

In November, the Dhaka and Chittagong Alliances Françaises are holding a series of Arab-Spring related events including a conference debate at Dhaka University on November 20; bringing together French and Bangladeshi intellectuals and academics. *The Daily Star* is publishing below a number of articles written by leading French experts in the run up to this event. The opinions expressed in these articles are solely those of the authors.

Holy War in the Islamic World

PIERRE CONESA

IS the Arab Spring, greeted as the triumph of the idea of democracy, exposing new fault-lines within the Arab-Muslim world? Shi'ites (however they may be known: Alawis, Alevis...) and Sunnites are locked in bloody combat in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bahrein, the Lebanon... In Saudi Arabia, the Shi'ites have no rights, and in Teheran, a capital city of 13 million inhabitants, there is not a single mosque for Sunnites... The mosques of Timbuktu and Gao, typical of the Maliki religious rite, which is widespread in the Maghreb, are being destroyed by the Jihadists of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)... There are increasing difficulties between the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt... In brief, throughout the world Jihadist terror is currently killing more Muslims than followers of other religions : there were 100,000 deaths in Algeria during the "dark years", Iraq has been the victim of kamikaze attacks (over 100 deaths in attacks on Iraq, in a single day, for which AQ has claimed responsibility), in the middle of Ramadan or the Shura; Afghanistan, where the Shi'ite Hazaras fear the return of the Sunnite Taliban these examples show that Arab-Muslim areas are indeed torn apart by a "Holy War in the Islamic World."

Analysts have long drawn attention to the growth of the Muslim Brotherhood, a visible opposition to the "modernist" dictatorships supported by the West, without paying attention to the growth of Salafism financed by Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism, a doctrine exclusive to the Riyadh government, is the strictest form of Hanbalism, one of the four schools of Islamic law.

Mohamed Ibn Abd El Wahhab, its founder,

prohibited any cult other than that of God, going ahead with the destruction of "profane" sites. Back in 1806 Ibn Saoud destroyed Al-Baqi, in Medina, a cemetery holding the remains of the companions of the Prophet, and the tomb of Mohammed was also nearly destroyed. The same violence erupted in Algeria during



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the Civil War (with the destruction of marabout sites, the murder of official imams and young girls on their way to school), or in present-day Mali, where the Salafists have just carried out a second stoning within a week, following the legislation applicable to Riyadh (and not only in Teheran).

Within the Salafist hierarchy, the other schools

of law or Sufism are enemies just as other religions are. "Shi'ism was invented by the Jews in order to split Islam!" ... "the Shi'ites are not Muslims" are the watchwords of Saudi theology.

Have Westerners become involved in this religious war by allying themselves with Saudi Arabia, with Pakistan, where the madrasas fill out the ranks of the Taliban, and with Qatar, which finances Sahel groups? Following G. W. Bush, Western strategists only interpret the Arab-Muslim world through the issues of Iran's nuclear capability and anti-western terrorism, limiting themselves to identifying what can be attributed to "Al Qaida." Why consider Iran as the exclusive enemy while the suppliers of terrorists and Salafist preachers are Saudi Arabia and Pakistan? Isn't there a risk that this instance of strategic blindness will lead western countries, to become cobelligerent of Salafists (i.e. lead to involvement in warfare) in Syria and Iran? Can democracy smooth things out?

Salafists legitimize violence by their literal reading of Sharia, leading attacks on places of learning (universities, television networks, exhibitions, cinema, media), the refusal of freedom of conscience, violence against opponents and women.

Their ambition goes a long way beyond setting up a national democracy in the interest of a mythical Califat. By principle this prohibits discussion, and thus democracy.

Are moderate Muslims not shooting themselves in the foot as a result of their reluctance to discuss the necessary *aggiornamieto* of Sharia? No religion on the planet sets so much store by solidarity among its believers, and yet...

(Translated from French by John Holstead)

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A few thoughts on the Arab revolutions

AMIN MAALOUF

THE great sense of relief which has moved the Arab world since December 2010 seems to me a major event of our age. I am convinced that it will end by leading those particular countries towards democracy, but only after a number of twists and turns, which, alas, will often be bloody and always misdirected.

Even though I feel impatient by what has been going on in Egypt, Syria or elsewhere, I try to reassure myself by recalling that the French Revolution of 1789 did not produce republican institutions worthy of the name until the 1870s, that is to say three generations later. In between there was the Terror, two empires, a restoration of the monarchy, coups d'état, civil wars, foreign wars etc. All the same, one must not appear complacent about the blood-stained settling of scores, or about backward-looking changes of attitude. It is important, even urgent, to affect a fundamental modernisation of Muslim societies, to affirm for them the rights of women and of religious or ethnic minorities, to denounce all their discriminatory practices. In this respect, the current revolutions have not yet revealed much progress, sometimes they have even led to a type of regression.

(Translated from French by Andrew Riemer)

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Can there be such a thing as a Libyan model?

MARC ROUSSEL

OF all the Arab revolutions, the one that led to the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya remains unique in modern history. Despite the Tunisian and Egyptian precedents, despite the (relative) relinquishing of power by Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, despite the attempted revolution in Bahrain and civil war in Syria, it is difficult to form a homogeneous revolutionary Arab model. Primarily because similar initial causes produce noticeably different consequences. There are several reasons for this - local political and religious context, economic issues and the revolutionary process which vary greatly from one country to another.

