

TARIQ ALI

BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE

Reply to Asef Bayat

‘DYNASTY AND GOVERNMENT’, Ibn Khaldûn wrote in his introduction to *The Muqaddimah*, ‘serve as the world’s market-place, attracting to it the products of scholarship and craftsmanship alike.’ The 14th-century scholar was constructing a new methodology for understanding history, based on a study of the Maghreb and a critique of the work of Arab historians of preceding centuries. Replace ‘dynasty and government’ with Washington or the ‘international community’ and what he goes on to write is not inapposite for modern times:

Wayward wisdom and forgotten lore turn up there. In this market stories are told and items of historical information are delivered. Whatever is in demand on this market is in general demand everywhere else. Now, whenever the established dynasty avoids injustice, prejudice, weakness and double-dealing, with determination keeping to the right path and never swerving from it, the wares on its market are as pure silver and fine gold. When it is influenced by selfish interests and rivalries, or swayed by vendors of tyranny and dishonesty, the wares of its market-place become as dross and debased metals. The intelligent critic must judge for himself as he looks around, examining this, admiring that, and choosing the other.¹

Looking around at the Arab world, two years after the uprisings that exploded across it in the spring of 2011, how should we judge the outcomes—fractious political scenes in Egypt and Tunisia, simmering strife in Yemen, armed anarchy in Libya, civil war in Syria, governmental crisis in Lebanon, crackdown in Bahrain, boosted regional weight for Riyadh and Qatar? Are there any patterns to be discerned in the Arab present? Asef Bayat’s ‘Revolutions in Bad Times’ is a thoughtful

contribution to a preliminary balance sheet.² Bayat offers a categorization of oppositional strategies—reformist, insurrectionary, ‘refolutionary’—set in a broadly comparative, historical framework. In one sense, he argues, this is indeed an age ripe for revolution: the bankruptcy of liberal democracy and lack of government accountability in face of soaring levels of inequality and deprivation, sharply exacerbated by the financial crisis, have created a political impasse that would seem to demand revolutionary change. Yet the hold of neoliberal ideology and the defeats suffered by earlier revolutionary currents—anti-colonial, Marxist-Leninist, Islamist—have undermined the possibilities for it: both ‘means and vision’ are lacking. As a result, he argues, the opponents of the dictatorships in Egypt and Tunisia adopted a strategy of ‘refolution’: mass mobilizations that aim to compel the regime to reform itself, rather than to overthrow it. It was only where intransigent regimes responded with armed force—Libya, Syria—that ‘refolutionaries’ were compelled to pass over into outright insurrection (with NATO backing) and the violent overthrow of the regime.

Bayat borrows the term ‘refolution’ from the Cold Warrior Timothy Garton Ash, who coined it to describe the liberalization underway in Poland and Hungary in the spring of 1989. Bayat admits, though, that the political processes in Tunisia and Egypt have not aimed at fundamental economic transformations, comparable to those that negotiations in central Europe were bringing about. In that sense, he argues, Georgia’s Rose Revolution in 2003 or Ukraine’s Orange version in 2004–05 are closer approximations, albeit lacking the liberatory charge unleashed throughout Egyptian society by Tahrir Square. Bayat concludes by borrowing Raymond Williams’s idea of the ‘long revolution’ as a possible strategy for ‘meaningful democratic change’. How should this contribution be assessed?

Terminologies

Bayat rightly stresses the lack of means and vision for a revolutionary overthrow of these regimes, but also the depth and scale of the insurrectionary energies released in Egypt, Yemen and Tunisia. Whether or not it is helpful to transpose the neologism of ‘refolution’ to capture these realities is another matter. Its original coinage referred to a very

¹ Ibn Khaldûn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, Princeton 1967, pp. 23–4.

