

SAUDI ARABIA AND USA: THE PARADOXICAL BENEFICIARIES OF THE "ARAB SPRING"

Sotiris Roussos

Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science & International Relations, University of Peloponnese and Head of the Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East & Islamic Studies (CEMMIS), www.cemmis.edu.gr

The "Arab Spring" and the uprisings across the region led to two "paradoxes" that few anticipated at the outset. First, the ascent of the Saudi Kingdom as the Sunni regional hegemon and the second, the new role of the USA as the mainstay of democratic change not against radical regimes, as it was the neo-conservative case, but at the expense of regional friendships and allegiances in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen. In other words, the democratic wave has strengthened the regional position of the most undemocratic and pre-modern political and social system in the Middle East and has enhanced the American soft power in a region where anti-Americanism was skyrocketing.

The collapse of Mubarak's regime brought certain unpredictability as to his successors' foreign policy. Moreover, introvert Egypt could not play a decisive role in the antagonism with Iran and its allies in the region. Its policies concerning Gaza and Israel are vacillating between facilitating the Fatah-Hamas agreement, ameliorating its relations with Hamas and improving relations with Iran on the one hand and assurances that Camp David Agreements and gas exports would remain unaltered on the other. It is clear that the new regime in Cairo is wishing for a bold Egyptian regional role, more autonomous from the US and Israeli choices. The decision of Egypt to allow Iranian warships to cross the Suez Canal on their way to Syria is a case in point. At the same time the Egyptian government is concerned with the public opinion and particularly with the views and reactions of their bitter partners in the post Mubarak era, the Muslim Brotherhood.

As Doaa el-Bey pointed out in *al-Ahram Weekly*, "rapprochement between Egypt and Iran is likely also to alarm Arab Gulf states who are worried about increasing Iranian influence in the Gulf. Prime Minister Essam Sharaf had to repeatedly assure the leaders of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait during a Gulf tour last week that any improvement in Egypt's relations with Iran would not be at the expense of Arab Gulf states, which have long accused Tehran of meddling in their affairs."

But the great danger for the Saudi Kingdom is not this alliance with Iran but the threat of the revolutions "contaminating" the rest of the Arab world and most importantly the Gulf region. The Saudi military intervention in Bahrain is a case in point. To this effect also Riyadh gave 5 billions dollars to Egypt and 40 billions to Bahrain and Oman (which is likely to be also destabilised) and 300 millions dollars to Jordan. Saudi Arabia invited Jordan and Morocco to become members in the GCC creating a new alliance of the crowns in the region. Yemen is a much more complicated terrain for Saudi intervention. The combination of regime collapse, tribal feuds, suspected Iranian aid to Zaidi

Shi'a tribes and the threat of Al-Qaida in the Arab Peninsula present serious difficulties for the old and till now effective Saudi policy of *divide et impera* in this Arabian country. Riyadh had built in the 1990s some sort of understanding with Assad regime on Lebanon and Iraq. However, in case of a regime collapse in the country, Saudi Arabia can become also the main interlocutor of a Sunni-based government. Last but not least, Iraq's unity framework has reproduced institutionalized sectarian consciousness and US military withdrawal will strengthen Moqtada al-Sadr's Shi'a militia. In such a scenario, a bold Saudi role as protector of the Sunnis should not be dismissed.

In his landmark speech of March, 19 Barack Obama encapsulated in these six words what is happening in the Middle East: "the status quo is not sustainable". The region, due to its regimes' sclerosis, has stayed in the margins of the globalisation process of the last two decades. President Obama has also laid the foundations of a strategy of economic partnership to change this situation. This could not be seen as irrelevant to an antagonism over economic supremacy in Eurasia. China, India and Japan saw the broader Middle East area as the energy plant, creating deep interdependence in the Eurasian continent.

The US foreign policy decision-making system is, however, complex and multi-layered and the President's statement can be interpreted and implemented in a complete different way by various agencies, institutions and lobbies. Nevertheless, as Issad el-Amrani described, there is a widespread view among mostly younger activists that " a new page could be turned and [...] that the West would learn from its mistakes and support a fledgling democracy." This is of course a clear asset for American soft power in the Middle East and the Arab world.

The Palestinian issue can exhaust this asset in a short period if Israel continues its settlement policies. The stalemate in the Arab-Israeli conflict and the inability of the Arab regimes to achieve a solution favourable to Palestinian and Arab interests and rights deprive them from making use of the Palestinian cause and Israeli aggression as an outlet for the political anger of their society. Mubarak's regime complied with Israeli policies of locking out Gaza Strip and the Syrian-Israel border was since 1973 by far the most quiet of all Israel's border. So, the social forces of discontent could not buy the Israeli scapegoat of the regimes. This should by no means lead to the conclusion that the Arab societies and political forces are looking favourably to Israel or that the Palestinian cause cannot inspire anti-American feelings and radical political mobilisation in the Middle East.

Last, both American soft power and Saudi regional hegemony will be surely influenced by the rise of a new middle-class stratum of pious Muslims that may lead to the formation of credible, moderate political Islam compatible to regional stability. The middle-eastern political landscape as we know it is not sustainable. More Erdogans may come forth.