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FROM ARAB AWAKENING TO ISLAMIC STATE

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Introduction

On 17 December four years ago a young unemployed Tunisian, Mohamed Bouazizi, trying to make a living as a street vendor, set himself alight. His immediate grievance was harassment from municipal inspectors but this came in the wake of a long period of frustration. He died on 4 January 2011, 18 days later, by which time Tunisia was convulsed by public protests against the elitism and autocratic rule of the regime of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. They peaked on the weekend of 8-9 January and resulted in the collapse of the entire regime.

Within weeks, protest against autocracy had spread across the region, culminating in the extraordinary developments centred on Tahrir Square in Cairo which resulted in the collapse of the Mubarak regime, long supported by the West and widely regarded as one of the most stable if harsh regimes in the entire region. Nearly four years later and in the midst of current turmoil, especially in Iraq and Syria, Tunisia is unique among the 'awakened' Arab states in having seen continuing political change leading to an evolving democracy. Yet it is also a state in which many young people are being radicalised into an extreme Islamist outlook and some are joining Islamic State as determined jihadists. Indeed, for the size of its population Tunisia is one of the Islamic State's leading recruiting grounds.

Why this is happening in a state in the region that has made considerable progress towards representative democracy is a key question. It is rarely asked but is of great importance if one seeks to understand the context in which Islamic State, with all its brutality, is attracting support.

The Tunisian Presidential Election

In the interim administration established after the fall of the Ben Ali regime, the well-organised if previously underground Ennahda Party, with its Muslim Brotherhood orientation, assumed power as the largest party in the October 2011 elections. Criticised for its failure to manage the economy as well as problems with security issues it lost this October's elections to the newly established legislature and power was transferred to a more secularist coalition. This peaceful, polite transition was itself seen as considerable progress.

The 23 November first round of the Presidential Election involved many parties and no one candidate emerged victorious. The run-off on 21 December, just four days after the anniversary of Bouazizi's desperate act, will be between Beji Caid Essebi, the 87-year old leader of the secularist Nidaa Tounes Party, and Moncef Marzouki, a centrist candidate with a rights activism background. Essebi was narrowly ahead in the first round but is criticised by Marzouki because of his links with the old Ben Ali regime. Essebi, in turn, points to Marzouki's links with the discredited Ennahda's period of rule which ended in crisis at the start of the year and a short-term handing over to an interim technocratic administration.

Whatever the result, analysts point to the basic issue which is that Tunisia really has undergone a transition and has the prospect of a stable elected government. But this also raises the issue of why so many people in the country, especially among the young, are intensely dissatisfied to the extent of looking to extreme Islamist groups.

Back to the Beginning

When the extraordinary changes spread across the region, the common view was that the fundamental issue was a revolt against autocracy and lack of human rights and democratic representation. Beyond that, though, some analysts pointed to a wider issue affecting the entire region, especially those countries that lacked significant oil and gas resources. This was discussed in the first ORG briefing published after the radical changes in Tunisia, ([Tunisia and Egypt in Context](#), January 2011). It described an opposition:

...which combines substantial economic marginalisation with a young and often frustrated population. Demographic trends across North Africa and the Middle East lag well behind the decreases in birth rates seen in the past three decades in many parts of the world. This means that there are large cohorts of young people between the ages of 15 and 25, for whom there are few employment opportunities. Their predicament is made worse by low economic growth rates leading to limited job creation, but because of welcome improvements in education provision, they are particularly aware of their own marginalisation. Such a circumstance transcends political parties and even religious beliefs, but may lead to radicalisation rooted in a political ideology or, more commonly, an austere religious outlook.

Where this analysis was particularly pertinent was in relation to the al-Qaida movement. At that time, with Osama bin Laden still at its head, al-Qaida was regarded still as a threat, although apart from Yemen and Somalia its development appeared to have stalled. This was before the rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria and other movements across the Maghreb, let alone Islamic State, but there was a concern that a time of upheaval across the Middle East and North Africa might provide it with new opportunities for growth. An ORG briefing ([Al-Qaida and the Arab Awakening](#), June 2011) expressed as follows:

What is of huge significance to the movement is the fate of the Arab Awakening. If the near-revolutionary changes now in progress in Tunisia and Egypt are successful, and are emulated elsewhere, then the al-Qaida movement faces its greatest challenge. However much the new leadership might extol the public opposition to regional autocracies, the reality is that al-Qaida has been pushed into near-irrelevance as multifaceted and frequently secular public protests have carried the day. If, though, the awakening falters and autocracies retain, or in some circumstances even regain, control, then al-Qaida and related jihadist entities may rapidly return to centre stage.