² Asef Bayat, ‘Revolutions in Bad Times’, NLR 80, Mar–Apr 2013.

different process. Garton Ash was gushing over the negotiations taking place between state and opposition representatives in Budapest and Warsaw, where ‘enlightened’ apparatchiks were staging an ‘unprecedented retreat’, offering to share power, signing up for the road to parliamentary democracy and crying ‘*Enrichissez-vous!*’ (even Garton Ash confessed that the prospect of Communist bosses turning into capitalist ones, as he put it, afforded him a moment of unease).³ With the exception of Romania and the DDR, the mobilizations in Eastern Europe were on a relatively small scale; the cosy confabulations in the spring of 1989 were a long way from the televised announcements by uniformed spokesmen of the SCAF and the cracked heads of Tahrir Square.

Nor does ‘refolution’ tackle the great rallying cry of 2011: ‘The people want the downfall’—not the reform—‘of the regime!’ There is an obvious risk in this terminology of confounding tactics—which, for any determined and effective political movement, will be flexible by definition—and goals. However the slogans and the spirit of the crowds in Cairo, Suez, Alexandria were very clear. It was not only Mubarak who had to go but also his torturers—including the sinister Omar Suleiman, whom the Obama Administration at one stage touted as Mubarak’s successor—and the Interior Ministry forces that had brutalized the country for decades. The military alone was not targeted, despite the role of a corrupt and collaborationist High Command that had been on the US payroll since the defeat of 1973. The decision by the protest leaders in February 2011 to refrain from trying to split the Army, despite the fraternization of junior officers and soldiers with the crowds, was probably a tactical miscalculation of the balance of forces, rather than springing from any illusions in the institutions of the Mubarak state. ‘Refolution’ in Bayat’s sense, if it means anything, is more applicable to the Bolivarian Republics in South America, a model firmly rejected by the Brotherhood and Ennahda, and with tragically little backing from young officers.

Bayat’s terminology offers little purchase on the social and political-economic content of the Arab revolts. Here the analogy with central Europe in 1989 breaks down completely. The Comecon states, eastern counterparts of Western social-democracies, were in essence social-dictatorships, for the most part heavily urbanized, with large-scale

³Timothy Garton Ash, ‘Refolution, the Springtime of Two Nations’, *New York Review of Books*, 15 June 1989.

industrial sectors and social, educational and cultural provisions that benefitted a majority of the citizens, as G. M. Tamás discusses elsewhere in this issue.⁴ Increasingly, through the 1970s and 80s, leading factions of the bureaucracies were won to market nostrums. Once the deal was done with the pro-capitalist oppositions, shock-therapy spending cuts and privatizations destroyed existing social structures and closed down much of the native industry, as Western firms stamped out competition. By contrast, import-substitute industrialization was always much more limited in the Arab republics, and workers were never valorized as they were under state socialism. Rural poverty is entrenched; vast slums surround the major cities; youth unemployment is desperately high. Egypt had disbanded much of its limited welfare state and embarked on a programme of privatizations under Sadat. Social provision is skeletal, mainly consisting of food and fuel subsidies; the mosques—Bayat’s ‘free riders’—provide most of the healthcare and education obtainable by the poor. Neoliberalism has famously served to benefit regime cronies. Social unrest and strikes have been repressed, time and time again, but they never completely disappeared. How to articulate political and economic demands remains a key strategic problem for the protest movements.

Missing dimensions

Equally important, Bayat’s abstract political categories—reform, revolution, something in between—exclude any analysis of the broader balance of forces in play. If the Arab uprisings began as indigenous revolts against corrupt police states and social deprivation, they were rapidly internationalized as Western powers and regional neighbours entered the fray. In his desire to find analogies for the Arab present in the European past, Bayat underplays the concrete impact of Western imperialism across the region. The current borders of the Arab states were drawn by the victors of the First World War and included a declaration by the British Cabinet—which its only Jewish member opposed—pledging to facilitate the establishment of a national home for European Jews in Palestine; thus setting in train the expropriation, uprooting and expulsion of large sections of the native Palestinian population to clear the ground for the state of Israel. There can be no adequate analysis of outcomes in the Arab world today without a consideration of the role played by the most

⁴ ‘Words from Budapest’, NLR 80, Mar–Apr 2013.

powerful military and diplomatic force in the region, the US; and given the hold of America's Israel lobby over US foreign policy, there can be no adequate assessment of the US role without bearing in mind the Israel-Palestine question.

