**The Arab Spring: What Happened?**

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I thank the AIIA for this opportunity to talk about the Arab Spring.

For the purposes of this address, when I say “the Arab World” I mean those countries in which Arabic is an official language and the dominant language. Together, these 19 or so countries have a population of over 350 million that is spread from the shores of the Indian Ocean to the shores of the Atlantic.

That definition omits Iran, a major player in the Middle East, and Israel, also a major regional player. If I mean to include these two, I will make specific reference to them.

I’ll avoid acronyms wherever possible, but one I will use frequently is GCC – the Gulf Cooperation Council – whose members are Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, Oman, and Saudi Arabia.

I will avoid as much as possible making this address the recitation of a list of all Arab countries and what has happened in them, post-Arab Spring. I will focus on some countries at the expense of others.

I’ll set the scene in a slightly different way – first with a joke, and then with a film review.

Inevitably, the joke is Egyptian – Egypt would be the wealthiest country in the world if it could copyright the thousands of jokes that originate there.

*During a State Visit to Egypt in the early 2000s, President Putin says he is envious of President Mubarak’s ability to win 95% or more of the vote in every election in Egypt.*

*He asks if Mubarak can help him achieve that kind of result in Russia. Mubarak agrees.*

*At the next election in Russia, Mubarak sends a team to Moscow and they get busy in the election campaign*

*And when the results are announced, sure enough, 95% of the votes in the Russian election have been won by – President Mubarak.*

The film is also Egyptian. It is called *Irhab wal Kebab (*roughly, *Terrorism and Kebabs)*, and was released in 1992. It remains in the top 10 or 15 most popular Egyptian films ever made.

Here’s the plot, told in some detail as it’s important to my point. It’s also blackly funny at times.

An ordinary middle class Egyptian goes into the enormous government building in central Cairo, the Mugamma’, to ask for his children to be transferred to a different school. Simple!

After considerable confusion, he finds the right office and in it he finds a bureaucrat, but a bureaucrat who prays incessantly. It’s made clear that the bureaucrat is praying to avoid having to do any work. He has an assistant, but she is constantly on the phone sorting out her private family dramas.

They tell him the person he needs to see is away for a week and, as usual, no one else will take on absent person’s function.

The protagonist returns a week later, but the man he is meant to see is not there. He is told the man has gone to the toilet, but in another building where the toilets are more refined. No one knows which building.

The protagonist goes on a tour of toilets in the vicinity, but cannot find the man. He returns to the same office in the Mugamma’. He gets angry, and a scuffle breaks out. Security is called, the protagonist accidentally ends up with a gun, and accidentally fires it. The security guards drop their weapons and run away. The building is evacuated.

The government now believes that terrorists have taken over the building and taken hostages – and indeed there is a group of people that the protagonist will not allow to leave. The main character then encounters, one by one, a small group of ‘misfits’ who have also endured a living bureaucratic hell in the building. They join his so-called terrorist band.

The Minister for the Interior negotiates with the chief “terrorist” and asks him what he wants in exchange for the hostages. The ‘misfits’ are so downtrodden by the whole political/bureaucratic system, and so low are their expectations, that all they can think of is – kebabs. That’s what they ask for.

There is a happy ending, of sorts. The hostages empathise with the protagonist’s immense frustration and invite him simply to walk out with them. He does, and the security forces are none the wiser.

After the recent murderous rampages in Beirut, in the skies above the Sinai, in Paris, in Mali, Nigeria and the US, that story might sound darker now than it actually was. But it is important to my point and I will stick with it.

The Mubarak joke tells us just how deeply the cynicism of ordinary people runs when it comes to the transparency, responsiveness and fairness of their political system.

In that respect, the joke and the film are particularly valuable as a critique of Egypt by Egyptians, not a critique of Egypt by outsiders.

We see a political system that is authoritarian, highly inefficient, old, creaking, and unfair; and a bloated, underpaid bureaucracy that puts an enormous emphasis on process but none at all on results.

The system depicted is also corrupt, something that the film does not dwell on – possibly through self-censorship, because the corruption went pretty much from the lowest of the lowly bureaucrats all the way to the top.

There are sickeningly sycophantic staff in the minister’s office, a group of hapless security police who decide that their best bet is to run away, and a host of other characters and ludicrous situations that Egyptians would immediately recognise.

I am as confident as I can be that citizens of many Arab countries would identify strongly with one or more aspects of this self-critique – not necessarily all of them, but some of them.

