

The Reasons and Consequences of Political and Social Unrest in Arab Countries

AN Huihou^①

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China)

Abstract: *There are many complex internal causes and external reasons for the intense political and social unrest in the Arab world. The United States and other Western powers are actively involved. The unrest will initiate a new historical chapter seeking a fresh path of development for citizens of the Arab world. The current unrest will last for some time and will undoubtedly have comprehensive impact on the entire configuration of the Middle East. The US dominance of Middle Eastern affairs has diminished, but its overall status has not been shaken.*

Key Words: *Arab Countries; Unrest; Western Intervention; China's Middle East Policy*

The political and social unrest that began in Tunisia at the end of 2010 swept across the entire Arab world. The unrest forced the Tunisian president to flee abroad. The Egyptian President announced his resignation. The Gaddafi regime was overthrown with the aid of the West's military intervention. The Bahrain protests calmed only temporarily after Saudi Arabia and the UAE sent troops. The Yemeni President handed over "power" in exchange for "immunity", but the situation in Yemen remains complex and unpredictable. The United States and other Western powers were behind the Syrian opposition,

^① AN Huihou, Former ambassador to many Middle East countries of China.

and are constantly increasing the intensity of the sanctions placed on Syria and demanding the resignation of President Bashar.

I. Complicated Reasons for the Turbulence and the Different Circumstances of the different Countries

The causes of the turbulence in Arab countries are fairly complex. The first is the intensification of the internal contradictions, namely: (1) Rising prices and a shortage of employment. These difficulties were the main contributing factors that led to the social unrest. The unemployment rate for 15 to 29-year-olds in Tunisia was as high as 52% (Tang, 2011: June 29). In Egypt, nearly half the population was living below the poverty line. And Yemen was classified as an LDC (Least Developed Countries). (2) The leaders tended to cling to power for rather long time, thus the power was highly centralized. Corruption was widespread and there were no intentions of reform, not to mention a lack of democracy, all of which sparked the strong dissatisfaction of the people. Ben Ali, Mubarak, Saleh and Gaddafi were in power for 23 years, 30 years, 33 years and 42 years respectively. (3) The US Middle Eastern policy has damaged the interests of the Arab nations, and yet some Arab authorities still cooperated with them, which has given the Arab people a strong sense of loss and humiliation. The fact that the unrest started in Tunisia and Egypt, two countries that were on rather good terms with the West is indeed thought-provoking. (4) The inherent tribal, sectarian and ethnic conflicts in these countries have intensified. (5) Islamic fundamentalism and the "democracy" and "freedom" ideas promoted by Western powers have impacted upon the Arab world from two opposite directions. A variety of factors have contributed to the uproar in the Arab world, many of which are universal, however the specific circumstances of each country remain remarkably different.

These factors have all existed for a long time, so it was the international factors that forced the situation to its tipping point.

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Firstly, the impact of the global economic and financial crisis exacerbated the economic difficulties of the Arab countries, leading to rising prices, high unemployment and livelihood issues that eventually ignited the accumulating public anger, the result of which were overwhelming. Secondly, the United States started on a downhill track after the wars in Iraq, and Afghanistan, not to mention the economic crisis. Therefore, the US's ability to manipulate international affairs has been weakened. President Obama has adjusted his policy, shifting the US global strategic focus to the Asia-Pacific region, conducting a strategic contraction in the Middle East. Thirdly, the rise of the emerging economies has had a strong impact on the Arab world. Finally, the popularity of the Internet has provided a convenient tool for the protesting public. However, it has also enabled some groups with ulterior motives to publish false news and even to fabricate lies to incite the people to add to the simmering pot of hatred.

In addition, the intervention of Western powers has intensified and expanded the chaos in the Middle East. After the turmoil in the Arab world, the priority of the US was to prevent the unrest from threatening its dominant position and strategic interests in the Middle East. At the same time, in the aim of promoting Western core values of "democracy" and "freedom" and preventing the trend of anti-Israeli and American sentiments, the US briskly steered the turbulence toward an "anti-authoritarian democracy movement", and what is more, seized the opportunity to overthrow an untamed government. In the beginning, the United States spared no effort to support the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. However, as protests in Egypt grew in intensity, the United States came to worry that it could lose control over the situation and turned to pressuring Mubarak to resign, handing power to the Egyptian military that the US trusted to ensure its control over the country. In Bahrain, the Sunni factions in power account for only 30% of the total population of Muslims in the country. The remaining 70% are Shiites and have close ties to Hezbollah in Iran

