruptions across the region sparked by the iconic self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor last December.

This term, too, has an historical antecedent, one that is actually rooted in the Middle East, which is a plus. It harkens back to the landmark 1938 book of the same title by George Antonius, a Greek Orthodox Lebanese and onetime British mandatory official in Palestine who extolled the rising of a renewed pan-Arab political and cultural consciousness after decades of European, principally British, machination and domination. But setting aside the ahistorical elements of Antonius' original work, "Arab awakening" conjures up precisely the wrong imagery for what has been happening in Arab countries over the past year.

First, Antonius' book was designed, in large part, to rally Arabs to the Palestine cause. In contrast, the changes of 2011 were, at their core, a sharp riposte to ideologues who contend that Arabs only, principally or even mostly care about Palestine. And second, while Antonius' Arab Awakening was a clarion call for pan-Arab nationalism -- the idea that Arabs from the Atlantic to the Gulf share a linguistic, cultural, social and even political patrimony -- the events of 2011 have been national, not pan-Arab, phenomena, with Egyptians, Libyans, Yemenis, Syrians and others celebrating their specific local nationalisms, not some abstract trans-regional ideology. So, like the romantic term "Arab Spring," the equally romantic term "Arab Awakening" obscures more than it explains.

There is, in my view, a widely used Arabic term of recent vintage that comes closer than either of these more popular phrases to capturing the explosiveness, the challenge and the uncertainty of what has occurred across the region over the past year. While this term is most closely associated with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the fact that it is linked in political consciousness to a single national experience makes it appropriate to use, in its plural form, to apply to the variety of national experiences witnessed in 2011.

The word is "intifada," whose Arabic original meaning is "shaking off" and has come to be used as the Arabic translation of "uprising." What the world has seen over the past year is a series of "Arab uprisings," i.e., popular efforts -- some more peaceful than others -- to shake off traditional authority. Like their Palestinian namesakes, these uprisings reminded the world that mass action can sometimes play as important a role in Arab politics as elite behavior. And like those earlier "intifadat" -- plural of intifada -- the outcome of these uprisings is decidedly uncertain.

Having decided the "what" (what to call the events of the past year), the next task is to determine the "so what" (what do these events really mean). This is even trickier. Identifying winners (Sunni Islamists) and losers (Israel and Iran) of these uprisings has become a favorite parlor game, but after just one year, it is far too early to judge if the events of 2011 will have truly lasting impact, where that lasting impact will be felt most, and how will it affect issues of strategic import, such as whether Iran will persist with slow-motion development of a nuclear weapon capability or jump to a breakout strategy.

Indeed, while leaders have been driven from power in four Arab countries -- Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya -- only in one of these (Libya) can one say conclusively that the regimes they led have been driven from power, too. In Tunisia and Egypt, the key institution that facilitated the original transfer of power -- the army -- remains intact; in Yemen, the deposed leader has not really even gone away.

One additional Arab republic, Syria, teeters on the brink of all-out civil war; while four-and-a-half others -- Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority -- have barely been touched by the "uprising" tsunami. Elsewhere, one monarchy fought back against its uprising and appears to have triumphed (Bahrain) while other monarchies employed a rope-a-dope strategy of reform to absorb the challenge of uprising and have, so far, avoided any significant unrest. The variety of national experience is itself the dominant motif.

Despite all this, the events of the past year -- no matter how they ultimately turn out -- have already had a profound impact, not so much in shaping a new Middle East but in demolishing several long-held assumptions about the old Middle East. Here are five.

- First, no longer valid is the idea that competition among elites, rather than the influence of popular will, determines the rise and fall of Arab regimes. For four decades -- from the mass outpouring of Egyptians who rejected Gamal Abdel Nasser's resignation in the wake of the catastrophic 1967 war to the mass outpouring of Egyptians who demanded Mubarak's resignation after 30 years of peace with Israel -- the Arab street was largely irrelevant to assessments of the region's politics. Tahrir Square brought that chapter to a close. This does not mean the mob will always determine the fate of Arab nations, but it is an actor on the Arab stage once again.