In systems like this, doing anything that requires official sanction of any kind is a nightmare. Working outside the rules is widely practised but fraught with peril. Initiative, innovation, risk-taking, and entrepreneurship are all passively or actively discouraged.

As you can imagine, the system is particularly hard on young people seeking to “get on” in life – find a job, start their own business, do something different. Given that, in every Arab country, people under 25 account for over half of the population, this is an issue of enormous import.

I claim no foresight, but it was not a surprise that the event which sparked the Arab Spring centred on a young person trying to scratch a living. He was a Tunisian, and he had a name, so let’s remember it – Muhammad Bouazizi.

He supported his family by selling fruit on the streets. He was harassed and humiliated by local officials for not having the right permit. One day in December 2010 he went to the town hall and demanded to see an official he believed was behind the harassment. He was rebuffed. He snapped, poured accelerant over himself and set himself on fire. He took nearly 3 weeks to die. He was 26.

That Egyptian film, it seems, got it all depressingly right.

Mohamed Bouazizi’s death started a chain reaction of demonstrations in Tunisia that brought down the government of President Bin Ali, and sparked mass protests in many Arab countries. The demands made by the demonstrators boil down to these:

* Changes to political systems to make them more responsive to the will of the people – including greater freedom of expression
* An end to corruption
* Economic reforms focusing on alleviating poverty and youth unemployment

They were the objectives, but to see what the demonstrators were up against, I turn now to the nature of governments in the Arab World.

At the beginning of the Arab Spring in early 2011, eight Arab countries were hereditary monarchies and they still are. And I don’t mean constitutional monarchies as we would understand the term.

Since the 1950s and 60s, most of the remaining Arab countries have had presidential systems of one kind or another but, historically, many of these quickly ended up as de facto dictatorships in a one party state. Tunisia, for instance, had just two presidents in 55 years. The now deposed Bin Ali consistently won more than 90% of the vote in elections. Remember the Mubarak joke?

Names of leaders like Saddam Hussein, Hosni Mubarak, Bashar Al Assad and his father Hafez Al-Assad, and Muammar Gaddafi, resonate for all the wrong reasons.

To be fair, I must note that some Arab countries, including the monarchies, have over time established parliamentary systems of a kind but, almost without exception, these assemblies have had little, if any, constitutional weight. With one exception, none of these bodies has any real bite.

The exception is Kuwait, where the parliament has some substantial constitutional powers and has occasionally become a thorn in the side of the ruling family. On the other hand, it is also the body that in 2006 voted on a proposal that the government pay off $27 billion in private debt held by Kuwaiti citizens. The motion was defeated 39-20.

All eight monarchies gave some ground during the Arab Spring, and the amount of ground they gave is roughly in inverse proportion to their wealth. Generally speaking, the wealthier the country, the less ground it gave in terms of transferring power from the ruling family to the people.

By the way, in this context “people” in the six GCC countries means exclusively “nationals”. Citizenship is jealously guarded. Expatriates are barred from citizenship and entirely disenfranchised, no matter how long they have lived in the country in question, even if their parents were also born there.

Given that in countries like the UAE and Qatar expatriates account for about 85% of the total population, this is a substantial issue on many levels.

The six GCC countries threw money at the problem.

Saudi Arabia even pre-empted potential unrest by strewing funding around for low-cost housing, job creation – particularly for young people – large increases in public service salaries, and other projects. One estimate suggested that the Kingdom spend $130 billion for a population about the same as Australia’s.

But the political landscape did not change in any meaningful way.

The Saudis are also believed to have funded largesse on the part of the rulers of Bahrain and Oman, who implemented much the same policies but on a smaller scale.

The Sultan of Oman went a little further by sacking ministers accused of corruption, and introducing unemployment benefits.

Bahrain and Kuwait actually gave cash grants of a few thousand dollars to all of their citizens. But in terms of meaningful power transfer, not much changed.

Bahrain even had an independent jurist examine the actions of the security forces during the serious unrest in the country. He found egregious human rights abuses. A ruling family member was sacked from the security services. Not much else changed.

Qatar and the UAE, where there were no protests at all, or even the prospect of protests, expanded the limited electoral franchise or increased the number of contested seats in their national assemblies. But these assemblies still have highly constrained constitutional roles.

Arguably, some political freedoms in GCC countries went backwards as a result of the Arab Spring or, rather, fear of the Arab Spring. Generally speaking, restrictions on already limited rights of assembly and expression, including in the media, were tightened. And the ruing families cracked down on new media they fear most because it is more difficult to monitor them and close down – bloggers, and in general those communicating via social media. There are currently some high-profile cases in this category in Saudi Arabia.

