

## Riddle of the Sands: A Middle East in Transition

By Dr. John Bruni

In 1949 George Orwell's fictional dystopia, '1984', warned:

*Power is not a means, it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship.*

Presently in the Middle East, major political change is taking place. How dramatic and lasting this change will be is still anyone's guess. The international media, spearheaded by the Qatar-based Al Jazeera, suggests that the oft-dismissed 'Arab street' has finally found its voice; that the time for democracy has come, and the world has nothing to fear from the toppling of the old-guard dictatorships of Tunisia's Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and, at the time of writing, potentially Libya's Moummar Gaddafi.

But bringing down the hard, intransigent old men of the Middle East has its own perils. Revolutions, such as the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and a whole host of post-colonial uprisings and 'revolutions' during the 1950s-70s, brought with them a heady mix of global challenges and opportunities. In each case it was the most organized political faction that rose to the top in order to seize power, and in each case

it can be said that power was 'not a means', it was 'an end'. History has shown that successful revolutions that had at their core a disciplined, unified group of civilian ideologues or ambitious military officers, often evolved into the very thing that people may not have consciously wanted – dictatorship.

But in the current Middle East uprisings, things are opaque. Neither in Tunisia, nor Egypt or Libya has yet arisen a group of disciplined and organized partisans of a revolution, that is, people espousing an alternative to the contemporary system of governance. Yes, people have found their voice against the tired dictates of one man, and at least in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, the offending head-of-state was removed but the system of dictatorship is still in place. What needs to be worked out is a 'legacy' system to predetermine who will inherit the top post on his/her merit. He/she will have to have popular appeal to mobilize the masses and garner legitimacy from the people, for the people, in order to fulfill at least a modicum of the democratic aspirations of the protestors. On the other hand, given sufficient time and Western backing, perhaps disciplined, hard men will be found to crush dissent and give rise to a new generation of regional autocrats. We cannot be oblivious to the prospect of new autocracies springing forth from this Middle East 'winter of discontent'. After all, the People's Republic of China has successfully managed to find acceptance of its totalitarian structures in the global community. Politicians and diplomats from all over the

world are trying to find ways to accommodate this economic giant in spite of the fact that it is a communist dictatorship harboring significant anti-Western elements within its military, diplomatic corps and political cadres. The fact that we keep on making excuses and normalize China in spite of its competitive behavior vis à vis the West, proves that would-be autocrats with an iron fist can exist, so long as this fist is wrapped in a velvet glove.

The Egyptian military junta now in charge in Cairo has promised the Egyptian people ‘free and fair’ elections. But it is doubtful



that the military’s hand will not ‘carefully guide’ this process in order

to retain the military’s central role in the Egyptian state and preserve the interests of its senior officer corps. Primary among these interests is maintaining access to US military hardware, intelligence and training – even if this comes at the cost of preserving the unpopular 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty, which goes against popular support for the Palestinian resistance in the besieged Gaza Strip. A way of distracting the Egyptian people from their fixation on Palestine is through involvement in other regional crises that can be managed by the Egyptian military staff. Crises such as Libya. There have been recent reports that Egyptian Special Forces are involved in training and arming the Libyan resistance based in the city of Benghazi. Should this be

true, then it is likely that Egypt’s strategic direction post-Mubarak, will be that of an Arab ‘bovver boy’. Should this be the case, Egypt, as the largest Arab state and hosting the headquarters of the Arab League, may in time turn into a regional power of some consequence, quite possibly serving as a potential strategic counter-weight against Iran following the completion of America’s promised withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. Were a pro-Egyptian Libyan faction to overthrow Gaddafi or simply secure the country’s eastern oil and gas basin for future Egyptian exploitation, this would secure and enrich Egypt, a country in desperate need of capital and resources, especially if it has larger strategic ambitions in mind.

Further west in Tunisia where all the trouble began in December of 2010, a state of emergency was declared following the resignation of President Ben Ali and a caretaker government was formed which included the remnants of the Ben Ali governing clique. This proved to be a highly



unpopular move among Tunisians who consequently refused to stand down from their protests. This eventually forced the Prime Minister to reshuffle his

cabinet, and purge it of Ben Ali timeservers. The Prime Minister fell on his own sword and resigned from his post on February 27<sup>th</sup>. Currently an interim leadership is struggling to regain the faith of its populous. Cabinet

members have resigned amid the political turmoil in Tunis and the unfolding refugee crisis on Tunisia's border with Libya where some tens of thousands of Libyans have fled. Swamped by endemic poverty, an ongoing immigration problem with Italy, weak political institutions and no obvious political alternative to the interim government, the path is certainly open for stronger political/social forces coming from domestic Islamic groups to make their presence felt over time. As with the powers-that-be in Cairo, those in Tunis, especially among the military, are sensing challenge and opportunity in the demise of Gaddafi. But, whether Tunis will commit its limited resources to external adventure to distract its citizens from their political chaos and economic malaise is yet to be seen.

The world anxiously awaits the end game in Libya. It is a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions. So far, over 150,000 Libyans have fled to neighboring Egypt and Tunisia. The Libyan state, built and maintained by Gaddafi since his ascension to power in 1969 is literally bleeding to death. But unlike Ben Ali or Mubarak, Gaddafi believes he will be able to hold onto his country in part or in whole. Military forces loyal to Gaddafi and bolstered by African mercenaries have attacked anti-Gaddafi forces, destroyed arms caches and threatened the country's oil and gas fields. Gaddafi has signaled that he will go down as a martyr rather than flee his country. Gaddafi loyalist forces have spent the past couple of weeks losing ground around the country but holding firm around the Libyan

capital of Tripoli. They have also been finessing a counter-attack strategy and over the next few days, we will see whether this strategy will work. The international community has strongly condemned Gaddafi's actions of violence against his own people. But this has fallen short of calling for military action to stop him, rhetoric of 'no-fly zones' notwithstanding.