The reasons why despotic regimes have persisted across the Arab world, long after the dictatorships of the Cold War era were dismantled across Latin America, Africa and much of Asia, lie largely in the intertwining logics of Washington's jealous guardianship of the region's oil and Israel's grip over its Middle East policy. Free elections risked bringing Islamists to power who might act on their pro-Palestinian rhetoric. The nature of Arab-world exceptionalism in face of the growing 'third wave' of democratization was starkly demonstrated in Algeria, where the Arab Spring might be said to have started in 1988. Following a week of mass protests, the FLN regime agreed to hold first municipal and then, in 1990, national assembly elections, just as the massive US military build-up to the First Gulf War was igniting popular anger across the region. The largest Islamist party, FIS, won a landslide in the first round of the national assembly elections, having led huge anti-war demonstrations not long before. The Algerian military cancelled the second round, on the advice of Washington and Paris. A brutal and corrupting civil war ensued with mass atrocities carried out by both sides, to the point of attrition, while the masses retreated to an embittered passivity. Conservative estimates of the number killed range between 100,000 and 200,000, without a word of protest from the Western powers. The country has still not fully recovered from that ordeal.

With some variations, the populist-nationalist regimes that had come to power in the 1950s and 60s in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and Algeria were structured—tragically—on a version of the Soviet model: a *de facto* single-party state, a grotesque personality cult glorifying the president of the day and a regime monopoly on politics and information. The collapse of the Soviet Union left the presidents-for-life as bad copies of the original. As they assembled to pose for the cameras at annual Arab summits, like so many veteran cars at a rally, they were cruelly satirized by the exiled Iraqi poet, Muzzaffar al-Nawab. Meanwhile the Mukhabarat (secret police) summits engaged in more serious business: collaborating with Mossad, comparing notes on dissidents, competing for renditioned victims from NATO countries and, occasionally, roaring with laughter as they described the effects of torture on the victim.

Neither the Mukhabarat chiefs nor their US/EU sponsors detected the scale of the coming insurrections.

Interventions

Taken by surprise when the uprisings broke out in 2011, the first reaction in Washington and Paris was to defend their vassals. Sarkozy's foreign minister Michèle Alliot-Marie hoped her friend Ben Ali could hang on while French paratroopers were assembled to defend his regime. It was too late; the Tunisian oligarch was already on a plane to Saudi Arabia. The Obama Administration's attempts to save Mubarak's face had to be abandoned, as hundreds died; but in a country as geo-strategically central as Egypt, Washington had other potential tools. Urgent talks were already underway with the Army High Command; a key US demand was a pledge that the new rulers would abide by the 1979 Treaty with Israel, stripping Egypt of sovereignty over an entire swathe of its territory abutting the Israeli border. One of the SCAF's first statements on taking power agreed to uphold the Treaty. SCAF would prove a crude and clumsy instrument, but Washington's immediate objectives had been secured.

After Tahrir Square, the indigenous protests no longer had the advantage of surprise, and imperial forces—together with regional neighbours—gained the upper hand in shaping the outcome of the revolts. Bayat lists 'oil' and 'brutality' as grounds for Western military intervention, but offers no explanation for the highly selective treatment of the different countries by the NATO powers. For Washington, the Arab states are ranked according to a hierarchical calculus of interests: geo-strategic importance; proximity to Israel; oil and wealth; location; demographic weight; friend–enemy status. Egypt, as geo-strategic linchpin of the region, has been a 'friend' hugged close to the US since 1973, second only to Israel in the quantity of military aid it receives. Impoverished Yemen was treated as a dependency of Saudi Arabia: the US kept Saleh in power as long as it could. It was only when the army split and a bomb attack on the despot's residence left him a partial wreck that Washington moved him to Riyadh and pushed through a compromise national government, with Saleh's men still in place.