- Second, no longer valid is the idea that authoritarian regimes can and will use the full power of the state to retain their control. For two generations, the spectre of the omnipotent state cast a dark shadow across the region's politics, stifling the development of any real opposition worthy of the name. The might and power of these regimes grew meteorically in recent decades, as many leaders looked at the frightening collapse of the Shah of Iran and decided to pour every marginal dollar (or pound, lira or riyal) into their manifold security and intelligence apparatuses.

  Over time, however, the rot of corruption and a preening sense of invincibility ate away at these regimes from within. The result was that the former commander of the Egyptian Air Force, a hero of the Suez crossing against mighty Israel, was forced to dispatch machete-armed camel riders in a last-ditch effort to salvage his rule. This decrepitude has not been the case everywhere, of course, as the brutality of the Libyan and Syrian sagas shows, but the rapid demise of authoritarianism in Tunisia and Egypt underscores the limits of presumed omnipotence.

- Third, no longer valid is the idea that the main threat to moderate, pro-West regimes across the Levant emanates from the emergence of an Iran-dominated "Shi'ite crescent." In its place is the potentially greater fear that a "Sunni crescent" of regimes led or influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood -- regimes that espouse Osama bin Ladin's anti-American, anti-Western and anti-Israel objectives without his radically violent and urgent means -- will stretch from Morocco to the Gulf.

  Already, Ikhwan-related prime ministers are or are poised to be in office from Rabat to Gaza, with the exception of Algiers, and they are likely to be joined by colleagues in Damascus and perhaps Amman before 2012 is over.

  Some will see in this an antidote to the destructive message of al-Qaida and welcome this as a more evolutionary and authentic trend, but their optimism is almost surely misplaced. (The canary in the Islamist coalmine will be the local Christian communities. The pace of Christian, especially Coptic, emigration, will be an especially useful bellwether. After two millennia, predictions that half of the current Arab Christian population will be gone within the next decade are not fantastical.)

- Fourth, no longer valid is the idea that the Saudi gerontocracy lacks the energy and vision to do anything but pay off enemies or count on America for its preservation. To the contrary, the year of "Arab uprisings" -- which has paralleled a year of unusual travails for the Saudi royal family -- has witnessed an unusually bold and assertive Saudi penchant for self-preservation, exemplified by the deployment of Saudi and other Gulf forces in Bahrain. This even led to the enunciation of Riyadh's version of the Monroe Doctrine, i.e., that no neighboring monarchy should be permitted to experiment with, let alone succumb to the allures of, liberal democracy. The Wahhabis of the Nejd, it seems, aren't going down without a fight -- and aren't about to let their royalist neighbors go down either.

- Fifth, no longer valid is the idea that the United States will always prioritize preservation of "the devil we know" over the uncertainty and inherent instability of "the devil we don't." To be sure, official Washington believed that the intercession of the Egyptian army to ease transition to a post-Mubarak future was a way to safeguard its diminishing equities, not a way to throw its lot in with the throngs of street protestors.

  But in less than a year, an administration consumed with domestic woes and eager to shed foreign entanglements has already begun to reconcile itself to a new, Islamist-dominated Middle East. While neither unchangeable nor irretrievable, the speed with which America made a strategic pivot in the Middle East, in the

process making peace with the idea that elections, not institutions, build democracy, is nothing short of astounding.

It is too early to define a new set of assumptions that will explain the ways of the Middle East in the next few decades with as much acuity and precision as the old assumptions helpfully guided us through the last half century. But we begin 2012 much as Middle Easterners began 1949, 1968 and 1980 -- confident only that uncertainty is the new norm.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute.

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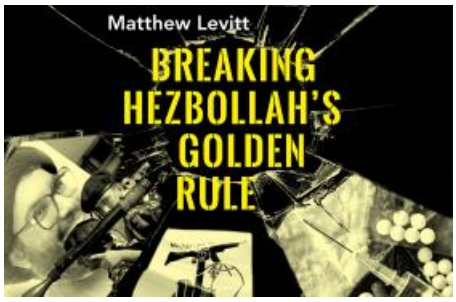

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