President

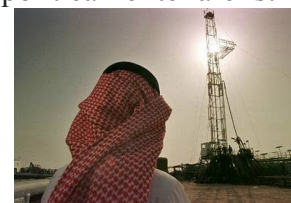
Obama has sent strong messages

that 'all

options' were on the table to bring Gaddafi to heel, but so far Gaddafi has ignored Obama's cryptic warnings in spite of the fact that Egypt is allegedly having a hand in stirring up and organizing the unorganized Libyan resistance, and US military and naval assets are moving closer to Libyan waters. The lack of a strong Libyan 'centre' around which the eastern Libyan resistance can coalesce is something that Gaddafi believes he can deal with. It seems that the game may be up for the Colonel, and the end of Gaddafi may well spell the end of Libya as the country fractures and disintegrates along ethnic and tribal lines.



East of Egypt is the Arabian Peninsula, home to 40 percent of the world's oil reserves. Here, the political elite are still reasonably protected by the largess they can afford their people. The Saudis have pledged some \$39 billion to keep the whiff



of rebellion at bay. The Omani monarchy has also pledged to create some 50,000 jobs, an increase in student stipends and general financial support for their disenfranchised, upwardly mobile, tech-savvy and bored youth who defied the royal family. While this was small-scale in comparison to other Arab street demonstrations throughout the Middle East, the security crackdown on Omani demonstrators was an over-reaction that could have gotten out of hand had security forces continued in their harsh, pre-emptive manner. But this was a protest, not a revolution, or even an open revolt from the people of Oman. The status quo therefore stands a fairly good chance of maintaining itself so long as the Al-Qaboos family refrains from reaching for the stick.

South of Saudi Arabia is the broken state of Yemen, ruled by President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Yemen is an oil producer, but not an important one. In fact the major product being produced in Yemen is the addictive mild narcotic called Qat. The problem of Qat production is that it takes enormous amounts of water and, for a country with a severe water shortage and a dwindling ability to produce enough of its own food, this situation, if not arrested soon, will have a significant effect on the health and welfare of all Yemenis. Many members of the Saleh elite have profited handsomely from Qat exports in spite of the damage this substance is causing to the country's agricultural base. The depletion of water resources has meant Yemen is dependent on Saudi water supplies. So far, some major tribes once loyal to Saleh, are now siding with the

country's many vocal protestors calling for Saleh's removal. It is true that Saleh seems to be loosing allies, but as with Colonel Gaddafi, Saleh senses that so long as the protestors keep acting like an unruly mob without a solid leadership figure to galvanize around, the protestors can be kept at arm's length. Saleh is also a critical ally to the American War on Terror and with Al Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) cells stirring up trouble in the country's south, an ongoing Houthi (Shiite) rebellion in the country's north, and southern secessionists talking of separation, Saleh remains the only person able to keep this fractious country from becoming a chaotic den of terrorist cells and a potential outpost of Iranian influence.

Just off the northeastern coastline of Saudi Arabia is the tiny island kingdom of Bahrain – home of the US Fifth Fleet. When the protests started there on Valentine's Day, February 14<sup>th</sup>, the widening gap between the Sunni rulers – the Al-Khalifa clan and their predominantly Shiite population exploded in rage on the streets of the Bahraini capital, Manama. While much of the world is focused on the drama of the dying moments of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, a shift of regional consequence is taking place in Bahrain with the Al-Khalifa rulers making concessions in order to stem the rising tide of public anger. This is important because any concessions to disenfranchised Shiites in Bahrain will have unintended consequences further a field in other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states with significant, but generally oppressed Shiite communities.

Most Sunni rulers in the GCC fear that Iran's hand is behind much of their troubles. Whether or not this is true, the fact remains that many Shiites believe that they have been vilified and ostracized by their Sunni communities and this gives Iran some strategic and tactical advantage against the GCC states even if it is only rhetorical. The perception of Iran manipulating Shiites in Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia plays into the hands of the GCC monarchies because, again, without any identified alternative governing structure to secure their people, they are the only ones who can stand up to Tehran's maleficence. Spreading fear of Iran will for a time still bind the majority Sunni populations of the GCC states to their respective rulers. Considering that Iran is dealing with its own protests, no one in Tehran is sitting easy, nor can they turn the current instability across the Gulf to their advantage.

So, while we are living through a period of great instability – from the Arabian Gulf to the Maghreb – we have yet to witness a true revolution. Perhaps a revolution will be the final act of the current series of crises. There then remains the prospect that a new generation of autocrat will emerge from these unsettling times, camouflaged as a democrat, speaking the language of the dispossessed and adept at the use of social media. He or she will be hailed a hero of the people until such times as the adoring masses are inevitably put back into their place.

Egyptian Uprising image:

<http://previous.presstv.ir/photo/20110210/Derek20110210173546343.jpg>

Map of Tunisia image:

<http://i.infoplease.com/images/mtunis.gif>

Libyan Uprising image:

[http://arabnews.com/saudiArabia/article291539.ece/REPRESNTATIONS/large\\_620x350/sau\\_libya2.jpg](http://arabnews.com/saudiArabia/article291539.ece/REPRESNTATIONS/large_620x350/sau_libya2.jpg)

Gulf oil image:

[http://1.bp.blogspot.com/\\_PG3ew\\_iFi3A/TUdWtdL-t8I/AAAAAAAAAW8k/nFVmlxp\\_sTs/s400/photo2.jpg](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_PG3ew_iFi3A/TUdWtdL-t8I/AAAAAAAAAW8k/nFVmlxp_sTs/s400/photo2.jpg)