The monarchies that owe their very existence to UK–US imperialism have always received differential treatment; in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain and the Gulf states, corrupt dynasts remain

the supreme arbiters of life and politics. In these ‘pillars of stability’, Western values—individual freedoms, human rights, no discrimination against women and minorities—are flouted more flagrantly and egregiously than in any ‘rogue’ state, with barely a murmur of disapproval from the White House. In Bahrain, the Pentagon and State Department obviously approved the Saudi military intervention that helped sectarianize the conflict—the youth who sparked the revolt had been chanting, ‘Neither Shia nor Sunni, We are Bahraini!’—and crushed the rebellion. This success emboldened Riyadh and Qatar to go on the offensive in Libya and Syria. With tacit White House and Israeli approval, Al-Jazeera became the megaphone for the militarization of the Arab Spring along lines determined by personal enmities, sectarian hatred and murderous rivalry with Iran.

The Arab nationalist republics had always been viewed more frostily by Washington. Libya was of little geo-strategic importance or demographic weight; sociologically it was more comparable to the Gulf states, with a small population, a large foreign workforce and an economy entirely determined by oil rents. Tripoli had been in Washington’s ‘enemy’ column purely on account of Gaddafi’s rhetoric, although the CIA continued to draw on his experience in persecuting Islamists. He was officially befriended in 2003 after surrendering some primitive nuclear equipment, and enlisted in the West’s war on terror, while British intelligence handed over Libyan dissidents. But unlike Mubarak and Ben Ali—pure apparatchiks, in hock to Washington or Paris—Gaddafi was unpredictable. He could be violent and vindictive one month, and offer concessions to those whom he had wronged the next. Gaddafi’s life was largely determined—and dislocated—by his constant need to strike a pose. He was capable of the most extreme self-deception and fantasy in order to elevate himself to a moral and ideological status that he had never had in the first place. After his rehabilitation, Western advisors persuaded him to promise a free market, indulge the oil majors and open up Libya’s pristine coastline to the global tourism industry. Gaddafi agreed but kept prevaricating. Instead he thought he could keep the Western powers sweet by doling out cash: he helped fund Sarkozy’s election campaign and the London School of Economics; he received Lord Giddens, whose fulsome praise to the effect that the *Green Book* and Tony Blair’s ‘Third Way’ (author: T. Giddens) had a lot in common was not entirely untrue.

Gaddafi's vices and more serious failings—balking at constructing a proper social infrastructure, and thus dissolving tribal loyalties; brutal repression of Islamist dissidents—were on full display during the first weeks of the Libyan uprising in February 2011. But once he realized that the West had decided to dump him, he was prepared to negotiate.⁵ The military-humanitarians' story that Gaddafi was bent on massacring his people was based in large part on an Al-Jazeera report that the Libyan air force was strafing demonstrators. This turned out to be a fiction, according to Congressional testimony by Defense Secretary Gates and Admiral Mullen. Nor were there any massacres in Misrata, Zawiya or Ajdabiya, when government forces retook them. Gaddafi's 'no mercy' warning of 17 March explicitly referred to rebels in arms in Benghazi, but offered an amnesty and an escape route over the Egyptian border to those who laid down their weapons. Brutal though Gaddafi's regime was, there is scant evidence that NATO bombardment would be 'preventing genocide', 'another Rwanda' or, as Obama put it, 'If we waited one more day, Benghazi could suffer a massacre that would have reverberated across the region and stained the conscience of the world.'⁶ Fewer than 1,000 had died before the NATO airstrikes began; on the most conservative estimates, 8,000–10,000 were killed during the six-month bombardment, with NATO planes not 'protecting civilians' but targeting Gaddafi's forces wherever they could be found.

The war has left the country fragmented and heavily armed, with power in the hands of those who can exercise a monopoly of violence over their territory, largely beyond the control of the General National Congress elected in July 2012 (Qatar was said to be funding both the major parties).⁷ The US Consulate in Benghazi, with its CIA annex, was attacked by Libyan militia members in September 2012, leaving the ambassador dead.⁸ Meanwhile the future of the National Oil Corporation remains

⁵ Hours after UNSC 1973 was passed on 17 March 2011, Gaddafi offered a ceasefire, in conformity with the resolution; this was immediately rejected by the National Transitional Council, confident of Western backing. Obama then demanded further conditions, amounting to unconditional surrender; Gaddafi's three subsequent offers of a ceasefire (April, May, June) were also ignored.

