

A Convulsion...

Little did Mohammad Abuazizah know what his act of setting fire to himself would bring to the Arab World. Although sometimes described in this manner, his doesn't seem to have been an act of self-immolation, or self-sacrifice for a Cause. It was far more primal, a self-fulfilling act of despair, of bidding farewell to the world, of dissociating from both its Creator as well as its creatures, loved ones as they may have been like members of his family, or despised as the policewoman who robbed him of his dignity as well as of the only means left for him to make a living. He didn't wish by his act to make a point, or to make a martyr of himself. He simply wished to snuff himself out of existence, to turn off the light in what had anyway become total darkness around him. But such was the resonating symbolism across the Arab world (how worthless and insignificant in the eyes of a violently ruthless and filthily rich ruling class a decent family man trying hard to earn a living has become) that, first in Tunis, and then in Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, Jordan and Syria -the entire Arab World began to rumble, bringing entire political edifices down, or threatening to do so. There was no denying that everyone –including intelligence agencies of local as well as of international powers, political theorists, experts, etc.- was taken by surprise. And just as surprising as the popular uprisings that spread like wild fire throughout the Arab World, was the consequent collapse of what had at first seemed like the rock-solid edifices of Ben Ali and Mubarak. Almost

immediately, theories began to follow in the footsteps of actions, and in the West at least, many questions began to be raised: is this an 'Arab Awakening', an 'Arab Spring'? Does this mean that Arabs (and Muslims) resemble Westerners (and Christians) in their yearning for values such as freedom and democracy? Does this close the chapter for good on 'the clash of civilizations' hypothesis? Or will the political tsunami sweeping across the Arab world bring anti-Western Muslim extremists to power? How will the Euro-Mediterranean region be affected? Will this tsunami hit the Palestinian Autonomy Areas? And how, in the end, will any of this reflect itself on the simmering Arab-Israeli conflict?

Conspicuously, the peoples' 'rumbling' in the Arab World couldn't have been more non-violent and peaceful in nature. Even here, pre-existing paradigms and prejudices about the violent nature of the Arab were completely shattered. First in Tunisia, then in Bahrain's Pearl Square, in Cairo's Tahrir Square, and in the Yemen, the incredible story repeated itself: in the hundreds of thousands young and old emerged from their marginalized alleys and homes into the streets, joining together in peaceful marches, singing light and even humorous revolutionary songs, dancing and chanting as if in a parade or a festival, oftentimes as if celebrating a major public or national holiday, rallying around the cry 'Be Gone', addressed to their respective dynastic rulers, and enunciating in simple but colorful graffiti the simple words 'freedom', 'justice' and 'dignity'. Then the ugly truth began to appear: armies that had supposedly been created to defend the nation were turned against it, used by rulers like Qaddafi and Assad to suppress the people's

peaceful revolts. This wasn't a case of a people who were inherently violent, who had to be kept in the shackles for fear of their unruly behavior. Rather, it was the case of narcissistic and stubborn leaders, surrounded by parasitic individuals and interest groups as much bent on continuing to suck the people of their resources and rights as the leaders themselves, who would wield the machinery of violence to further their own ends, heedless of human values. What transpired was that this was a case of peoples paradoxically being held under occupation by their own armies! An occupation, in the words of one Yemini opposition activist commenting in *al-Jazeera* TV on the 30th of May on the army's brutal treatment of peaceful protesters in Ta'z, more ruthless than Israel's of the Palestinians. And amongst Palestinians, finally taking their cue from their Arab brethren, and as though finding legitimization for their own long-standing non-violent forms of resistance to occupation, the long-sought answer for their conundrum seemed finally to have been found: they no longer had to bear arms to achieve their dream of returning to their homeland. They could just march there. In the millions! And so began the march of the 15th of May, the day of the *nakbah*, commemorating the creation of the State of Israel, and by implication, the dispossession of the people from their homeland. The entire theory that only by means of war, by military means, by nuclear power, could nations achieve their freedoms and rights or to protect them once achieved, also collapsed. Peoples could simply *march* to their desired victories! Or so rosy seemed the picture.

Among observers there was general consensus that the one underlying secret behind this unforeseen and unprecedented eruption in the Arab World was the breakdown of fear. But early optimistic political diagnosis began to give way to concerns, as Christians and Muslims clashed in Egypt, as Shi'ites and Sunnis seemed poised to confront each other in Bahrain, as factious bickering among political leaders and parties in Tunisia began to replace the earlier images of blanket unity and solidarity on the seething streets. Now observers began seeing that no single theory could be applied to explain or predict events. Different circumstances in different regions demanded different analyses. Yes, the breaking of the barrier of fear seemed a common denominator, as also the outcry from the human deep for respect, dignity, freedom, and justice. However, this giant wave that swept across the Arab world immediately broke into pieces as soon as it hit the different Arab shores, morphing into different shapes fitting the different geo-political landscapes where it came to settle. Everywhere one looked, different power-seeking parties or movements, communities, interest groups or individuals, began to reposition themselves, in preparation for the inevitable re-distribution of power that would follow these unprecedented peoples' revolutions. Both the American President and the British Prime Minister spoke with visible humility and respect for what they described as a historical moment during a press-conference held in London in advance of a meeting of the G8 which was to take place later in the week in France. We should turn this moment (of the Arab peoples rising up against the tyrants ruling them) into a political continuum, President Obama remarked: make it a

watershed in the history of the fight of the peoples of this world for their self-determination. He seemed to be rolling Montesquieu, Jefferson and Martin Luther –both French and American revolutionary values- all into one: Arabs should from now on be looked upon as an example, he seemed to be saying. No more the embarrassing oddities in the history of the human struggle for freedom and equality; but the model to be eulogized and emulated.