and Lebanon. The protests by Bahraini Shiites caused Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab monarchies concern as well as making the US uneasy. As a result, the joint forces of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were permitted by the US to send troops to carry out military suppression of protesters in Bahrain. In Libya, the turbulence was mainly caused by the aggravation of the long-term accumulated tribal conflicts. The US and Europe exaggerated Gaddafi's repression against the opposition and slapped sanctions on Gaddafi's regime and then used the UN Security Council Resolution 1973 to launch air strikes against Libya, supporting the Libyan rebels to expand the civil war. Eventually, the NATO coalition provided weapons and sent ground troops, directly commanding the anti-government armed forces to overthrow Qaddafi's regime. The United States demanded the Yemeni President to step down, but was also worried that Yemen might evolve into another rudderless Somalia with separatist factions, and perhaps worse Al Qaeda taking advantage of the disarray, developing a foothold in the country. Therefore, the US in fact gave some breathing space to President Saleh. In Syria, the US incited the opposition to escalate the tense situation, and then announced that the Syrian president had lost the legitimacy of ruling and continued to exert sanctions against Syria, publicly asking President Bashar to step down. There is a clear intention to counterbalance Iran in the US's suppression against Syria.

II. The Turmoil in the Arab World should be Defined as Social and Political Unrest

The turmoil in the Arab world has attracted much public attention. Firstly through public opinion of its control, the US hyped up the "Arab Spring", and the "Arab revolution", aiming to steer the turmoil towards "the anti-authoritarian fight for democracy", hoping that the democratic pro-Western liberals would grow and develop in the turbulence thereby creating a new pro-Western government,

taking the opportunity to overthrow the regimes that it has long been dissatisfied with. Iran was elated with the turmoil, regarding it as the recurrence of the Iranian-style Islamic revolution. Al Qaeda also cheered on the turmoil, calling for Islamic extremists to overthrow the secular regimes and establish an Islamic regime. The protesters also think that they were participating in a revolution. For example, people used the "pie revolution" slogan designed to highlight the legitimacy and justice of their actions. Different countries and forces also defined and interpreted the turmoil according to their respective positions, interests and political orientations. After a short confusion, China's media tended to define it as; "political and social unrest", but there are also some that accepted the idea of the "Arab Spring" and the "Arab revolution".

This paper believes that first of all, the turmoil has fully exposed the many contradictions facing Arab countries and what is more, shown the strong desire of the Arab people for novelty, change, and an appropriate development path. It is possible that this is the beginning of a historical period in which Arabs seek a new path of economic development, social justice, democracy and diplomatic independence. This will be a long historical process full of contradictions and struggles as well as repeated twists and winding relapses. In the future, great turmoil and great change may be the main theme of the Arab world. This time the turmoil only affected a few republics, the next however, could have an impact on the monarchies of the region. It is expected that after experiencing the great turmoil and great change, a prosperous, strong, civilized, progressive, independent and vibrant Arab community will stand among the nations of the world. This goal cannot be achieved in the short term, so it may perhaps be too early to assume the emergence of the "Arab Spring", and "Arab revolution".

Political and social unrest is an open and neutral concept, so the situation may develop in the direction of a revolution, and may evolve into an upheaval, or cause foreign military intervention. The reasons

for the current state of affairs are complicated. There are many goals, and the direction of development remains unclear. The outbreak has distinct features of “unpredictability” and “grassroots”. There is no unified and clear agenda, nor was it initiated by a political party or group. It was only after the unrest erupted and expanded that Islamic forces, democratic factions, elite classes and Western powers, notably the US, actively intervened in order to exert influence and try to manipulate the development of turbulence to fit their needs. Furthermore, in Tunisia and Egypt, the people protested out of dissatisfaction, which eventually led to the supreme leader to step down, which did show some of the characteristics of a “revolution”. In Bahrain, sectarian contradictions were the main reasons. In Libya, tribal conflicts mattered most. In Yemen, there were tribal contradictions as well as the struggle between the southern separatist forces and the Central Government not to mention Al Qaeda’s intervention. In addition to social and political contradictions, Syria also saw sectarian and ethnic conflicts. Seemingly, the situation was very different from country to country. Lastly, there are a total of 22 countries in the Arab world, of which two countries experienced no turbulence at all. While in most countries the unrest soon subsided, five countries suffered severe impacts from the turmoil, accounting for nearly one quarter of all Arab States. All of the countries affected by the serious turmoil experienced manipulations and even interventions by foreign powers. These actions changed the nature of the situation, as was the case in Libya. Therefore to claim that the turmoil was a “revolution” is in line with the interests of Western countries, or at least objectively, in line with the treacherous guidance of public opinion and the actual operation of the West.