⁶ Hugh Roberts, 'Who Said Gaddafi Had to Go?', *LRB*, 17 November 2011.

⁷ Patrick Haimzadeh, 'Libya's Unquiet Election', *Le Monde diplomatique*, July 2012.

⁸ According to General Petraeus's ex-mistress, Paula Broadwell, the CIA was holding militia members prisoner in the annex, and saw the attack as an attempt to free them. 'The challenging thing for General Petraeus', she said, 'is that in his new position, he's not allowed to communicate with the press. So he's known all of

shrouded in secrecy, despite the proclamations of ‘transparent governance’. Libyan oil represents 3.5 per cent of world reserves, and if the NOC were to be privatized there would be no shortage of buyers.

Syrian endgame

Of much greater geo-strategic importance, the Ba’athist police state in Syria has played an ambivalent role in the region: supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon, sheltering the Hamas leadership for many years, but effectively resigned to Israeli occupation of its southwest and siding with the US against Iraq. In some respects it has proved less assimilable to the US-led order than most of the states in the region: it has not sought to collaborate with Israel and the West, as Turkey and Jordan have, nor had its sovereignty curtailed, like Egypt. Twenty years after the end of the Cold War, Damascus still manages to find some room for manoeuvre, albeit shrinking, between NATO and Russia. Iran has been a support in the struggle against the Saudis over Lebanon. If Bashar al-Assad’s regime is more rational than Gaddafi’s was, its options are limited by the fear of Sunni-majority retribution against the Alawite and Christian minorities that have always run the state.

For many months the popular protests were peaceful and the strength of the movement grew and grew, not unlike the first Palestinian Intifada. But early hopes that the scale of the uprising and its evident popularity would force the regime to negotiate—the demand was for elections to an assembly which would draft a new constitution—were never fulfilled. There is some evidence that a minority within the regime did favour such a course, but Assad, who has sought to mimic his father’s intransigent authoritarianism, was convinced that any concessions would be fatal. The establishment of Turkish training camps for the Free Syrian Army in the summer of 2011, Saudi Arabia’s declared interest in overthrowing the Ba’ath regime—the King’s view that ‘nothing would weaken Iran more than losing Syria’ was widely shared in Israel, which also looked forward to seeing Hezbollah brought down—and the supply of arms and money from Riyadh and Qatar to Syria’s Islamists via Jordan, under CIA oversight, could only confirm the regime’s view that this was a Sunni

this—they had correspondence with the CIA station chief in Libya. Within 24 hours they kind of knew what was happening.’ The CIA flatly denied Broadwell’s claims. See Max Fisher, ‘Why did Paula Broadwell think the CIA had taken prisoners in Benghazi?’, *Washington Post* World Views blog, 12 November 2012.

offensive backed by foreign powers, and strengthen its decision to dig in and defend itself by military means.⁹

As in Libya, the Obama Administration is 'leading from behind', channelling what the *New York Times* describes as a 'cataract of weaponry' to favoured groups and knocking opposition heads together to construct a semi-puppet government, as in Iraq, while Arabs kill Arabs on the ground. Opposing Assad did not have to lead to calls for Western intervention; once NATO enters the fray, whoever wins, the people will lose. The 29 August 2011 statement of the Syrian Local Coordination Committees was unambiguous on these questions. An imposed transitional government, a quick-fix election as a fig-leaf and a Texan-Syrian parachuted in as the new Prime Minister, will do nothing to solve the social misery in the poor agricultural towns that have been the bedrock of the protest movement.¹⁰ Even at this stage, a negotiated solution would be the best way to get rid of Assad and his henchmen. But it seems the die is cast. The empire wants the downfall of the regime.

