

21st Century Challenges of Revolt and Dissent: from the Arab Revolts to the “occupy” world movement

Friday 4 November 2011, by [ALI Tariq](#), [KHATIB Firas](#) (Date first published: 25 October 2011).

Veteran historian, novelist, and activist Tariq Ali spoke to *al-Akhbar* about the challenges facing the Arab Revolts, the future of US policy in the Middle East following ‘disengagement’ from Iraq, and the significance of the current movement of dissent taking over the streets and squares of cities across the world.

The Arab Revolts

Firas Khatib (FK): Do you agree with the argument that change in the Arab world has been incomplete?

Tariq Ali (TA): I am in favor of the mass uprisings in the Arab world. When they first erupted, I compared them to Europe in 1848. [Back then] there were huge uprisings which set the picture for the next hundred years. But at the actual time that these uprisings in Europe occurred, there were lots of defeats and setbacks, and I think that is what we are probably going to witness and experience. I hope not, but so far it looks like the authorities will recuperate the situation by promising a few reforms here and there while keeping the system in place. That is happening in Tunisia and Egypt. Libya is another story all together, where the West intervenes, supposedly for human rights and to stop Benghazi being taken by Gadhafi, and ends up fighting in the war and NATO has been bombing this country now for over six months. And the results are going to be a mess in my opinion. I have argued that whoever wins in Libya, the Libyan people are going to lose given what’s happening. Libya is important to them not because of its geography but because of its geology, it contains huge reserves of oil and natural gas and they will not allow this to go away.

FK: Months have passed since the outbreak of the “Arab Spring.” What is your evaluation of Obama’s reaction to it?

TA: The initial reaction of the United States was surprise and fear. Surprise that this had happened and was escalating, and fear that it could bring down the whole facade in the region with unforeseen and unforeseeable consequences. In Tunisia, the Americans tried late via the French to keep Ben Ali in power. The French government, Sarkozy and his defense minister, offered to send French troops to keep Ben Ali in power, but it was too late. Ben Ali was already on a plane to Saudi Arabia. In Egypt, they tried to control the situation, first by hoping to keep Mubarak in power. Then a lot of negotiations started behind the scenes, and, ultimately, sensing that the situation could get out of control and possibly lead to disputes in the army, the US agreed that Mubarak had to go, so Mubarak was put in a straight jacket and dragged off the political stage screaming and struggling.

And then you have a situation subsequently where they have sacrificed Mubarak, but they want to hang on, to persist, like they do in Pakistan and Tunisia and other countries where death forces and dictators have been removed. And they've permitted the setting up of civilian facade, but one that is very carefully negotiated and choreographed. It is not working out so well, because the attack of the security forces on Christian demonstrators in Cairo last week shows how fragile the situation is.

FK: Why, after such a victory for the people in Egypt, has there been many setbacks?

TA: The mass uprisings are absolutely vital to shift a dictator, but what is put in its place then comes with true political means. And here, the fact that these new movements in the Arab world have not produced new political formations, is of great importance. Here the contrast with South America is very visible. In South America throughout the 1990s and in the 21st century, you have a combination of massive social movements, which produce new forms of political organizations. These organizations contested elections and came to power democratically and electorally and then implemented structural reforms, challenging the grip of neoliberal capitalism. Not capitalism as a whole, but this particular form of capitalism. Without new forms of political organizations, the existing political structures like the Muslim Brotherhood, especially in Egypt, have a huge advantage.

FK: What is the future of the relationship between the Egyptian army and the United States?

TA: That depends very much on what happens over the next year. Once you have a civilian government elected in Egypt, whatever it is, that changes the relationship or the forces [at play] in the sense of producing a government which has a legitimacy that the military doesn't have. But I think the power of the Egyptian military is in decline, and the system they are trying to put into place in Egypt will be like in Pakistan and Indonesia where the military was the main force working with the US. Over the last decade, the US stopped using the military in these countries because they see it is counterproductive and they have been working with other forms of regimes. I think this is what is likely to happen in Egypt, so a lot of negotiation is taking place.

FK: Why do the events in the Syrian uprising remain so controversial despite the numbers of killed people?

