

# **9/11, bin Laden, the USA and the Arab uprisings: The perils of people power**

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**The Arab uprisings have shifted hero status from Osama bin Laden to the people, a shift that could backfire on the United States.**

Like most terrorist attacks launched by little-known underground groups, al Qaeda's September 11 attacks were an attempt to capitalise on wide-ranging social and political frustrations. Al Qaeda's goal was to paint itself as heroic, thereby attracting a broad following. Such endeavours can only be successful—to various degrees—where deep frustrations already exist. Examples include where there is widespread poverty, a resented, despotic regime, intolerable social inequalities or foreign occupation.

Such conditions are heavily represented in the Arab region. In light of the ongoing upheaval there, there is hardly any need to dwell on the fraught domestic issues which have affected the Arab region for decades. Rather, I want to revisit the question that has obsessed Americans since September 11: "Why do they hate us?"

The fact that 19 young Arab men were prepared to die on the morning of September 11 in order to inflict maximum damage on the United States was a painful wake-up call for Americans. Most Americans had never heard of al Qaeda or Osama bin Laden before then. Most had hardly any clue about how intensely Arabs hated the US and its government. And this hatred wasn't limited to Arabs. It extended to most of the Global South (Africa, Central and Latin America, and most of Asia).

Not that there were huge numbers of volunteers for suicide attacks in the Arab world or the Global South. Except for a tiny minority, the hatred was rather passive. The fact remains, however, that the September 11 attacks were greeted with *schadenfreude*, not only in the Middle East, North Africa, and other Muslim-majority countries, but around the globe.

My own experience of this remains engraved in my memory. I happened to be visiting East Asia soon after September 11, staying for a short time in Hong Kong. Knowing I was an Arab, the warden of the building where I was staying, an old Chinese man who had been a policeman before retiring to his present job, told me in his limited English: "This man, this man from your country, great man, great man!" Initially, I didn't realise what he meant and asked him which man he was referring to. His reply astounded me: "Bin Laden," he said.

Osama bin Laden had acquired global hero status almost overnight. From that fatal day, his face would even emblazon T-shirts in sub-Saharan Africa or Latin America, though not in Arab countries, where local regimes rightly perceived bin Laden as a major threat. Indeed al Qaeda's leader would not have missed the opportunity to call for their overthrow.

How could such a horrendous crime and causing the death of thousands have projected Osama bin Laden onto the world stage as the champion of the "wretched of the earth"? For his popularity stood upon that: peoples' frustration at their states' inability to counter the US superpower and their

subsequent joy at bin Laden's "representing" them in taking revenge on the global bad cop. But why would people want to exact revenge so eagerly, and in such a terrible way? Indeed, "Why do they hate us?"

It is interesting to re-read the answer that George W. Bush gave to this same question when he delivered a speech to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001: "Americans are asking, why do they hate us? They hate what we see right here in this chamber—a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble, and disagree with each other."

The futility of this explanation is even more glaring today than it was 10 years ago. Leaving aside the obvious absurdity of asserting that a group of men would commit suicide simply because they did not like freedom in another, faraway country, how could anyone claim that the motivation for the hatred bin Laden personified was the resentment of freedom and democracy? The fact was that those who cheered for bin Laden in the Arab world were subjugated by despotic regimes, which their new hero had pledged to destroy. This was actually acknowledged in the same discourse, when Bush said: "They [al Qaeda] want to overthrow existing governments in many Muslim countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan."

The underlying assumption George W. Bush's speech made was that this so-called hatred of freedom and democracy had wide currency among Arabs and Muslims, and that Washington's Arab friends, despite their lack of democratic credentials, were still more "enlightened" than their subjects. The "Orientalist" perception of Arabs or Muslims as people addicted to despotism—which represented their "culture"—lurked rather obviously behind the president's statement. How else could one reconcile Washington's pretension to pursue a "civilising mission" and its reliance on, and support for, despotic regimes in the region?

The great Arab revolt of 2011 undermined to a large extent the very possibility of holding such discourses. They will not vanish, of course, but they have become much less sustainable and believable than they used to be. Indeed, the perception that Arabs are addicted to despotism has never been anything more than an optical illusion, resulting from the fact that they seemed to tolerate despotism rather well. This cultural explanation was often given as a justification for the fact that the Arab region contained an impressive collection of mummified absolutist regimes, as if it were a vast natural reserve of archaic government institutions. The same illusion was reinforced by the impression that whenever the Arab populace resented its government, it did so mostly by supporting forces advocating an even more despotic, theocratic rule.