Islamists in power

The contrast between Algeria in 1991 and Egypt and Tunisia after 2011 lies in Washington's cautious licensing of soft Islamists as potential parties of government, albeit under the shadow of the Army and the Interior Ministry. Bayat's description of these forces as 'post-Islamist', aiming at a pious society but a secular state, fudges the real politics at stake. The model is that of Turkey's AKP: a neo-liberal economy, strong military links to Washington and *de facto* collusion in Israel's occupation of Palestinian land. It may be too early to draw up a balance sheet on the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt or that of Ennahda in Tunisia, but their record to date is instructive. Discussions between US officials and the Egyptian Brotherhood were given new urgency as soon as the SCAF had ousted Mubarak from power. Khairat Al-Shater, the Brothers' principal ideologue, gave continual assurances that he wanted to 'further deepen' Egypt's strategic relationship with Washington, would abide by

⁹ C. J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, 'Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, with Aid from CIA', *NYT*, 24 March 2013. For King Saud's assessment, see John Hannah, 'Responding to Syria: The King's Statement, the President's Hesitation', *Foreign Policy* blog, 9 August 2011, quoted in Tuğal, 'Democratic Janissaries? Turkey's Role in the Arab Spring', *NLR* 76, Jul–Aug 2013, pp. 16–7.

¹⁰ On Ghassan Hitto, see Franklin Lamb, 'A Draft-Dodging, Zionist Friendly, Right-wing Texan Islamist to lead Syria?', *CounterPunch*, 22–24 March 2013.

Sadat's treaty with Israel and fulfil the agreements to provide Israel with subsidized oil and gas.¹¹

Nevertheless, when the June 2012 presidential election was held the SCAF managed to find an *ancien régime* candidate, Ahmed Shafik, Mubarak's last prime minister, and ensured he had a high enough vote so that the State Department, at least, had a choice. If they could not reach a deal with Mohammed Morsi and the Brotherhood, they could have Shafik; the military would then put down any popular protests. On 24 June 2012, a week after the election, the tension was defused. Washington green-lighted Morsi's victory and the Election Commission formally sanctified the Brotherhood's electoral triumph. On his first visit to kiss hands in the White House, Morsi was purring:

President Obama has been very helpful, very helpful. And I can say really that his deeds coincide with his intentions. We've been talking together about the ceasefire, that's very important, then we can talk about differences between Palestinians and Israelis . . . Both sides are talking about differences. We want them to talk about similarities . . . We are now doing this job as much as we can.¹²

The job in question included policing Gaza's borders and sealing the tunnels that are the only economic lifeline for the 2 million people locked inside the mass ghetto of the Strip. Morsi vowed to shut them down in September 2012. The Egyptian military has begun flooding the tunnels with sewage.¹³

In Tunisia, Ennahda and its leader Rachid Ghannouchi are struggling to consolidate their hold on the country, eighteen months after the October 2011 elections. The constitutional situation is still in flux, the new draft not yet ratified. The economy has deteriorated, with unemployment at 17 per cent, inflation rising and the impoverished interior little changed, despite talk of re-orienting development to the long-neglected south. The conditions of a 2012 IMF loan, still under negotiation, include cutting the fuel subsidy and increasing value-added tax. The stasis, and the armed struggles in Mali and Syria, have helped

¹¹ 'Khairat Al-Shater to *Al-Ahram*: We Are Not at War with Anyone', *Al-Ahram*, 29 January 2012; see also 'Khairat Al-Shater: The Brother Who Would Run Egypt', *Wall Street Journal*, 23 June 2012.

¹² 'We're Learning How to Be Free', *Time*, 28 November 2012.