III. The Turmoil Has Caused and Will Continue to Produce by No Means Negligible Influence

First, Islamic forces are rising. In countries such as Tunisia and

Egypt that have already gone through regime changes, the first wave of change has come about in the following three ways. The first is political pluralism. A large number of political parties are competing for ruling power through elections. The second is the surge of Arab nationalism sentiment. People eagerly require independence and oppose foreign interference; support the Palestinian struggle and oppose Israeli occupation. The third is the rise of Islamic forces. The Ennahda Movement, also known as the "Renaissance Party" has become the largest party in Tunisia and has also formed a cabinet. The Freedom and Justice Party founded by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood won the first round of parliamentary elections. The Islamist Justice and Development Party became the largest party in the early Moroccan parliamentary elections, and was authorized to form a cabinet. These Islamist parties all appear to be moderates. A general election is scheduled to be held in a few months. The chairman of the National Transitional Council declared that future Libyan laws would use Sharia, the Islamic code, as their "basic source" (Chen & Wang, 2011: November 10). Islamic armed forces have played a major role in the war to overthrow the Gaddafi regime, and will continue to have a decisive influence on the political stage in the future. The rise of Islamic forces in the turmoil is an indisputable fact, but it should also be remarked upon that the Islamist groups boast barely half of the votes in both Tunisia and Egypt, meaning that the secular parties in the Arab countries still hold considerable sway. In any case, the majority of people do not accept extremist ideologies. Therefore in order to develop, the Islamic forces must take a moderate stance and join the ruling coalitions with the secular parties. Therefore, even if the Islamic forces control the parliament, or even lead in appointing the cabinet, the Iranian-style theocratic regime could not take hold. At the same time, secular democratic forces are also under development, including two factions: nationalism and extreme pro-Westernism. Anti-Americanism is popular among the Arab people, so the extreme pro-Western faction cannot win over the broad public. Thus, the battle

between secular and Islamic forces, over which development path to choose, what kind of policy to make and who plays a leading role as well as other aspects, will intensify. Al-Qaeda and other extremist forces stand no chance of obtaining broad public support, nor are they tolerated by the Western powers. Hence they cannot become an important political force. However their power of destruction should not be ignored.

Second, it will be a tough job to restore stability and rebuild the economy. Peace, a stable social environment and a ruling authority will be needed for economic and social reconstruction. However, the fighting factions, the intractable sectarian and tribal conflicts, the serious anarchist tendency of the people, as well as the intervention of Western powers have made it difficult to stabilize the situation, to establish the authority of the government and to rebuild the economy. Currently there are 114 existing legal political parties in Tunisia. What is more, there are many internal factions in the National Transitional Council of Libya. The tribal paradoxes have also been exacerbated by the civil war. In Egypt, in addition to factional fighting, the conflict between the Coptic Christians and Muslims has also worsened. People have become accustomed to demonstrations and protests. The strongman rule has been overthrown, but the stability and authority needed to reconstruct are difficult to achieve in the short term. For instance, a new round of protests has burst out in Egypt. In Libya, the possibility of a new outbreak of armed conflicts cannot be ruled out. The situation in Yemen is not mitigated by the President Saleh's "handover" and even worse the Syrian government is beset with difficulties both at home and abroad. It can be expected that the new governments might all be weakened due to the partisan struggles and the constraints of "public opinion".

Third, the regional structure is changing. Egypt is still in turmoil and can no longer lead the Arab world. Contrarily, the influence of the Gulf Arab states led by Saudi Arabia has been enhanced. For instance, the Gulf Arab countries played a leading role in the Arab League's

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decision to impose sanctions on Syria. However, once the situation improves, Egypt will remain the world's most important Arab country. In the wake of the turmoil, the Arab world has been greatly undermined. Its cohesion and influence have been weakened in the Middle East and around the world. Meanwhile, the Non-Arab Middle Eastern countries, i.e. Turkey and Iran have enhanced their regional influence. Turkey's relationship with Israel has deteriorated, and it is eagerly getting involved in the Arab states affairs, in order to expand its influence across the Middle East. Turkey is also trying hard to sell to the Arab countries its own development model. Turkey's attitude towards Syria is somewhat tough even going so far as to hold military exercises on its Syrian border. However, being too ambitious, Turkey could cause resentment within the Arab countries. Iran, on the other hand, is committed to the establishment of the Shiite Hezbollah Alliance in Iraq, Iran, Syria and Lebanon. This will not escape the containment of the United States, nor will it be accepted by the Arab States. Although in the Arab world there are many internal contradictions and differences posing a barrier to its unity, it is still an entity of 22 countries, so by no means will they allow Turkey and Iran take the reigns of leadership in the Middle East.