TA: There are a number of reasons that the Arab world is divided on Syria. The first reason is that Syria is seen as the only regime in the region which maintained some degree of independence and stood firm on certain issues. Whether that is accurate or not, I think it is more complicated than [that]. The Assad regime has been a very opportunist regime. As we know, it participated in the first Gulf War, so where was the so called anti-imperialism then? On the other hand, it's a regime which has definitely backed Hezbollah in Lebanon and the forces that were effectively combating Israel, so that produces another contradiction. Thirdly, it is a regime that has remained hostile to imperialism. That creates confusion. The fourth reason, in my opinion, is that the NATO bombing of Libya for six or seven month has made many people in the Arab World extremely sensitive to the issue of imperialist intervention, and they don't want to see that in Syria. And many of the Syrian opposition have said that they don't want to see that either. So a combination of these factors has meant that the attitude toward Syria is confused. It is not confused to me, I want to make that clear. I think that the Assad regime, this family dictatorship imposed on Syrians, first under Hafez Assad, came to power through a brutal coup against the civilian wing of the Baath party, led by some very fine people who were wiped out in Syria, just like Saddam did in Iraq. They wiped out, pushed, exiled, and locked up many people. That is how they came to power, and since then they have been maneuvering effectively within Syria and the region to stay in power; and now they refuse to accept that their time is up. It is absolutely astonishing that Assad Junior could not push through Syria's

reforms, when he sees the writing's on the wall. He has seen what happen in Tunisia and Egypt and [is] feeling that somehow he can hold on to power. My feeling is that their days are gone and that sooner or later they will crumble. Another point worth bearing in mind now, is that Saudi Arabia has decided that essentially they would like a Sunni government in Syria which will be their ally and which they can control. So their attitude toward Syria has totally changed 180 degrees. They were prepared to tolerate [the Assad regime]. They were prepared to deal with it, especially after the withdrawal from Lebanon, which the Saudis saw as a big victory. But now they have had it, and the big pressure on the Syrians is from the Saudi axis in the region. [The Saudi's] want to get rid of them, which is another reason for their hostility toward Iran, which is backing the Assad regime. It is a confused picture but we shouldn't lose sight that the people of Syria have said enough: we don't want you, go in peace, but the killing and massacres happening in Syria now have reached a scale that leaving in peace will be difficult.

FK: What is your assessment of a post-Assad Syria? What are the roles of the United States and Israel in what is happening in Syria?

TA: I think the Israelis don't want a change. Certainly the Israelis don't want the Assad regime to be overthrown, because they deal with him off and on, and they don't know who might follow him. The big fear of the Israelis is democratic governments, because once you have a democratic government in the region, even if they are not great in many issues, they are default governments. Nonetheless, they have to respond to some of the mood of their base, and the Arab base, the Arab street is hostile to what the Israelis have been doing in the region now for three decades. They don't like it, so there will be a lot of pressure. The Israelis prefer to deal with despots because they can make deals with despots, and there is no sign that they want to remove the Assad regime.

FK: Does the ambiguous reaction of Western powers towards the Arab Spring result from their "fear" of the Muslim Brotherhood?

TA: Why is the Muslim brotherhood a threat to them? They are a socially conservative force, but the West loves working with conservative forces all over the world. Why would that change just because they happened to be Muslims? My own politics is that I don't support them, but if people want to elect them to power like they elect Christian democrats in Germany or Italy or wherever else, why should they be stopped? This is not simply hostility to the Muslim Brotherhood, this is essentially a hostility to democracy in the Arab world. If people are scared of them, the only way is to let them be elected and people can judge them, that is the way forward, and that should be the way forward. But the attack on the Brotherhood is essentially an attack on the idea that the Arab people are mature enough to choose their own governments. And this has got a great deal to do with the strategic importance of the region. Wherever you have oil, the West has always preferred to work with despots than [with] democratic governments.

Iran, United States and Israel

FK: What was your reaction to the alleged elaborate plot by Iran to kill the Saudi ambassador in the United States?

TA: I think it is so incredulous, it couldn't possibly be true. it's basically an attempt to help out the Saudis in the region, because there is a great deal of unrest reported in the Shiite areas of Saudi Arabia. Given the role they played in Bahrain, they are nervous. And I think the American intelligence agency further claim to help the Saudis out. It has now emerged that this guy who is supposedly accused of the plot is crazy, and however foolish the Iranians may be, they are not that foolish. So my initial reaction was this was a set-up job.

FK: What is the United State's planned policy towards Iran? Are they going for sanctions, war, limited military attack, or diplomacy?

TA: My feeling about the United States policy in relation to Iran has been for some time now, that it comes purely from American interests to destabilize Iran. Their attempt to carry out bombings or to impose heavy sanctions with the approval of Russia and China is unlikely to work. Any [push for a] military attack on Iran will be resisted by American generals and the Pentagon, for a number of reasons: one is an overstretched military; secondly the danger that if you attack Iran, the Iranians can respond in Iraq or Lebanon or Afghanistan.

We get carried away by what the United States is doing vis-a-vis Iran and we tend to forget that in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Iranian clerical regime essentially backed the wars and American occupation of Iraq. They backed the NATO occupation of Afghanistan, which is very important for the United States. So for them to take a pot shot at Iran runs the risk of unraveling and destabilizing the occupation in these two countries and it is unlikely they will do it. The pressure to do something in Iran is coming from one source, Israel. And the reason for that is the fear that the Israeli nuclear monopoly in the region might be broken. There is no other reason.