The crux of the illusion was to mistake positive mass support for Islamic fundamentalist movements for what was merely no more than borrowing from the only available means for expressing their discontent. Islamic forces were often the only available national opposition with a minimum of credibility. They were tolerated as such in most US-friendly regimes (Tunisia being the exception, but only after 1990) because these regimes—whether in the various Arab monarchies, or in Egypt or Yemen—often resorted to making concessions to the most reactionary religious aspirations in order to cover for their unpopular domestic and foreign policies.

The upheaval of 2011 has seen the irruption of new players on the Arab political scene, who have regrouped along strikingly similar lines in almost all the countries of the region. They form a new generation of liberals in the American sense, that is, social liberals who are very different from the classical liberals prominent in Arab politics before the Second World War, and who vanished almost completely after the first 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the subsequent rise of nationalist forces.

The politics of this new generation are intimately shaped by the new communication technology,

both upstream and downstream. Their espousal of liberal values is influenced by access to global culture that has happened since the advent of the “information age”. Their ability to connect, interact and organise is intimately dependent on the use of the global communication network. If it is very much reductive to describe the Arab upheaval as a set of “Facebook revolutions”, it is justified on the other hand to describe this vast network of mainly young people as being largely a Facebook movement.

This liberal current, along with a variety of leftwing groups, has been and still is instrumental in the impulsion and organisation of the upheaval. Islamic forces joined the movement only after it was initiated in the most prominent cases. Coming on a back of deep popular discontent due to a broad range of social, economic, and political factors—a discontent that found expression in the rise of various forms of social protest in several Arab countries during the previous decade—the initiatives of the liberal-left alliance unleashed a formidable chain reaction of popular revolts that is probably still only in its infancy. The main common slogan introducing the various demands of this great regional upheaval has been: “The people want ...” This is the Arab equivalent of the “We, the people” that opens the preamble to the United States Constitution of 1787. It is the clearest possible indication that it is the people who are the new hero on the political scene.

And whenever the people become the main actor on the scene—notwithstanding the individual supporting actors, the *shuhada*, or the martyrs, as they are called by the mass movement—all previous substitutive heroes are superseded. The British journalist Robert Fisk was right when he referred to bin Laden’s killing in *The Independent* (May 3, 2011), writing that “the mass revolutions in the Arab world over the past four months mean that al Qaeda was already politically dead”.

“Bin Laden told the world—indeed, he told me personally—that he wanted to destroy the pro-Western regimes in the Arab world, the dictatorships of the Mubaraks and the Ben Alis,” wrote Fisk. “He wanted to create a new Islamic caliphate. But these past few months, millions of Arab Muslims rose up and were prepared for their own martyrdom—not for Islam but for freedom and liberty and democracy. Bin Laden didn’t get rid of the tyrants. The people did. And they didn’t want a caliph.”

Is this new collective hero who craves freedom and democracy therefore reconciled with the United States, which sees itself as the foremost upholder of these values? Definitely not, as anyone will agree who has observed what the various popular mobilisations have had to say about US policy in the region. Even in Libya, where one might expect the popular uprising to be grateful to Washington for its military intervention, there is deep frustration at how the revolution has been hijacked by an Atlantic Alliance that refuses to deliver the weapons the insurgents have been requesting since NATO’s intervention started. The West’s distrust of the Libyan insurgents is reciprocal. There is no other explanation why the insurgents have rejected Western intervention on the ground in their country until now.

The root cause of the resentment against the US that prevails among Arabs bears no relation to any hatred of freedom and democracy, or any “cultural” clash. The truth is that what the author of the *Clash of Civilisations*, the late Samuel Huntington, called “the democracy paradox”, which he defined as the fact that “adoption by non-Western societies of Western democratic institutions encourages and gives access to power to nativist and anti-Western political movements,” has nothing to do with “civilisation”, and everything to do with imperial politics.

The reasons for Arab resentment of Washington’s policies are numerous and well known. They range from US sponsorship of Israel, which hardly wanes however arrogant and brutal the attitude of Israel’s governments can be, to the occupation of Iraq, to Washington’s support of despotic regimes, believed to safeguard US interests—oil being the crucial factor—against the “democracy paradox” enunciated by Huntington. This is why the so-called paradox will keep proving true in the Middle

East.

The ongoing democratisation in the Arab world, if it is not interrupted by a counter-revolutionary backlash, will certainly and increasingly bend regional government policies in a direction contrary to US imperial schemes and interests and to a degree that bin Laden could never have achieved. Unless we see a far-reaching change in Washington's Middle East policy, the shifting of heroes from Osama bin Laden to "the people" will prove severely detrimental to US regional interests. Confronted with "the people" and what they want, Washington may very well come to regret the loss of the convenient foe that bin Laden represented.

**Gilbert Achcar**

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\* From American Review:

<http://americanreviewmag.com/stories/The-perils-of-people-power>