Fourth, since the end of the Cold War the United States' role has continually weakened. In the turmoil, the United States pressured Mubarak to hand over his power, making the other leaders of the Arab countries feel bitterly disappointed. In addition, the air strikes against Libya and the blatant interference in the internal affairs of Syria and Yemen by the US, have only stimulated the resentment of the majority of Arabs towards them. The long-term accumulated anti-Americanism among the Arab people has not been weakened but strengthened due to the turmoil. On top of this, through the turmoil, the Islamic forces are rising in many countries and even moderate Islamist ideology and governing philosophy is at odds with the US's Middle Eastern policy. Islamic forces and the public sentiment have a stronger influence on the decision-making of the government. It can be

expected that after the turmoil, the Arab countries will not cooperate with the US's Middle Eastern policy as they did before, looking more so to the foreign policy adjustments of Egypt's Transitional Government as an example. America's leading capability in the Middle East will continue to diminish but the US remains the only superpower and its dominant position in the Middle East will not be challenged. Nevertheless, Israel's position has become more difficult.

Fifth, in recent years, American control has caused a massive destruction in the Middle East. America's ability to lead international affairs has reduced and there has been an overall rise of developing countries, among which China's national strength and international status have increased remarkably. Thus there will be an increasing tendency among Middle Eastern countries to "look east" (An, 2011). This 'Eastern outlook' has been strengthened since the Middle Eastern countries are seeking a road suited to the conditions of their own country and suitable for their own development. After the turmoil, the Arab countries will continue to attach importance to the relations with the US, because they will still need favors from the United States in many areas, such as politics, military and security. However, their desire to seek the right path of development suited to their own situation and to learn from the development experience of emerging economies will be ever more urgent, and the tendency to "look east" will continue to develop in Arab countries.

IV. An Uncertain Prospect for the Syrian Crisis

In March 2011, the Syrian people held an anti-government protest, involving an increasing amount of participants, larger momentum and people from a wider range of regions. On one hand, the Syrian Government announced a series of reformative measures. On the other hand, it tried to suppress the forces with violent clashes, which not only failed to quell the unrest, but instead incited ever stronger protests.

“The Local Coordination Committees of Syria” is one of the anti-governmental organizations. Composed of young protesters, it is a major force in organizing protests despite its limited number of members (Tang, J., 2011: December 13). “The National Coordination Committee for the Forces of Democratic Change”, composed of 15 domestic political parties, claims a safe and peaceful transition to democracy. “The Syrian National Council” announced its establishment in Turkey by the Syrian opponents of the regime residing outside of the country. Its goal is to overthrow the current regime in Syria, and urge the international community to intervene. The organization has obtained the support of the United States and other Western countries. In addition, “The Free Syrian Army”, the anti-government armed forces composed of defected Sunni officers and soldiers, based in Turkey and other neighboring countries, which claims to have over 15,000 strong , aims to overthrow the existing regime (Su & Zhang & Qiu, 2011: November 21). It is reported that this force has gained foreign aid and support, with its forces trained by instructors from Turkey, France and other countries.

The increasingly intensifying situation of the protests in Syria is largely due to the support and provocation from the United States and other Western countries. It has been a policy of the United States to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad by taking advantage of the political and social turmoil in the Arab world. Over the years, the US has seen Iran as the greatest threat to this. Syria, being closely related to Iran, is an important member of the “Shia Crescent”, which is comprised of; Iran, the new Iraq, Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad regime would be equivalent to cutting off one of Iran’s arms. Syria is also a major supporter of the Palestinian Hamas party. Therefore, the United States, Europe and other Western countries have imposed severe sanctions on Syria and publicly demanded that Bashar al-Assad step down.

Arab Gulf countries hold misgivings about Iran’s nuclear program, and they are also dissatisfied with the alliance between the

Bashar government and Iran. This provides the Arab Gulf countries a common interest with the United States and other Western countries. They instigated the Arab League to put pressure on Syria, and proposed to send observers into Syria, followed by the imposition of sanctions on the country. Seeing as the Arab League required military intervention by the West in Libya in order to expand the civil war and to overthrow the Gaddafi regime, it is now somewhat unpopular. The Arab League has still been making efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis within the Arab League itself. Iraq and Lebanon did not participate in the sanctions against Syria, nor is Algeria in favor of putting excessive pressure on the country. Egypt stressed the necessity of a political solution for Syria against the use of force. Russia opposes sanctions against Syria as well as the use of force against it. Turkey, in contrast, has a quite tough stance on Syria.

