

## Fouad Ajami

### Notes from his talks Ambassador Marilyn McAfee (Ret.)

“The Arab Spring: Outlook for the Middle East”

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Noted Middle East scholar **Fouad Ajami** suggested that the popular upheavals that have rocked the Arab World might better be understood as an “**Arab Awakening**” than the oft used term “Arab Spring. “ Spring implies a seasonal follow-on which would not describe a positive outcome. Ajami a self-described ‘innate optimist’ warned that there is always the risk that things can go badly, but rejected those that believe ‘Arabs don’t have freedom in their DNA’. Egypt is the trend setter, but there the military has the power, not the cabinet, and will resist change that negatively affects its interests, particularly financial. There and elsewhere liberal constitutionalists must contend for power in a political arena with a stronger, better organized Islamist party under the oversight of a cautious army.

The Arab **populist street revolts** were set off just three months ago (March 2011) by the impact of a poor, young vegetable seller in Tunis. Blocked from selling his goods by a policewoman who said he had no permit and then loaded bags of his vegetables into her car as a “fine”, he poured gasoline over his body and set himself on fire. The poverty, frustration and hopelessness of the Tunisian vegetable seller is mirrored throughout the country and the region by a large and looming generation of young Arabs who don’t see a future and are angered by rich, corrupt, greedy dictators with their cronies and murderous enforcers. They want dignity, freedom and jobs. The Middle East has the highest birthrates in the world. These countries are among the largest wheat importers and among the lowest on an economic opportunity scale. Bread subsidies are essential. In 1952 Egypt had a population of 18 million living along the banks of the Nile. The population today is 83-85 million. While the Arabs made their own lives terrible, Ajami argues “we either help them to become free or they will destroy us.” They travel. He spoke of two photos that speak to the younger generation of Arabs: one of Mohammad Atta (of 9/11 infamy) and the other of the young Google executive who led the Egypt demonstrations. And there is Steve Jobs whose birth father was Syrian and whose impact was global. What if he had been born and grown up in today’s Arab World? One note in Arabic on the Apple store read “There were three apples: Adam, Newton and Jobs”

The outcome of the uprising in **Syria is too hard to call**. It is “an immovable object against an irresistible force.” The violence of the elite Syrian Guard Force has been unspeakably vicious. A video is airing of the deliberate taunting and murder of a Syrian villager by members of the Guard Force into whose hands he stumbled along a roadside. The elite Guard Force is made up of Alawites, a minority group (12% of the population) from the Hills of Syria that controls the government through the ruling Alawite al-Assad family. If the Sunni protesters prevail and the ruling al-Assad family dynasty and greedy

cohorts fall, the murderous elite guard is finished so it ruthlessly defends the regime. The resistance forces which have courageously stood up to the Syrian army forces also know that failure is not an option. They will all be hunted down and executed by the regime. Thousands have already been killed or disappeared. The Rubicon for many was crossed when the body of a 'disappeared' 13 year old boy was returned to the village with signs of brutal torture and mutilation. Syria's President, Bashar al-Assad, was not intended by his family to rule. He trained as a ophthalmologist. When his brother died he was pressed into office. At the outset he had a decent, benign reputation amongst Syrians. Not so his family, much less his father or brother who headed the Guard Force. However the blood of the killing is now on Bashar as well. The resistance forces have called for international assistance, but it is not likely. The geography of Syria does not favor their success even though neighboring Turkey has broken with the regime over the army's brutal attacks. Dr. Ajami is not optimistic. He praised the current U.S. Ambassador Robert Ford who has been in contact with the opposition despite government efforts to block him. He was recently withdrawn by the U.S. State Department for consultations due to very credible threats on his life and the Syrian government's unwillingness to protect him.

**Tunisia was the spark that set the revolts in motion.** The overthrown regime, the Ben Ali family and cronies, had an insatiable appetite for money and luxury. They controlled 30% of the national income. His wife even stopped at the national bank as they fled (to Saudi Arabia; French Premier Sarkozy turned them down) to liberate \$60 million in gold bars. "Belatedly Ben Ali went to the hospital to visit the young vegetable seller (who lived 3 agonizing weeks)." Dr. Ajami said, "Imagine a shiny black suit and black, slicked back hair." Tunisia had been led into nationhood by the highly respected Habib Bourguiba. Ben Ali was no Bourguiba and an embarrassment to the Tunisians. National elections were just held and the Islamist party was the clear winner. The liberal constitutionalist party has expressed its willingness to work cooperatively with the new government.

