



Clingendael Policy Brief

No. 29; March 2014

Clingendael Institute

Lambs and Lions of the Arab Spring

In the shambles of the Arab Spring, a few states stand out for their progress toward more responsible and participatory governance, but for all of them a negotiation approach has relevance for constructive policy. Tunisia has passed its constitution, leaving partisan bitterness in the midst of consensus. Morocco has accepted its new constitution, granted by the king from above. Both now need Western diplomatic attention—political in Morocco to keep the country on the track of reform and above all economic in Tunisia to rebuild the shaken economy. Despite its faltering on the same path of liberalization (and with 2 ½ constitutions in as many years), Egypt’s latest government needs Western help and pressure in both directions. On the other hand, in Syria, the West, notably the US, has abandoned its natural allies among the resisters, the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army, while the al-Asad force press ahead, inexorably, with diplomatic and military support from Russia, Iran and Hizbollah. Geneva II has shown (incredibly not realized before) that in the absence of a stalemate painful to both sides and of a zone of possible agreement acceptable to both sides negotiation is pointless. There is still time to give support to the more liberal side in the fight but the window is not open for long, the only way to avoid a major geopolitical defeat.

I. William Zartman

The world has tired of hearing about the Arab Spring and has gone on to other things, leaving the outburst of energy in favor of ‘Dignity, Work, Citizenship and Liberty’ lost in the quicksands of ‘typical Arab disorder.’ Instead, attention has turned to chemical weapons (CW) in Syria, and Western policy is now to hold off the al-Qaeda- and Qatar-backed Sunni Islamists by strengthening the regime of Bashar Assad backed by Russia and Iran. Egypt is a quandary, whether to back the popularly elected but ousted Muslim Brother Mohammed Morsi or the popularly supported and soon to be elected General Abdul Fatah al-Sisi. The rest is unintelligible.

But there still are situations of major importance at quite the opposite end of the political spectrum in the aftermath of the Spring uprisings that demand

policy attention (Zartman 2015). At one end is Tunisia, at the other Syria.

Tunisia, and Morocco

In Tunisia lies the first and last hope of a positive outcome for the four values of the original uprising that set off the successive explosions and expulsions. The country has completed and passed its new constitution, the procedural rules for its government. While the two sides have joined in its support, they are clutched with reciprocal fears—the organized moderate Islamist Renaissance (al-Nahdha) Party fearing that the liberal/secularists are trying to eliminate them entirely from the political scene, just as the Egyptian army wiped away the Brotherhood’s government; and the disorganized liberal/secularists

fearing that the Islamists are trying to take power and hold onto it, just as Morsi pursued his winner-take-all policies in Egypt. Now the two sides need to overcome the exclusivist challenge that the Islamic issue posed and begin to focus their attentions on constructive cooperation as they negotiate a substantive program of economic reform and revival.

The distinctive quality of Tunisian politics is that, in addition to horizontal negotiations between two organized sides, a pattern of vertical negotiations between civil society and government established in the uprising has continued into the last phase of constitution-making. Civil society has filled the vacuum left by the disorganized liberals, with the labor union UGTT in the lead. Al-Nahdha has its place in Tunisian politics, but it is losing votes, and a liberal coalition is likely to take over in the upcoming elections. Voters are turning against al-Nahdha because of their fears but above all because of the government's inaction in assuring security and restoring the country's economic growth. The uprising was for Dignity but also for Work.

This is where *policy* comes in. If there is any chance for Arab countries to throw off their proclivity for authoritarian rulers and embark on a bumpy path of democratic stability, it is in Tunisia. The leaders of the fragmented liberal/secularist camp need some tough talk from friendly ambassadors and concerned op-eders to get their act together (Hampson & Zartman 2013). The left/liberals now act as if they were still in the opposition, and that will keep them there indefinitely, against the organized and committed Islamists. It does no good to oppose al-Nahdha for the sake of opposing al-Nahdha without a positive platform, a plan for protecting democracy, and a project for economic reconstruction. The government needs to be pressed to assure security in Tunisian villages and tourist centers, without however substituting government aggressiveness for Islamic terrorism. Tunisia should figure positively on the private, government and business screens, because the country matters. Europe needs to inject some quick stimulus into the Tunisian economy; it needs to restore Tunisia as its favorite location for escape from winter doldrums; it needs to 'think Tunisia' in making Mediterranean business investments and trade contracts. And the business codes of the country need revamping to assure welcome to foreign direct investment (FDI). Tunisia

has a free trade agreement with the EU that needs attention.

A word on Morocco as well: Morocco cleverly put off the *muntafadin* (uprisers) of the 20 February Movement by adopting the procedural elements of many of their demands. The uprising in Morocco was weak and never asked for a change in the system of monarchy itself. The answer, in a new constitution that was already under consideration before the protest movement, included a decentralization of power to the regions where budgetary control would be in the hands of the elected assembly and not the wali appointed by the king.