FK: Given the complicated situation you mentioned, do you think there is a possibility that Israel will take concrete action against Iran?

TA: Israelis can't attack Iran without US approval, which is impossible because the resulting mayhem that will follow could bring down the Saudi regime. If Iran is attacked militarily by the Israelis, there will be mayhem in the Middle East and in different parts of the world. It will not be something popular. And then the big question is, what will the opposition in Saudi Arabia do? It is not a well-organized opposition, but we know it exists. And that is a serious problem for the United States, because the one unacceptable thing for them in the Middle East is that anything should happen to the Saudi regime, which they back solidly.

All talks of democracy and human rights and freedom is forgotten when it comes to Saudi Arabia, that is a very clear position by the United States. So it will be extremely counterproductive to permit an Israeli raid on Iran. But sometimes politicians do irrational crazy things.

Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine

FK: Washington has vowed to disengage from Iraq by the end of this year. What will this mean in the current political context in the Middle East?

TA: Let us wait and see if the disengagement happens. The huge military bases that they have already built in Iraq and are currently building in Afghanistan don't indicate to me a rapid disengagement. This disengagement is largely for show, like what happened when the British occupied Iraq. They retreated to the military bases from which they were not thrown out until the revolution in 1958.

The Americans here are copying the British model: huge military bases, like American cities, constructed in 6 different places in Iraq, where they are going to keep 15 or 20 or 30 thousand soldiers. So it is very premature to speak of disengagement. And if the Iraqi regime asks all the American soldiers to leave, that would be an interesting moment in Middle Eastern politics. Let's wait and see what happens.

FK: The situation is going to be complicated in Afghanistan, and even the United States did not even offer anything new. Would that weaken Obama or weaken the United States?

TA: It already has. Obama made his big glory on the foreign policy, the difference from Bush is that Bush did not send enough troops to win the war in Afghanistan and that Obama was going to send more troops. And he did send them, and they failed. Essentially the American occupation of Afghanistan has led to the creation of a resistance which is not simply the old Taliban, who are still there, but many new elements in it. It has, as I have been arguing, become a Pashtun resistance, with a political leadership which is Taliban and new Taliban, and we didn't know what.

But one thing [these groups] agree on is that they will not negotiate with Karzai as long as there are foreign troops in the country. But behind the scenes, negotiations have been taking place with the resistance. And the Americans are pleading with them to come and join the national government, but they said they will do that, but not while there are foreign troops on Afghan soil.

Americans and NATO people live in a bubble, even they can only visit some parts of the country by paying huge amounts of money to the insurgents, just like the Russians used to do. It failed then, and it is going to fail again. I don't know if that is possible any longer, but five years ago I argued that the only way for them is to go out and to give the countries in the region the authority to set up their national governments. But that is not how the West people operate.

FK: Why do you think Obama opposed the recent bid for Palestinian statehood after declaring a few months ago that he would support a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders?

TA: Obama is not different from any other American president. Bush made even stronger pushes at one point in the case of a Palestinian state. And Father Bush was even tougher on the question of a Palestinian state. Even Clinton talked about an independent Palestinian state. But in most cases they meant an independent Palestinian state that was acceptable to the Israelis, and the Israelis refused to allow even a nominal Palestinian independence. All that was being asked of the United Nations was to recognize the current status-quo as an independent Palestinian state. And they were not even able to accept that.

They kicked the Palestinians in the face, and this is what the PLO gets for having totally and completely capitulated to the West after the Oslo accords. That's the tragedy, that they have been left high and dry and they don't know what to do. In any case, there is no question that the Security Council would not accept this because the Europeans and the Americans will not do anything that the Israelis do not want. And the statement of Abu Mazen [Mahmoud Abbas] was pathetic. I have never seen a Palestinian leader so utterly pathetic. His statement was: "this reveals that the United States is not being evenhanded." When was the United States ever evenhanded, balanced, rational, or backing both sides?

Global dissent and Social justice

FK: There is a movement to occupy Wall Street demanding social justice. What is the relation of leftist movements to what is going on, and how hopeful is the push for change?

TA: I think that the current generation all over the world - not just in the Arab world, but in South America and now in the West, who are growing up under the umbrella of the capitalist crisis, are fed up. They are fed up because they live in countries without any serious opposition from the political parties. This situation is increasing now in the West, where the form of capitalism that prevails is strangling democracy and democratic accountability. And so you have no opposition in Britain. You have no opposition in the United States. You have no opposition in France or Spain or Greece. And it is the center-left parties in Spain and Greece that are pushing through hostile policies like the New Labor was preparing to do before it was replaced by a coalition in Britain. And the policies of Obama

and Bush, economic policies and foreign policies, show the continuity of the imperial elite, nothing new.

