



WORKING DOCUMENT CEMOFPSC MEETING DEBATE

“THE ARABE SPRING”: A YEAR LATER

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Foundation for the Social Promotion of Culture

Introduction

Since last year, Arab countries are the stage for uprisings of oppressed people against their dictators ending by the overturning of autocratic leaders, that had ruled for decades in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt or Libya, while Syria and Yemen have appeared to transit through the same path.

The "Arab Spring" has been greeted by many experts, since its beginning, with optimism and joy, for them, it meant the end of an era in the Arab world: the era of Arab nationalism and its corrupt and authoritarian rulers, and the starting of a new era with the instauration of democratic governance systems upheld by the pillars of the universal human rights and civil liberties.

A year after the fall of these regimes, Islamic parties have won the free and democratic elections, where they took place, and actually are governing countries such as Egypt, where they have to prepare the new constitution, as well as Tunisia and Morocco. They have harvested a large success thanks to their extensive social network of support for the most vulnerable, the good organization of their parties, their coherent speech and their critique of the ancient powers accused of being complacent with Israel, the United States and Europe.

It is not yet known what political order they will impose, but from the statements of their representatives and the reading of their electoral programs, it is understood to be a moral and social order based on Islam¹.

While in other countries: Libya, Syria or Iraq, we are witnessing a process of degradation of the situation that is bringing fear and concern because it could lead to a situation of greater chaos, territorial fragmentation, division and violence, with the very serious risk of its possible extension throughout the region. No matter how much work is going into making the various revolutions permanent and lasting, the hypothesis of a "Somalization" or "Iraqization" based

¹ *Election Program, The Freedom and Justice Party, Egypt, Parliamentary elections 2011.*

on communities, religions or tribes of part of the region cannot be ruled out. So that as for today, the situation is far from being clear, and many questions are still remaining unanswered.

One of the major concerns that the Arab Spring is awakening is the not so recent phenomenon, of the flight of Arab Christian populations from North Africa and Middle East. The results of the elections in Egypt and Tunisia and in particular the astonishing rise to power of some of the radical parties and the resurgence of attacks against Christians, foreshadow the worst for the multi-secular survival of religious diversity and coexistence in the region.

Arab Christians are an ancient community rooted in the area, which played an exceedingly role and leadership in the renaissance of the Arab culture and politics in the XIX and beginning of the XX centuries. As an example of it, the stance adopted by Christians Palestinians in the defense of their cause or their outstanding influence on the renewal of Arab culture, by their tireless efforts in improving education.

Currently they are nearly 20 millions, with strong and stable ties not only in the Middle East but also in North Africa, thanks to their deep historical and cultural roots that they share with others around them and their good neighborly relations. At present, they have made direct contributions to some of the uprisings against dictators and in some cases, as in Egypt, the have taken part of the movement's leadership. The images of Christians and Muslims praying together in *Tahrir Square* in March last year are good examples. One can even further assert as mentioned by the Turkish journalist, Recep Korkut, that Christians have acted as catalysts in the support lent by the West to the "*Arab Spring*"².

Arab Christians are on the verge of being sacrificed to the violence from governmental and non-governmental parts and the lack of authority that have arisen as a result of the recent events in the region. Deadly attacks against Copts in Egypt are on the rise, and in Syria, local Christian communities, depicted as taking part of the Assad regime have become true targets of the insurgents attacks. Attempts to sow seeds of enmity between Islam and Christians through provocative attacks in mosques and churches are also increasingly bloody and frequent.

Most of Muslims of the Arab world have no desire to see non-Muslims living in their region forced out. Good proof of it: the participation in Christmas mass in Egypt of Muslim authorities to try to stem the tide of violence. Instead, it is obvious that some radical religious political movements are seeking to destabilize the region, aiming to tether nationalist and religious feelings, in order to gain control in their own favor and to impose their policies and peculiar view of religion.

They have set out to "*cleanse Christians*"³ from places such as Iraq, Egypt or Syria, as though this is part of their religious duty. Their purpose is to prevent Christians to live like other citizens, thereby forcing them to flee their countries as a result of their attacks.

In any case, with their description of Christians as "*enemies from within*", they are gathering support from their societies, as well as from some moderate religious leaders and politicians. In fact, after the drama of Iraq, we are currently witnessing attempts in Egypt and Syria to

² *Democracy versus pluralism: spring for the Arabs, flight of the Christians, Recep Korkut, Sunday's Zaman, 8 of January 2012.*

³ *Idem n° 2*

spread anti-Christian sentiments by all means. In Syria, for example, the attacks against Christians are rooted in the perception that they have taken the side of the Assad regime.

Recent events, such as the withdrawal of the United States troops from Iraq, leaving its Christian populations, along with other minorities at the mercy of the radicals, without any recourse or legal protection, as well as the alliance between the NATO troops and declared factions of Al Qaida in Libya, and its subsequent current tribal fragmentation, and finally the position of most Western governments supporting majoritarian democratic forms, to the detriment of the consensus, which could be more respectful of religious diversity in the region, cast doubt on the ability of Western powers to manage a balanced transition guaranteeing human rights in the region, rather, in some cases they are being accomplices of political extremism and fragmentation.⁴

Many other factors are threatening to interfere in the process of transitions. First of all, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian issue forever unsolved. Although at first, it seemed they were not part of the concerns of the protesters, some events in many capitals, such as the assault on Israel's embassy in Cairo, the withdrawal of the Israeli ambassador of Jordan, and Turkey's expulsion of its Israeli ambassador, are suggesting that the radical approach could be key to the future.

Nor can we rule, these next few months, the role of external actors in the fate of the new Arab order. New powers are emerging in the region such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran and are increasingly consolidating their areas of influence against West, and could play a decisive role. Each one of these countries has its own priorities and political model to offer. Except for the Turkish model, with all its limitations and problems, the other models are far from being democratic, rather it cannot be ruled out that some of them aim to promote war or support the creation of theocratic and intolerant regimes.

With this new encounter *The Arab Spring, a year later*, CEMOFPC, intends to answer to some of the many pressing questions, about the path of the new order in the Arab world:

In an area where during thousands of years Christians and Muslims lived together in harmony, we must ask ourselves:

What is the reason for the threats and attacks against Christians?

Will the new regimes be able to dismantle the old system and build strong states and institutions that can ensure freedom, especially the religious freedom, to all its citizens and end with the Arab-Israeli conflict?

Which model of governance is going to be launched? Will it be the western secular one as promoted by the European Union? Will it be based on confessionalism giving all citizens, including religious minorities the same rights and civic duties? Will it be a new Islamic model yet to be defined?

What will the regional actors Qatar, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia do to extend their areas of influence?

Will the change reverses in the strengthening of civil society? Will these new regimes be able to bring true economic and social development to their people?

Center for Middle Eastern Studies
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⁴ We recommend the readings of *Les révolutions arabes à la lumière de l'Histoire* of Gerard Khoury, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2011-12-20-khoury-fr.html>