Policy-wise, interested outside countries can applaud decentralization and other reforms in the new constitution. They can do more that can keep the *makhzen's* feet to the fire in urging greater progress in the implementation of the constitutional reforms. This is the perfect time to show interest in the evolving Moroccan scene; the king has pressed his government to move on reforms, an extraordinary moment, and friends of Moroccan can back that direction. Such evolution must be careful and measured; it does not evolve a Spanish evolution (did you see what is happening to the Spanish monarchy?). But it does lead to a sharing of some power between the monarchy and political organizations. For that, as in Tunisia, there need be effective, programmatic political parties

In exchange, the friends of Morocco can cooperate on the matter that matters most to Morocco, the Sahara. The current fireworks about human rights among the Sahrawis on *both* sides of the border are a disturbing distraction from the main problem of finding a resolution. Morocco has offered the only intermediary solution between the two extremes—autonomy, in which Morocco gets the outside of the box and the saharawis (all of them) get the inside, a positive development as the previous Special Envoy of the Secretary-General (SESG) Klaus van Walveran indicated. It is time for friends of the Sahara to join together and help Morocco give some content to this autonomy framework, and then recognize the result.

Syria, and Egypt

It is a different world in Syria. There the Arab Spring never achieved its first task, of overthrowing the authoritarian ruler, once characterized by US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton as a villainous killer. Clinton and Qatar worked hard in late 2012 to cobble together a National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SNC), whose persistent disunity is captured in its title. But they never gave enough support to the Free Syrian Army and the National Coalition to enable them to prevail or even hold their own against the regime, and in the process external Shi'i forces flowed to the rescue of the regime and radical Sunni forces pushed aside the secular pan-Syrian resistance. The West observed a self-imposed unilateral arms embargo (a US Defense Department member said, 'We send them bandages for the wounds al-Asad's troops give them'), while Iran, Hizbollah and Russia supplied arms and manpower to the regime. When al-Qaeda-supported Sunni guerrillas emerged from Iraq to spur the resistance and form Jebhat al-Nusra (The Defenders' Front) and the Islamic State of Iraq and [Greater] Syria (ISIS), and members and units from the FSA joined them in order to obtain arms and food, Qatar and Saudi Arabia funded them. This is a strange reversal of alliances.

Russia and the US, with the other countries of the West tagging along, sought to bring the parties together in a conference in Geneva to implement the Geneva I principles of a negotiated transition established by Kofi Annan in July 2012. It was hard to get the National Coalition to agree to attend, understandably because they are losing militarily and so would come in a position of weakness. Their attendance was produced only by enacted threats from the US to cut off aid that the US had already cut off and was rewarded by its symbolic restoration. But, absolutely predictably, no negotiations took place. The al-Asad regime is the strongest player with a correspondingly single-minded dedication to stonewalling negotiation. At the same time, it has been dragging its feet on the removal of chemical weapons, the initial agreement that it had used to buy off the threat of Western military punishment for use of the weapons. The US has joined Russia and Iran in seeing al-Asad as the best and only party able to hold off the Sunni radicals, and has joined Russia and al-Asad in tge agreement to abjure chemical

weapons, which al-Asad employed several times with impunity. Another strange reversal of alliances.

In late September the Syria deputy prime minister declared that the military situation was a stalemate; he was fired. Around Aleppo and Damascus, the rebels have been hanging on as the forces of al-Asad inexorably press on to obliterate them and the population with them in a war of bloody attrition. Both sides believe in their victory and its necessity for them. This is scarcely a mutually hurting stalemate or moment ripe for resolution. Given the monstrous cruelty of the government toward its populations and the fanatical commitment of the Islamist rebels, any incorporation of the resistance into a national coalition with the forces of al-Asad is impossible, and al-Asad feels strong enough with unshaking support from Russia and Iran to continue to stonewall any negotiations. Meanwhile the mass killing continues. The alternative to a total al-Asad victory is a division of the country into regions of control: the populous west and south to the government, the center and east to the Islamists, the north to the Kurds who are not part of the negotiations. In a word, this would produce a series of Lebanons instead of one Syria, where each segment contains minorities of populations from other segments. Such a partition agreement—explicit or implicit—is an anathema to Turkey, a triumph for Russia, a gift to Iraq, a sop to al-Asad, and a reward to Hezbollah, and it leaves the West out in the cold, with no gratitude from its whipped dog in the fight.

The turn in the Syrian Spring has left the original uprisers abandoned and the former allies traded in for new support for the authoritarian regime. The West has lost its pants and its friends in the Mideast. It has lost Syria, of any color, and its natural allies, Turkey and the FSA, plus Saudi Arabia and Qatar, for lack of support. The Syrian population is losing its life, over 130,00 and rising daily. Russia has saved its natural ally, the Asad government, and Iran is consolidating its control over a Shi'i Axis of Iraq and Lebanon (through Hizbollah). Al-Asad is not a bargaining chip for Russia and Iran; it is a prize of intrinsic value, not to be bargained away for some unrelated gain somewhere else. Its loyalty to the two patrons is solid, for it owes its existence to them. Neither great power has endeared itself to the rest of

the Arab world in the process, but the Arab world likes winners. There have been a few fights to the finish in recent history. The government was finished in Libya, the rebels were finished in Sri Lanka. The key to that lay in the external support the sides received. Syria is in the running.