Reportedly, the Saudis have also recently threatened to sue overseas Twitter users who have been making invidious comparisons between judicial punishments used in Saudi Arabia and those favoured by ISIS. Inevitably, all this did was invite online scorn under the hashtag *SueMeSaudi*.

One point that should be emphasised in this context is that, in no instances of which I am aware did those calling for change seriously suggest that abolition of the monarchy was an essential element of reform.

Nor should we assume, as we make our way through the wreckage of the Arab Spring, that people in Arab countries have ultimate ambitions for constitutional arrangements that exactly mirror those in the western world.

Having fewer resources, Jordan and Morocco were not able to throw as much money at the problem and a certain degree of reform was conceded, albeit not enthusiastically.

The Moroccan king decided that he could take the initiative from the forces for reform by positioning himself as the champion of change. He appointed a commission to reform the constitution. Three months later, he announced a referendum on the new document – to take place a short two weeks later. The official numbers state that it was approved overwhelmingly by voters.

Overall, though, while the king accepted some minor constraints, the general broad sweep of his powers were not substantially affected. But he delivered stability, and it may be that this is now the main priority of many ordinary people in the Arab world.

In Jordan, King Abdullah responded quickly to some of the protesters’ demands. He dismissed three unpopular prime ministers in just over a year (note – the King, not parliament, retained the power to do this) and he too appointed a body to oversee constitutional reforms.

The changes, duly passed by the parliament, did not constitute major change or the yielding of substantial power to the parliament. He too delivered a reasonable level of stability and, once more, this seems to be enough for now for a majority of Jordanians looking askance at their neighbour, Syria.

In Tunisia, on the other hand, despite what might have been crippling setbacks, substantial progress has been achieved. A crisis in 2013 caused by the murder of two opposition politicians was overcome when the Islamic An-Nahda party eventually relinquished power to a government of technocrats as part of a settlement to defuse the crisis.

More than three years after Mohamed Bouazizi’s death, Tunisia got a new constitution and a coalition government which is now focused on the country’s enormous economic challenges like youth unemployment, rather obsessing over the roles of secular versus religious-based political parties.

I may disappoint some of you by spending very little time on Syria. We all know that the Arab Spring did make it to Syria, in the sense that it emboldened opposition groups to take up arms against the minority Alawite Assad regime, which has now been in power, father and son, for 44 years.

The fighting in many areas of Syria created a power vacuum that attracted all kinds of groups. Islamic State burst out of the desert, but not out of nowhere – that’s another story – bravely machine-gunning helpless civilian vehicles as they barrelled down the main highways into Iraq.

Even for the Middle East, the situation in Syria and western and northern Iraq is complex. Some Arab countries, including some of the Gulf States, are supporting some groups fighting Assad, while Iran, Hizbollah in Lebanon, and now Russia, are providing military assistance to Assad. What a deadly mess!

By the way, one of Islamic State’s objectives in the region is clearly to try to convince the Sunni communities under their control that IS is the Sunnis’ best or only hope of ascendance in Iraq, where Sunnis are a minority, and in Syria, where for decades they were a repressed majority. I doubt that it will work, but we will only know in the years after IS is booted out of places like Mosul and Raqqa, as it will be, at a great cost in lives.

Libya is another mess. Once the grip of Gaddafi and his family on Libya began to wane, accelerated by EU air attacks on his military infrastructure, all the old tribal and regional rivalries that Gaddafi had suppressed through largesse and coercion burst out again.

Forty years of his rule had not, it seems, achieved much in the way of nation-building. Until 7 December, there were two rival governments and multiple groups jockeying, often violently, for advantage. Again we had a power vacuum, and again everyone from criminal gangs to IS affiliates moved to fill it. The national unity pact achieved on 7 December, with considerable help from the UN, Libya’s neighbours, and the EU, is a very delicate flower, but it offers the first real glimmer of hope.

You will forgive me, I hope, if I spend a disproportionate length of time on Egypt. It has the Arab world’s largest population – between 80 and 85 million people, most of whom live close to the Nile in a land area smaller than the State of Victoria. l also happen to love the place and its people.

Arguably, Egypt has the strongest sense of secure national identity in the Arab World. Egyptians will tell you, unsolicited, that they have been around for at least 5000 years and, in unguarded moments will also tell you that many other Arab nation states are merely “tribes with flags”.