¹³ 'To Block Gaza Tunnels, Egypt Lets Sewage Flow', *NYT*, 20 February 2013.

strengthen the Salafist militias, who have been targeting the trade-union federation, UGTT, which had cohabited for years with the Ben Ali regime before mobilizing against it in January 2011. The assassination of the country's most popular left-wing leader, Chokri Belaid, in February 2013, for which Ennahda denies all responsibility, resulted in a mass funeral demonstration and street confrontations that led to the resignation of the Prime Minister, Hamadi Jebali, Ennahda's Secretary General. He had offered the crowd a national government consisting of technocrats, with Ennahda stepping down until the new constitution was passed and new elections held—a programme that had the backing of the UGTT, the Army, the employers' association and the Western and Algerian embassies. Ghannouchi replaced him with a tougher Islamist, Ali Laarayedh. The crisis has led to a huge public debate with the secular left arguing that Ennahda's real aim, despite its soft talk, is to establish an authoritarian confessional regime and marginalize its secular opponents through repression and murder. That there is a current within Ennahda that favours such a course is indisputable. Ghannouchi himself, more astute than Morsi (not a difficult requirement), is said to favour the Turkish model. In his case, it means sidelining Paris and establishing close relations with Washington.

A long revolution?

In the heyday of Pan-Arabism, when Nasser could nationalize the Suez Canal, resist the Anglo-French-Israeli revenge attack and respond to Western economic pressure by turning to the Soviets for help in building the Aswan Dam, the Muslim Brotherhood effectively aligned itself with the goals of Western imperialism. There were three attempts by the Brothers to assassinate Nasser, and it was this that led to the banning of the organization, the arrest of its leaders and the regrettable execution of its most gifted and twisted ideologue, Sayyid Qutb. Throughout the Cold War, Islamist groups across the Muslim world accepted US funding via diverse routes, one of which was the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia, to organize their constituencies against atheistic communism. References to these organizations in the US political-science text-books of the time were largely favourable. For half a century, Arab nationalists, socialists, communists and others were locked in a battle with the Muslim Brothers for hegemony in the Arab world. We may not like it, but that round has been won by the Brotherhood.

The fruits of their victory were delayed, for it coincided with Israel's crushing of the first Intifada and with Washington's military thrust across central Eurasia, carving an arc of war across Muslim lands from the eastern Mediterranean to Kabul, provoking inevitable political anger. But 'post-Islamism' in Ankara—and, it seems, in Cairo, too—has proved capable of swallowing even this. Deserted by the Arab states, the Palestinians have been defeated not just militarily but politically as well. The Oslo Accords have turned out to be even worse than Edward Said's characterization of them as the 'Palestinian Versailles'. Though a bantustan statelet may still be on the table, any idea of an equitable two-state solution has been discarded, with the connivance of the PLO leadership and its secret police; in return the PLO bureaucracy has grown rich as it has watched its people suffer. It would be better to abandon the fiction that the Palestinian Authority exists as anything other than an adjunct of the Israeli Defence Force, providing dignitaries who can be wheeled on and exhibited as the 'good Palestinians'. Better coldly to acknowledge the realities of the day and declare the Palestinians to be rightless citizens of a single bi-national state.

What is obvious is that the hopes of those who sacrificed their lives in the heady days of the Arab Spring are far from being fulfilled. The coercive apparatuses remain intact and, rather than offering any kind of social-democratic palliatives, the Morsi and Ghannouchi governments are under pressure from the West to cut food and fuel subsidies further. The Brotherhood's promises of 'social justice' remain studiously vague. In the meantime, it has eagerly courted foreign investors, al-Shater asking a bank partly owned by Mubarak's son to set up meetings with Western financiers, while other prominent Brothers praised the Mubarak government's economic policies.¹⁴ Both Islamist parties are aware that their electoral victories were made possible by the uprisings, which they joined only after they were sure of success. The ability of the masses to topple two presidents has given them an inner strength; the consciousness it produced has not evaporated in either country, and it remains a real impediment to the governments' proceeding with neo-liberal policies too far or too soon. One lesson offered by the upheavals in both countries is that, without a political instrument or the creation of new institutions from below, the people vote for what appears to be

¹⁴ Avi Asher-Schapiro, 'The GOP Brotherhood of Egypt', Salon.com, 24 January 2012.

the best on offer. The Brotherhood in Egypt both collaborated with and resisted the Mubarak regime. It accepted the carrots and the torture, too. Memories of the latter helped propel them to power. But their future will depend on their ability to deal with the huge social crisis that underlay the 2011 explosions.