The Tunis example quickly spread to **Cairo, "the mother of the world."** Egyptians wanted an end of the Mubarak pharaonic regime of plunder and repression. Mubarak's son was in the wings. Nothing was going to change. It showed Arabs the despair of the youth bulge. As to plunder, the Mubarak's were infamous. Nasser had left office with only a \$2,000 passport account. President Mubarak himself was a foul mouthed person who feared and disdained his people. He called them "animals." He feared their large and growing numbers. Attacks on the Copts (early Christian Egyptians) by Muslims had always been a part of the Egyptian landscape. Mubarak never protected them. There had been 167 attacks since 1972. Change in Egypt will not be fast and it will be the Egyptian way which is "messy." But it will be a bellwether for democratic change in other Arab countries. The three power centers are the Islamists, the Army and the liberal secularists. The Army holds the power as in many countries in this region, but it has no wish to govern. It wants to preserve stability and its own financial interests. Notably the Army at the outset of the demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt did not fire on its own people (as the Iranian Army did not in 1979). In Libya and Syria this has not been the case. (Deserters occurred in both countries, but in both tribal loyalties and divisions have made the fighting fierce).

The death of **Libya's Gadhafi**, even if he was murdered, should occasion no regret. He was a killer and a madman whose murderous tyranny brought torture and death to scores of innocent Libyans at home and abroad. In 1996 he ordered the killing of 1200 prisoners and ordered multiple terrorist acts including the downing of PanAm 103 and its 270 passengers. When popular resistance bubbled up, he told the people in Benghazi that he was "going to hunt them down like rats house by house." Genocide awaited Eastern Libya. In his case death seems too easy. Some say it's too bad dictators like this only get killed once. His end, being pulled out of a drainage ditch and pleading "Don't shoot," is reminiscent of Saddam Hussein, Iraq's murderous dictator, emerging from the spider hole with hands up saying "I am the President of Iraq and I want to negotiate."

**Bahrain** is difficult. It has a Shiite native, majority population, but it is ruled by a Sunni backed by the Saudis who have built a causeway connecting the two. The U.S. Navy has an important base in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia has long been an ally and source of oil. Saudi Arabia sent armed mercenary troops and tanks across the causeway to put down the uprising.

**Saudi Arabia** has just lost Crown Prince Sultan who was to follow an unwell and elderly King Abdullah to the throne. The king is a reformer and Sultan was seen in the same light. It is likely that Prince Naif, known as a hardliner (the 'Prince of Darkness'), will become the Crown Prince. King Abdullah has lavished money on the Saudis, and even more money recently, but he is respected and there is affection for him. Should Prince Naif become the king he will not enjoy that. And all of the princes, sons of the scion and founder of Saudi Arabia King Saud are quite elderly. It faces an uncertain future.

**Turkey just reelected Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan**, a Muslim. Turkey's economy is booming with a 10% annual growth rate in GDP, a stark contrast to most of its neighbors, especially Greece with whom they have long had major problems (over Cyprus and EU membership for Turkey). President Obama sees Turkey as the model for an Islamist democracy and frequently consults Erdogan. Interestingly when Erdogan visits another country he has described himself as the "Muslim leader of a secular democracy." He intends to be the second revered figure for Modern Turkey. The founder of Modern Turkey is the dedicated secularist Kemal Ataturk ("for the people despite the people") whose worshipful Kemalist followers include most in the army from which he emerged. Erdogan has begun to make changes in army leadership, lest another coup develop within that powerful sector. Turkey sees itself as a, if not the, major power in the region. Dr. Ajami says that the Arab World would not accept a non-Arab in the lead role (as had been the case, and in part because of it, under the dominance of the Ottoman Empire). But Turkey is a major power and Prime Minister Erdogan is one of the region's most influential leaders

**Israel is very worried about democratic developments in the region.** It had arrangements with some of the neighboring regimes, particularly Egypt on the critical Gaza southern border which is a constant security concern. Egypt, Ajami says, will continue to honor the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. The Egyptian Army will not again pay the sacrifice in lives and treasure for other Arab states who want to take on the powerful Israelis. On its northern border Turkey and Israel have had longstanding good relations. Recently Turkey has broken with Israel over Prime Minister Netanyahu's refusal to apologize for the airborne assault on a Turkish vessel headed to Gaza that resulted in the death of Turkish civilians.