When the Arab Spring arrived in Egypt, the first to get out onto the streets were the young – predominantly educated and middle-class young people using social media to communicate and organise.

But, quite quickly, the young were joined by people of all ages and from all walks of life – though still predominantly urban. It was when I saw TV images of older Egyptian women in headscarves dotted among the demonstrators that I concluded Mubarak really was finished. The Muslim Brotherhood was there too, but kept a low profile for some time.

But the young demonstrators with their i-phones did not represent Egypt. They were on a different planet from the majority of Egyptians.

World Bank figures suggest that nearly 60% of Egyptians live in rural areas. The fellaheen, the rural population, tend to be pious, highly conservative, and not politically engaged. Like the hero in the Egyptian film I described, they have little faith in the ability of governments to deliver meaningful services (beyond keeping the price of bread artificially low).

But a substantial proportion probably had experience of the charitable activities of the Muslim Brotherhood, in place since the 1930s, and those of the even more conservative Salafist[[1]](#footnote-1) organisations. It is said that, even when Egyptian governments were most hostile to the Brotherhood, they refrained from closing down these charitable activities, as they represented the only effective social services network in the country.

So, when the Brotherhood established its Freedom and Justice Party after Mubarak’s overthrow, it was already well-organised and strongly engaged with the rural population and the urban poor.

On the other hand, Mubarak’s National Democratic Party was in disgrace and other even longer-standing (but marginalised) parties like the Wafd, and the slew of new parties that emerged, had limited organisational capacity, and very little time to try to engage the electorate, particularly the rural electorate.

It should have come as no surprise that, in the first post-Mubarak parliamentary elections, the alliance dominated by the Brotherhood won over 37% of votes and the alliance dominated by the Salafist Al-Nour party almost 28%, together forming a substantial majority in the parliament.

It’s worth noting, however, that in the presidential elections held around five months later, some Egyptians may have had second thoughts. In the first round, the Brotherhood’s presidential candidate Mohamed Morsi won 25% of the vote, just ahead of the Mubarak-era minister Ahmed Shafiq.

In the run-off between these two candidates, Morsi won the election with slightly under 52% of the vote – a clear victory for sure, but nowhere near the Islamic bloc’s winning margin in the parliamentary elections.

The Brotherhood blundered and staggered their way through a year or so in government, alienating minority groups, managing the economy poorly, reneging on constitutional promises, and making some ill-considered decisions, such as the appointment as the Governor of Luxor of an individual with links to an extremist group that had murdered more than 60 tourists and Egyptians near Luxor in 1997.

The Brotherhood was unprepared for the storms of criticism of many of their decisions from all sides, including a suddenly liberated media, other political parties and interest groups. Their election slogan was *Islam is the solution,* but translating a slogan into effective government turned out to be far more difficult and complex than expected.

After a rise in political tensions, culminating in enormous demonstrations against Morsi, counter-demonstrations supporting Morsi, and a rising tide of violence, the army stepped in, deposing a president and a parliament elected freely and fairly.

Clearly the military saw and sees the Brotherhood as an existential threat to itself and to the country. Nothing else explains the ruthlessness and ferocity of the crackdown on the Brotherhood (but, N.B., not on the ultra-conservative Al-Nour Party).

Hundreds of Brotherhood members are now under sentence of death, the media and NGOs are under much tighter control (again!) as illustrated by the Peter Greste case.

Ominously, the younger members of the Brotherhood are now trying to overturn the organisation’s old-guard policy of working within the political system. The young radicals are no longer interested in any kind of democracy. Surveys suggest that a wider group of Egyptians has also lost faith in the democratic process and is focused on a return to stability.

So, all-in-all, almost five years after the Arab Spring began in Tunisia, and despite all the sweat and blood expended, the political changes in many Arab countries look minimal. At one end of the scale, we have real movement towards greater political participation in Tunisia, in the middle a minimalist approach to reform in the GCC States, and at the extremes a deeply split Egypt, the murderous messes in Syria and Libya, with Yemen heading in the same direction.

The turmoil and chaos that emerged in some countries post-Arab Spring have themselves become an excuse for many governments to justify minimal reform and indeed to crack down harder than before on dissent. Stability has become their watchword, their slogan. Better stability and the status quo, they now say, than further reform and the instability that comes with it.

The Arab Spring, whether of itself or in combination with other factors, highlighted another tragedy created by decades of authoritarian rule. This phenomenon is not unique to the Arab World, but its impact is no less damaging for that.

I’ve used the anodyne phrase “weak civil societies” as a shorthand description. (I acknowledge that I’m using “civil society” in a much broader sense than usual.)