Bayat concludes his reflections on the early outcomes of the Arab Spring with some more general remarks on the possible and desirable means of fundamental social change today. In a striking move, he goes on to associate ‘refolution’—creating ‘a better environment for the consolidation of electoral democracy’—with Raymond Williams’s elaboration of the idea of a ‘long revolution’. Here, he writes, is ‘another understanding of “revolution”’, and so it is, but not of a kind that is likely to flatter the practitioners of refolution as an improvised route to the next political settlement. For Williams, the revolution would be long in the making and even longer, perhaps, in the fulfilment, precisely because of the scope and depth of the transformation it envisaged; but it would not be gradualist in the sense that reformists and latter-day eclectics propose. ‘The condition for the success of the long revolution in any real terms is decisively a short revolution’, he wrote.¹⁵ It may come early or late on in the sequence, but its moment is inescapable. The conceptual framework of the long revolution offered a way to resist, theoretically and in practice, the ‘scaling-down’ of expectations—a horizon limited to the achievement of universal suffrage, a certain standard of living, a given school-leaving age—that was itself a severe hindrance to genuine democratic, industrial and cultural advance, Williams argued. It suggested a measure for actual conditions of development and demanded that we identify and counter the forces—‘the nameable agencies of power and capital, distraction and disinformation’—that continually operated to block or limit any forward move.¹⁶ Accommodation with them, as Bayat proposes, was not an option.

¹⁵ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, London 1979, pp. 420–1.

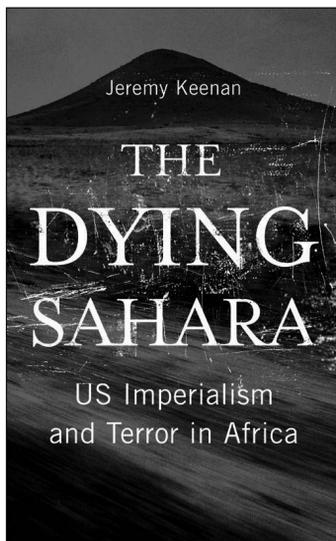
¹⁶ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, London 1961, pp. 12–13; and *Towards 2000*, London 1983, p. 268.

THE DYING SAHARA

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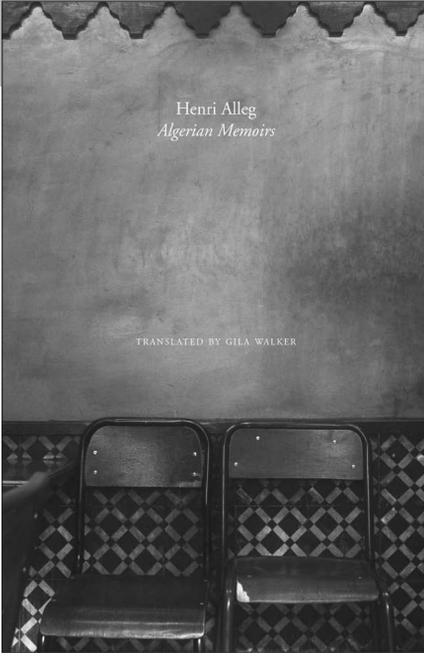
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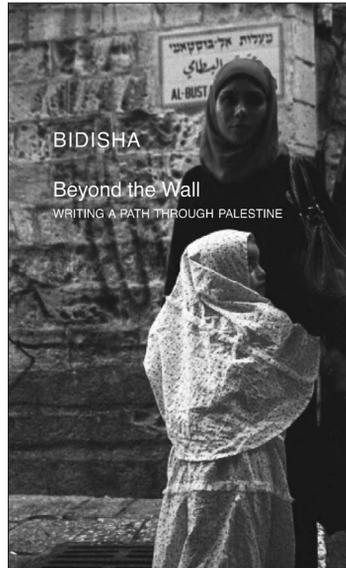
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