In the event, some states such as Morocco engaged in a somewhat enhanced process of reform and others such as Saudi Arabia repressed dissent, at home and in Bahrain, while the Assad regime responded with considerable brutality. The Gaddafi regime in Libya was terminated with considerable military help from NATO states but the country has since declined into bitter internal conflict between multiple militias, many of the more powerful groups having Islamist orientations. Yemen has faltered between repression, state collapse and a complex proxy war.

A Revitalised Movement

Al-Qaida as a coherent movement is close to being defunct, but allied groups in Yemen, Somalia and the Sahara are thriving, Boko Haram is rampant in northeast Nigeria, and Islamic State now controls substantial territory and several million people. The war on terror has recently entered its fourteenth year, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan has slowed, and the western troop involvement in Iraq has risen from a handful at the start of the year to 3,000,

with a further 1,500 due to be deployed shortly. Air strikes and armed drone attacks are a daily occurrence and are likely to expand.

While Islamic State is in competition with what remains of al-Qaida it is seen as the most dangerous of the current manifestations of Islamist extremism. It may currently be held back from expanding its territorial control by western air strikes but it is succeeding in maintaining a flow of recruits from across the region and beyond. Its development is hugely bound up with complexities including the Syrian civil war, the previous marginalisation of the Iraqi Sunni minority and the wider issue of the Shi'a-Sunni regional competition and Iranian-Saudi relationships, but the issue of recruits to the cause is also central to its possible progress.

The Relevance of Tunisia

In seeking to understand why Tunisia is significant as a source of recruitment in spite of its internal political progress there appear to be two main factors aiding involved. One is that in the transition from the autocracy of the Ben Ali era, many political prisoners were released and they included radical clerics as well as others who had been radicalised in the direction of an Islamist outlook while in prison. Over the past three years they have successfully proselytised some young people, partly through mosques and partly through social interaction, including the new social media.

Even so, this does not explain why young people in Tunisia should be attracted to this outlook in the first place. The indications are that this stems substantially from a severe lack of life chances among many of them, especially recent graduates. Accurate figures for numbers are not easy to come by but there have been indications of as many as 140,000 unemployed graduates in a population of 11 million. Some [more reliable data](#) shows that unemployment among recent graduates rose from 14% in 2005 to 30% last year. For 2013, this 30% figure compared with an overall national unemployment rate of 17%.

Part of the reason for this is the international economy's recent downturn, but in Tunisia's case there has also been a serious decline in the tourism sector as well as economic mismanagement by the previous Ennahda-led government, both of these having a particular effect on recent graduates and their employment prospects. There has thus developed a particularly high level of frustration which is exacerbated by the earlier expectation after the end of the Ben Ali regime that prospects for ordinary Tunisians would improve.

As the new government takes office in the New Year it will face a political environment in which there is a loss of support for governance of any form, given that the transition from autocracy to democracy has not resulted in better economic prospects. The government may well turn out to be effective but that does not diminish the extent of the task, especially at a time of regional economic problems let alone the turmoil across the border in Libya.

Regional Implications

What has already been happening in Tunisia is now developing in Egypt and this has much greater potential for a regional impact. The transition to democracy after Tahrir Square resulted in an incompetent and non-inclusive Muslim Brotherhood government that was replaced last year by what is essentially a return to the Mubarak era under President al-Sisi, even if initially popular. The new government has been markedly repressive against the Brotherhood and its supporters with well over a thousand killed and tens of thousands detained.

That is fuelling the rise of extreme Islamist elements within Egypt, especially but not only in Sinai, but there are also indications that recruitment from Egypt into the Islamic State cause is

increasing, with this including people with an originally secularist outlook who are embracing an Islamist vision as the only alternative to what is seen as a repressive and autocratic system. It is stemming partly from the al-Sisi policy of repression of opposition but is made worse by a more general frustration and anger at the economic as well as political marginalisation of so much of the population.

Conclusion

The ORG analysis quoted above (June 2011) of the consequences of the Arab Awakening faltering does now seem uncomfortably prescient, but not quite in the way expected. It is not al-Qaida that is to the fore, but another movement, Islamic State, which was just forming from al-Qaida in Iraq in mid-2011. More significantly, though, economic marginalisation, even in countries transitioning to more democratic governance, may prove to be a seriously underestimated factor in the recent and future development of Islamic State.

This has major implications for how the problem of this movement's growth and brutality is approached. If it is seen simply as a security threat for which the response is essentially military then that is missing an important part of the problem. Unless some of the more deep-seated elements of the region's economic environment and the manner in which they aid Islamic State are also recognised, then responding primarily with force may be little more than treating symptoms rather than underlying causes. Furthermore, this is an issue which is likely to be exacerbated if the recent substantial downturn in oil prices turns out to be a long-term trend, given the implications for the wider economy of the Middle East.

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