In too many Arab countries in the past four or five decades – in other words touching several generations – there has been a hollowing out of important political, leadership, management, organisational, and community skills. Or, to be more precise, a hollowing out of opportunities for these skills to be developed, practised and refined.

I’ll start with a dramatic example not related to the Arab Spring: when the American-led coalition overthrew Saddam Hussein in 2003, there were only two indigenous institutions with the national presence and organisational capacity to run Iraq: the Ba’ath Party and the Iraqi Army.

The Baathists were too closely associated with Saddam to be a palatable option, and the party was disbanded. The Army had just suffered a humiliating defeat, and was dominated by minority Sunnis, and it too was sidelined – a mistake in my view – in favour of a group of Iraqi exiles with tenuous connections to the country.

Ultimately this left a power vacuum that was filled by Sunni insurgents, Shia and Kurdish militias, and criminal gangs. That’s not a great recipe for stability, much less unity.

Back in the context of Arab Spring, Libya is another example. Despite over four decades of Gaddafi’s rule, his creation of a nation-building ideology via his *Green Book*, the hierarchy of popular committees that he claimed was a form of direct democracy, there was no group of Libyans with the profile, the requisite political and leadership skills and experience that was willing or able to take up the reins on Gaddafi’s demise.

This is, of course, because authoritarian regimes are suspicious of, threatened by, and often downright hostile to any group that has the capacity for independent thinking, espouses alternative views or, worse still, has the capacity to influence the views of the broader community.

There must have been, there must be, there are, individuals in both countries with the raw talent and the potential to become effective, unifying leaders of their countries.

But there were no pathways to transform raw talent into effective leadership: no plurality of political parties, no independent community organisations or NGOs, no independent trade unions or professional organisations, no social institutions in which to learn and practise skills like leadership, governance and professional administration, conflict resolution, and building common interest across disparate groups.

There were no institutions in which an individual could engage in a real (and peaceful) contest of ideas. There were no consistently available mechanisms for individuals to learn to value the concerns and interests of others in addition to one’s own, which is the kind of attitude that can help change a raw struggle for power into a dialogue about a desirable shared future.

I acknowledge that not all of the Arab world is Libya or Iraq. The strength of civil society varies across these countries, though it is always wise to look carefully at institutions that seem to fall under that heading, but are in fact instruments of the ruling regimes.

But I would argue that nowhere in the Arab World is there an active, robust civil society that can act as a sort of community ballast to bring the ship of state to an even keel when the boat is rocked.

Except, just maybe, in Tunisia, where the social and political processes underway, though still very much still a vulnerable work in progress, may just be showing the way. And I note that Tunisian trade unions played a major role in finding a solution when seemingly intractable problems arose in 2013-14.

We have seen the terrible devastation visited on countries like Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen by violent conflict. Bringing these to an end, or at least achieving a cessation of hostilities, is now the focus of many of the external parties who are involved.

But the atrophy of the kinds of skills and experience I am talking about is another kind of devastation. It is less deadly, perhaps; it is invisible, and not able to be splashed across TV screens all over the world. But it is certainly a grievous multi-generational loss that may take generations to make good.

While I’m on that subject, there may be clues in that comment on what kind of help, beyond safety, food, shelter, and refuge, countries like Australia might most usefully offer to the Arab world. And it is the kind of assistance in which a small effort can have a disproportionately positive effect.

I began my address this evening with a joke and a film review, and I end with a poem: not, I regret, one of the great poem cycles of pre-Islamic Arabia like the Mu’allaqat, or any number of great Islamic era Arab poets like Al-Mutanabbi, nor even a Muslim Persian-speaking poet such as Rumi.

Instead, while putting these thoughts in order, I was reminded, of all things, of Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* and, in particular, of this couplet:

*Full many a flow’r is born to blush unseen,*

*And waste its sweetness on the desert air*

I have met too many excellent, admirable, thoughtful people in Egypt, in Syria, in the Gulf States, in the Palestinian Territories, whose flow’r is destined never even to be born, much less blush unseen.

I remember and envy these fine individuals for their quiet intelligence and wisdom. I look at the words and behaviour of the governments that represent them and am too often shocked and grieved at the chasm between the two.

My hope is that, before we arrive at Arab Spring 2 and 3, leaders in the Arab World realise that their most important assets, assets that are crucial to their futures, are not in their banks, nor even in underground in oil and gas reservoirs, but under their very noses – in their communities.

1. See, e.g., <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/salafi> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)