Will Western countries launch a military strike against Syria? The possibility cannot be ruled out, but the prerequisites for the use of force is: 1. The main oppositions in Syria all agree to overthrow the existing regime and request a foreign military intervention, and they have capable armed forces to launch a civil war. 2. The Arab League formally requests Western powers to intervene. 3. The United Nations adopts a resolution that can be interpreted by the Western powers as an authorization for the use of force. However, these three conditions currently do not exist. In addition, if the West plans military actions against Syria, the following factors should also be taken into consideration: 1. How will Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas react? If they send military support to Syria, the Western countries are bound to face a regional war. But are the Western powers ready to fight a war of this scale? 2. After the fall of Gaddafi, the West was ridiculed by the Western media for making "a tragic victory". Faced with both the economic downturn in the United States and Europe and the European debt crisis, do the United States and Europe have the ability and determination it takes to initiate a war like this, especially in an election year in the United States and France in 2012? 3. Both Russia

and China are opposed to the use of force in Syria and the interference in its internal affairs, advocating a peaceful solution to the crisis through dialogue. Moreover they will not agree to let the UN Security Council pass any resolution like Resolution 1973 against Libya that could be used by the West.

Even if it is difficult for the West to be resolute on the use of force against Syria at this moment, it will not let go easily. The West will continue to increase the sanctions, to give vigorous support to the opposition, and to incite the Arab League and Turkey to put pressure on it in order to promote a change. The only thing that the Bashar regime can do is to fight as much as possible for the sympathy of the Arab countries in order to gradually ease the crisis within the Arab League, otherwise it will find it difficult to escape the fate of being overthrown.

5. China's Countermeasures are Commendable

China suggests that the differences and contradictions be resolved through dialogues and negotiations by political means, while violence, civil war, or foreign military intervention and invasion should not be adopted. China always resolutely adheres to the principle of noninterference in internal affairs. Foreign countries do not have the right to decide whether leaders of other countries have the ruling rights or not, nor should they overthrow the legal regime of other countries by military means. China has offered the troubled Arab countries timely assistance to alleviate the humanitarian disaster and timely contact with the factions to urge them to achieve a political solution through dialogue. China respects the right of people in all countries to independently choose their own political system, path of development and national leaders., China also helps to rebuild nations afflicted by turmoil in a positive way. The position of China, mentioned above, is based on the fundamental interests of the people of the countries concerned. China does not seek any self-interest, and

has acted in line with the Charter of the United Nations and the norms of international law. Thus China's behavior has received broad support by the Arab countries and can stand the test of history.

The relations between China and Arab countries are traditional, friendly and cooperative and pose no fundamental conflict of interest. Those countries that have gone through regime changes in the turmoil will continue to develop friendly and cooperative relations with China. Some say that "China was on the wrong team in the Libya issue" (*Is China on the wrong team on the Libyan problem?*), and that "the principle of noninterference in internal affairs is outdated". Western media bodies have conducted smear campaigns, while our own citizens should not follow suit, bringing irresponsible accusations against their own government. Western powers used the UN Security Council Resolution 1973 to launch air strikes against Libya to support the opposition and to expand the civil war, which went far beyond the scope of the resolution about setting up a no-fly zone, causing many civilian casualties. The Western powers also violated the provisions of the United Nations and provided a large number of weapons and equipment to the opposition as well as sending clandestine ground troops, planning, commanding and participating in the capture of Tripoli, and consequently the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime. Based on the principle of noninterference in internal affairs, China could neither have stood on the side of the Western powers i.e. supporting them in their war in Libya, nor prematurely recognize the Libyan Transitional Council.

China has consistently advocated the equality of nations large or small, and respected people from all countries to independently choose their own political system and development path, so it is only natural for China to adhere to the principle of noninterference in others' internal affairs. In today's world, the Western powers still hold the dominant position in international affairs. There are many unjust and unreasonable cases in the international order for the vast number of developing countries. The insistence of the non-interference

principle is an important shield for developing countries to defend their national independence and sovereignty. Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika said, "Sovereignty is the last line of defense in developing countries". To pursue their own interests and implement their own values, the Western powers constantly spread the theory of the non-interference principle in others' internal affairs as being outdated and that "human rights prior to sovereignty" theory, advocating a "humanitarian intervention", while the goal of which is to provide a theoretical basis for their wanton interference in the internal affairs of developing countries. Considering the large disparity in power, the West is constantly seen to interfere in the internal affairs of developing countries whereas there has never been an instance of a developing nation interfering in the internal affairs of the West. Thus, it is only too clear who can benefit and who will suffer from the theory that the principle of non-interference in internal affairs is outdated.

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