On this last point, a crucial one judging by what is going on in Syria, Libya is the only country where external military intervention was possible on a large scale, in the name of humanitarian intervention, a concept defended for decades by activists and intellectuals such as Bernard Kouchner and Bernard-Henri Lévy.

I accompanied the latter on his many trips during the eight months of the Libyan revolution and we made a film out of it, *The Oath of Tobruk*. What is so different about Libya? First and foremost, it is a unanimously popular revolt and as such it has quickly organized itself politically into the National Transitional Council. On a religious level, virtually all Libyans are Sunni, a fact significantly reducing the risk of division.

Next, Gaddafi's thirst for absolute power and his use of state terrorism indirectly curbed the influence of radical Islamist groups in the country. Finally, to this favorable combination of circumstances was added the audacity and interpersonal skills of a half-naïve, half-visionary Bernard-Henri Lévy, who was able to bring together Abdeljalil, the newly appointed leader of the National Transitional Council, with President Sarkozy, who was eager to lead a Western intervention. Whether the non-interventionists like it or not, it is clear that without the swiftness and commitment of all parties,

the bloodbath in Benghazi that Saif Al-Islam Gaddafi had threatened to cause would have without a doubt taken place. I filmed the columns of tanks on the outskirts of the city. The revolt would have run the risk of turning into a protracted civil war gradually paving the way for the jihadists, which I unfortunately witnessed happening in Aleppo last August. Nine months after the conflict the Libyans held their first elections. Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, the elections in Libya were dominated by the liberal party Alliance of National Forces, led by Mahmoud Jibril which was a major player in the dialogue between NATO and the rebels during the war.

Can the revolution in Libya therefore become a model? Yes, and to a lesser extent, no. Yes because a

lengthier and deadlier conflict was avoided, because it has been possible to curb the influence of the Islamists and because the people conquered the right to self-determination and freedom (for example being allowed to learn English, which Gaddafi had prohibited). On the other hand, it cannot be a model because

the Libyan situation is far from being stable, because of the repercussions of the conflict on the Sahel region, and because in Syria's case, the politico-religious mosaic changes the equation. The ASL rebels are supported by the

Sunni powers of Saudi Arabia and Qatar who attempt to conceal their imperialistic designs on the Arab world.

Moreover, they get increasing support from a growing number of jihadi and Salafist radicals. Should there be an intervention in their favor at the risk of bringing Islamists to power? Should there be no intervention giving Bashar the tyrant and his Iranian ally free rein? Western countries (except Russia which has clearly taken sides) have been faced with this impossible equation for months. They will remain so until the US elections, which weigh heavily in the global balance, are over.

(Translated from French by Somen Dutta and Olivier Litvine)

Marc Roussel is a French Photographer, Journalist and Filmmaker.



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Reflections on the Arab Spring

MARC SAGHIÉ

FOR a long time, the images of the demonstrations in Tunisia, later in Egypt, recalled images of the the Eastern European Spring. And the Tunisian Mohamed Bouazzi burning himself to death inevitably brought to mind Jan Palach setting fire to himself in Wenceslas Square. Springtimes (despite its having been winter) when the Arabs, whom the whole world considered as members of all those people who had withdrawn from History, demonstrated to regain their bread, justice and liberty. Universal themes which led them out of their isolation and made them return to the real world. Theories concerning the clash of civilisations and particular cultural characteristics which had justified every barbaric act could no longer stand. But the comparison stops there.

In contrast with the Arab world where the 20th Century did not witness the emergence of even a single successful nation state, Eastern Europe had retained in its memory genuine political life before Communism, more or less free elections and democratic institutions. And liberal and secular values had penetrated deep into the various layers of society.

Locked into Communism, the people of Eastern Europe saw in Europe and the West the democratic system to which they aspired. But the Arab world often saw in that West only its colonial past and its support of Israel. As soon as Syrian civilians were felled by their hundreds by the bullets of the Assad regime, intense debate tore apart the Syrian opposition over the question of seeking help from the West, proving how much the Arabs remained distrustful, even perhaps reticent towards that world.

Eventually, the Eastern European Spring coincided with the fall of the USSR and the final victory of the western democratic model. Today, that western democratic model is going through a veritable

economic and cultural crisis. It no longer holds enchantment, no more for Arabs than for other people. Other models have emerged revealing that economic development does not require a democratic culture. And the new Arab states, having emerged from dictatorships, are not immune to that temptation.

So these spring-times did not naturally arouse in them the hope of democracy. If they could give birth to obscurantism, religious radicalism and civil wars, why support them? It is still too early to judge the achievements of these revolutions. At last this Spring has opened a new page in the history of the Arab World. Transitions will be neither swift nor simple. But at least the thick pall smothering so many societies has been lifted.

And the truths about that world have appeared in full daylight: of countries which had known nothing of political life during several decades, probably since each gained independence: societies which had rarely addressed social and cultural questions, agreeing that the question of nationalism, so often employed by corrupt dictators and fashioned by the hollow rhetoric of the cloud-cuckoo-land of debates about democracy, women, minorities and the role of religion in society. It is by starting from these truths that the act of construction must begin. And no one will regret the end of the long, changeless cycle of corrupt dictators, hereditary republics and the absence of a state based on the rule of law, the terrifying decades which have prevented the entry of the Arabs into modernity and drove the people to fall into the arms of religious radicalism.

(Translated from French by Andrew Riemer)

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