Is there room for *policy* initiatives and emphases in such a situation? The minimum requirement of any negotiated agreement is to assure a free run of Syria for human rights observers, and protection and tolerance for all minorities and religious groups, to be verified by the observers and with enforcement provisions. Any elections must be covered by international observers who have open access to the country, to insure free and fair voting. There must be provisions for continued unimpeded entry for chemical weapons inspectors until all stocks are accounted for and destroyed. To effectively protect its inspectors, the Organizations for the Prevention of Chemical Warfare (OPCW) needs a management and support system for what is increasingly looking like a long-term process of engagement in Syria, that may well be a precedent in the making for future inspections (Melamud, Meerts & Zartman 2014). An agreement should also include a sentence erased from the Geneva I communiqué imposing a multilateral arms embargo on the country. These provisions must be written into any agreement that comes out of post-Geneva II. They all have been rejected by Russia, in the UN Security Council, by Iran, in its statements, and by al-Asad, in declarations at Geneva. They may be deal breakers, but they are points on which to dig in the heels, whatever Russia, al-Asad, or Iran might like.

Negotiation theory and concepts are usually invoked in such a discussion to indicate how to negotiate. But they are also relevant in indicating when—and when not—to negotiate. In the absence of a stalemate painful to both sides and of a zone of possible agreement acceptable to both sides, negotiation is impossible, and A meaningless agreement at any cost for the sake of an agreement is not an appropriate goal; the empty form of agreement should not outweigh its meaningful content. What is left to negotiate? Plenty, as indicated, but the lesson of theory and experience (ultimately, the same thing) is that this is not the time to try. The US and the West went out on its dead limb in calling for Geneva without having the proper conditions in place; they

should not be surprised at the results. The only value of the experience is to show up the immobility of al-Asad and his supporters, riding on the road to victory, and their obduracy before elemental elements of human rights and open politics. It is not obvious that that demonstration was necessary but it is there. Sometimes the lesson of an attempted negotiation policy is that no negotiation is possible, at least now.

The only alternative for the West to laying back and enjoying it is to finally give good support to the FSA and SNC, if it is not too late. The struggle continues; the Asad forces have not yet achieved their victory, the resistance holds on, the chemical disarmament drags out, the world watches. (if it doesn't write it all off as traditional Arab-Muslim behavior). There is still a side to support, and that is where Western policy needs to focus. The alternative, as said, is to wait until factional forces break up the Shi'i-Russian solidarity so that the West can play on the splits and conduct business as usual with the government. And that is a long wait, with lots of things happening in the meanwhile.

Finally a word on Egypt. Public opinion is strongly behind the current, military regime. That may sadden Western observers, but politics takes some saddening turns, and Morsi alienated all but his die-hard supporters. The sin of the SCAF is about all the massacres in mod-2013, that it will have a hard time shaking off. But the military regime is what we have to deal with, and so, as in the case of a different regime in Morocco, the West's challenge is to move it toward a more accountable, constructive (I didn't say 'democratic) direction. That means working with the regime to press it in the direction of open, free and fair directions. Cutting military aid only presses the regime into the hands of the Russians, who are not known for such values. The Egyptians protest that the arms deal with Russia does not mean a reversal of alliances, undoing Sadat's reversal in 1972, but it is certainly a step in that direction. The West has its values and directions that we feel are good for all people. Morsi was totally obdurate in refusing the pleas of Western ambassadors to open up and negotiate; we can only put the same pressure on the successor regime rather than turning our backs to it.

In Sum, Feeding the Spring

The Arab Spring has presented a dramatic opportunity for the Arab people, particularly their youth, and more broadly for the peoples of the world community devoted to the same values of Dignity, Work, Citizenship and Liberty. The results have been spotty, but positive developments around new constitutions in Tunisia and Morocco invite Western political diplomacy to keep the course toward implementation and economic support to revive and reform the economies. Even where the events have involved as many steps back and forward, in Egypt, the same efforts are needed, in Western countries' interest. At the other end of the spectrum (and the Mediterranean), the determined refusal of a

murderous regime in Syria to come to terms with its opposition and near-total Western abandon of its natural allies in the resistance have left the clear lesson about when negotiations are not possible. That leaves no alternative but to invest the active support that is so long overdue in the forces that fight to change the regime that will not negotiate, in order to avoid not only continued massacres of the population and destruction of the opposition but also a major geopolitical defeat for the US and European interests in the area.

About Clingendael

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