In this situation where you have a huge crisis and the governments of today carry on like before, young people are feeling that no one is going to help them unless they do something themselves. So they are doing what they know how to do, marching, demonstrating, and occupying. This is a very important first step, which shows a shift in political consciousness. But from here, a leap is required, which is the creation of new political formations. I am not saying it is easy, but unless that happens, these movements will rise and fall without being able to achieve what they want to.

FK: Do you see a chance of creating new political formations in the west?

TA: I think it will take another 20 years. Although I think that people learned from their own experiences. It is experience that teaches people; so in Egypt, their experience taught them it is a do-or-die situation, we are prepared to die, but we will get rid of Mubarak. When they reach that stage in the United States and parts of Europe, then we will see different outlooks and different outcomes, but that has not happened so far. The system has succeeded in recuperating [from] protests before, and it can do so again. It doesn't feel seriously threatened by them. That does not mean they are not important. They are very important, but one has to have a long-term view.

FK: Will occupying Wall Street and demonstrations all over Europe lead to a new economic era beyond capitalism?

TA: Lenin said many things people had forgotten, one of which is very important. He said there will never be a final crisis of capitalism unless there is an alternative. And I think that is absolutely true. Capitalism has been through numerous crises before, and it will solve them - well, badly, with repression. But it will get through them unless an alternative emerges on a national and global level. That is an unfortunate fact of history. You can't jump past that, because the system is in power. It doesn't see these things as a challenge. These uprisings, occupations are extremely important, and I support them fully; but on their own they are not enough. I think it is one's responsibility to point this out. They are not enough. What they show is a great deal of unease in the world. They show a new generation which has seen through all the lies of neoliberalism or privatization, of capitalist greed. They have seen through all that, and somehow now, Marx is suddenly popular again, because he is the guy who analyzed capitalism the best. Even his enemies admit that. They have to get back to Marx to see how the system works. That is all to the good that people are reading again, people are thinking again, but ultimately, Lenin's words are not wrong. Until people see an alternative system, [the prevailing system] will always win.

FK: How can one describe what we are witnessing in the world today?

TA: I think what we are living through now is a transition, psychologically, politically, socially, and culturally. But it is not a transition that can be completed unless something new emerges. This notion which neoliberal capitalism spread throughout the world, saying: borrow money, shop, watch pornography, do whatever you want, be happy... yet all the figures show that over the last 20 or 30 years, the disease that infects people in the heartlands of capitalism the most is mental depression. In fact, capitalism produces a deep insecurity and unhappiness, which comes out as depression. This is statistically proven. It goes very deep in this society, so there is no doubt in my mind that these societies are corrupt and evil, but that doesn't mean that they will fall away.

The 21st century is going to be, I hope, a century of transition, from something which we know does not work to something that might work. What it would be we can't predict with certainty now, because there is no certainty in this world. But nonetheless, I don't feel that the final answer has

been given on these questions.

FK: Given the changes we are witnessing in the Arab World and the global economy, is the United States in decline?

TA: No. I have to be very frank. We have a phrase in our language in Pakistan, “cooking an imaginary rice.” We can cook many beautiful dishes in our imagination, but the reality is that the United States has suffered worse setbacks than this in its imperial history, and it has no rival. Ironically, the occupation of Iraq may have made Iran a central player in that region. That is a direct consequence of the American occupation of Iraq, and the fact that they backed Shiite clerical parties who are very loyal to Tehran, or close to Tehran if not 100 percent loyal. So that has meant that the relationship between the Iraqi government under the occupation and the Iranians is very close, and this is a direct result of the American intervention.

Now if the Americans were totally rational, what would have happened is what happened with Nixon’s trip to Beijing. Obama should have flown to Tehran and done a deal, the Iranians were prepared for it. They would have given him a big welcome, but he did not do it. And the reason is because of the Israeli opposition and resistance. There were intelligent forces within the American administration saying that we can do a deal, but the weight of Israel within the American ruling elite is very strong, and they can’t openly back it.

The congress and the Senate gave a blank check to Israel after 9/11: ‘you are our primary and only friend,’ so it became difficult to do that, but they still could if they were pushed. I think it is premature to talk about American retreat or American defeat. I think it suffered some setbacks, but they will recover from that very quickly. They are an imperial power with an enormous military strength, which we have seen them using in Libya. Six months of bombing, how many people have died? No one tells us. The figures some said [are] 50 to 60,000, some said 30,000. But it is a huge figure, supposedly in order to prevent a massacre, they have gone in to massacre tens of thousands of people. That’s a reality, but it is also a demonstration of real power. This is what we can do from the air, even without ground troops. It is a warning shot to the entire region that we are still here, we are not going away.

P.S.

* From Beirut-based Al-Akhbar, Tuesday, October 25, 2011:

<http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/tariq-ali-21st-century-challenges-revolt-and-dissent>