Where, in all of this, were the philosophers? Dead, in a single word. Averroes, Al-Jabiri, al-Urwi, Badawi, Hanafi, al-Amil, Fuad Zakariyya, and others: all dead, whether actually or figuratively. And along with the philosophers one could list all the so-called “public intellectuals”, journalist, “experts”, TV commentators and political pundits. The revolution that broke out neither waited upon, nor needed theory, or analysis. “Is one matchstick worth the whole of your philosophy?” one is again tempted to ask? Yes, one is tempted to answer. In the area of action, and more generally, or specifically, of a people’s primal convulsion, Abuazizah’s matchstick seems to have been enough to light up a revolution when the works of the Marxist al-Amil and the reformist al-Jabiri could just as fairly have been considered, or as simply being, dispensable as the worthless paper used to keep a fire alight.

This is not to say that education, including Philosophy as a scholarly discipline, or party and street politics, including tireless activism and planning, are useless or irrelevant. But it is to say that it is not philosophies, ideologies, or theories that seem to inspire, or rather

ignite or spark a revolution. It is a matchstick, whether figuratively or literally, struck at the right time: an incident, a happening, a poem, a slap in the face... It is a Rosa Parks in Alabama, or a Muhammad Abuazizah in Tunisia. Ultimately, it is the weight, the searing impact and pain, of an affront, an *indignity* being forced down one's throat. Its immediate victim may be one individual. But so typical the condition of that individual that this intrusion is psychosomatically and at once felt by all, as if the all become one, or organic parts of one body, and so that the entire nation comes to feel the impact of the slap or sleight, and rises spontaneously in a rebellious act of fury, attempting to expunge the affront.

Here, then, we need to underline, and to appreciate, the important distinction between the impulsive passion that instinctively rejects and despises indignity on the one hand, and the well-groomed theories, or just the songs, speeches and sermons on the other that purport to explain or induce human action. Philosophical as well as rhetorical tracts, political cartoons and speeches, plays, editorials, songs, sermons, and suchlike, can indeed help in retrospect explain behavior, or to *arouse* passion that leads directly to action. They can sow the seeds for a common language of protest, or they can start up a conversation to help explain an event *post facto*- what happened and why, or they can enshrine a moment in the annals of a people's history. They can also help create the necessary intellectual environment, giving expression to growing discontent. But they are not, and cannot be revolutionary manuals, or ignitions of a people's inner rumblings or convulsions –that inner passion for justice that is as primal as hunger, desire or fear. This human

passion, this inner moral sense, this natural hunger for dignity and respect, is instinctual and primal, and while its impulsive expression in any number of innumerable ways is also primal, and is not also something that is *taught*, it can surely be developed and cultivated. The *objects* of this passion, whether in their general forms, like dignity and self-respect, or in their more particularized expressions, like education and health, come typically to be described as *rights*. These can be articulated and legalized, or enumerated or listed. But it is surely the inner passion and not the intellectual knowledge of these lists that brings people out onto the streets. Anyone observing the radical convulsions sweeping the Arab world, or watching Tahrir square or the joyous celebrations of Yemeni students dancing to Arabic rap-style songs calling for their ruler's abdication would have immediately been struck by the fact that neither the works of Averroes, Locke, Rousseau, Jabiri or Hanafi; nor the compendious works of Gene Sharpe either ignited this volcanic eruption or could possibly have included the myriad imaginative ways of non-violent protest that were used in it against the various Arab dictators: like vocal sounds and rules of grammar that are *posterior* to speech practices, revolutionary theories and non-violent manuals manage only to enumerate behavioral practices, but they cannot hope either to light up a soul's passion for freedom or to encompass the endless ways in which the human imagination is capable of expressing itself in pursuit of that goal.

And yet, one must not allow oneself to lose sight of the painfully twisted contours of a people's struggle to achieve its freedom and dignity. What was optimistically labeled 'the Arab Spring' has sadly but undeniably turned into a murky, and bloody affair- an unsavory mixture of murderous military dictatorships in some countries bent on retaining power whatever the human cost; and –where rulers have abdicated- a creeping process of fractious politicization and dwarfing of the peoples' glorious revolts. Both developments prove, like the outbreak of the revolutions themselves, that there are no preset paths to the unfolding of history, no 'single' or unique outcomes to predict or expect, that it is the combined input of a multitude of factors, each grown individually, each groomed to act differently, which inscribes what will happen next. More than anything else, this observation reinforces the conviction –already proposed in these lectures- that there are no better lessons of theory or philosophy to learn or to teach than to help educate one and all to be best able to contribute to the best possible trajectory towards a better life for all – to try making a philosopher-king of each. Only this way can a public discourse continue to survive, and to therefore produce ever-better solutions to the basic human hunger for dignity and freedom. There may never be final answers, for there is never an end to human evolution. And there will be grave errors committed along the way, for we can but hope to make best guesses, and many of these turn out to be ruinous. But this mustn't make us despair of the human progress being made, even as we see signs of apparent 'break-ups' or 'breakdowns' in what began like an idyllic and non-violent spontaneous eruption.