## **Regarding the Israelis and Palestinians**, “Nothing good will happen there.”

While optimistic after the Oslo accord the continued Israeli construction of new settlements expressly forbidden by the accord makes him very pessimistic. In peace negotiations over the years “those who would couldn’t and those who could wouldn’t.” Dr. Ajami sees little reason for hope. He noted that it was not the right timing for the Palestinians to seek recognition as a state at the UN (as they did in September). This is not 1947 when Israel went to the UN for statehood.

There are more Croations in California than there are **Al Qaeda** jihadists in **Afghanistan**. The base of operations now is **Yemen** whose dictator’s removal has been called for by popular resistance demonstrations. The recent successful targeting of U.S. citizen and Al Qaeda leader Anwar al-Awlaki by a U.S. drone strike in Yemen was doubtless facilitated by the Yemeni regime in order to ease U.S. pressure on it. It surely knew where he was all along. There is no love lost in Afghanistan for Saudi Arabia and the Arabs. By setting up schools based on the Koran and Arabic, they have supplanted their languages and made Arabic, the holy script, the preferred language.

There is also no love lost in Iraq for the Iranians. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki spent 8 years in exile in Iran, but 16 years in Syria. He doesn’t like or trust the Iranians. That is true of most Iraqis, including the Iraqi Shias. The most revered Ayatollah of all Shiia Islam is an Iraqi, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. Many of the holiest Shia shrines are in Iraq. Muqtada al-Sadr is not liked either, aside from his rabble street gang of followers. **Iran cannot dominate Iraq**. Dr. Ajami supported the Bush ’43 Administration’s invasion of Iraq. It remains to be seen if it is a “noble success” or a “noble failure.” In either case we were not meant to stay in Iraq. A presence is good, but “leave Iraq to the Iraqis.” The recent announcement of the **withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq** for lack of agreement on immunity for remaining forces is a political decision, not a strategic decision. Politically it favors both President Obama and Prime Minister al-Maliki, each with his own national constituency. Strategically it favors neither. Politics trumps.

## **Observations:**

Importantly, the **populist revolts against Arab dictators were led and accomplished by young Arabs themselves**. Libya was half and half with NATO intervening to prevent mass murder at the urging of France’s Sarkozy and Britain’s Cameron. President Obama reluctantly supported it for the same reason. Young Arabs held their own people responsible for their problems. They did not blame the United States. A **freedom deficit** and **crony capitalism has wrecked this part of the world** psychologically and emotionally.

The U.S. which expects ‘fast’ everything-fast food, fast democracy, fast- change needs to give these people time. **It is not a fast part of the world**. At the same time, Quoting GW Bush ’43 he noted that **“We must resist the soft bigotry of low expectations.”** Manhattan liberals he charged are left wing racists. Saudi Arabia always reluctant to rush into anything, especially change, says “It will take time”; “We’re looking into it” (Saudi Arabia ‘looks into everything’ says Ajami and keeps on looking into it. Under King Abdullah, who is popular, we have seen great patience,

especially by the women. He saw a Saudi woman in full burka at the side of the road with a sign that said "cars want women to drive them." Women driving- it has been announced. It is coming-but not quite yet (like the Saudi women's vote).

**The three most influential leaders in the region** are Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan and Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei (President Ahmadinejad has been stripped of his power by Khamenei in a recent power struggle).

The U.S. has nothing to apologize for in the region.

We shouldn't have such fear of Sharia law. Most countries say they have it and just ignore it.

**The European welfare state**, which harbored so many Jihadists, **nurtured the roots of the Jihadist movement.**

Some in Saudi leadership/the Royal Family gave the jihadists funds to buy them off and ensure that they were not the targets. Ultimately the Saudis became targets. **"Arabs have made their own lives terrible."** **"We (the West, the U.S.) either help them become free or they will destroy us."** **"Even though I have studied the Middle East, I am innately an optimist" about its future, but it will take time.**

*Fouad Ajami, Lebanese by birth, grew up in NYC and is a longstanding NYC resident. He also has residences in Palo Alto where he heads the Islamic Studies Project of Stanford's Hoover Institute, and in Washington D.C.*