

ESSAY FOR OUR TIMES

THE ANTI-CONSPIRACIST'S GUIDE TO REVOLUTION IN THE ARAB WORLD

BY THOMAS P.M. BARNETT

Let this be the manifesto for those of us who do not believe the world is run by a Jewish cabal or secret societies or anybody else. Glenn Beck fingers in his feverish deliriums. For when I survey the wreckage and wrath of the revolutionary wave that has swept North Africa and dares lap Gulf shores, I count up a cast of characters too long and too varied to march to anybody's drum - save the complex and ever-changing beats of globalisation itself.

Fear not. I will, in the end, offer accusations against a vast army of co-conspirators who arise from within our collective ranks and whose ambitions will determine the very fate of our world. But first, let me dismiss the many pretenders to that throne...

Bush's "Big Bang"

George W. Bush and his band of neocons dreamt of plunging the Arab world into democratic revolt through the undeniable example of free elections in Iraq. And in 2005, just two years after Saddam Hussein's toppling, the signs were there: pharaoh Hosni Mubarak submitting to a plebiscite, the Saudis holding their first local elections in decades, the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon... But instead of pushing on those ropes, as tricky as that would have been, the neocons became infatuated with a new, seemingly more compelling threat: Iran's pursuit of The Bomb under just-elected president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Yes, four free elections later, Iraq serves as democratic exemplar of sorts, arguably taking a back seat only to neighbouring Turkey. But the cost of that journey is likewise a strong deterrent. Painful evidence? President Obama's clear nervousness about embracing any of this unrest, especially on the subject of military intervention.

Radical Islam

Yes, we'll all be watching the Muslim Brotherhood in the days ahead. But these guys spent the uprising running to the sounds of protest, not orchestrating them. It's the same story throughout this revolutionary wave: the Islamists, radical or not, are but one of many voices articulating the profound desire for change. This means that the days of rulers offering the bogeyman of Islamic extremism are over. A bigger, far too worldly force has arrived on the scene.

Al-Qaeda

Having lost its cause célèbre among the Sunni in Iraq and now consuming what's left of its strategic momentum in a pawn's play in northwest Pakistan, the vaunted terror network is reduced to franchising itself among the most pathetic groups left out there. Big hint: the more territory claimed in their "organisational chart" (AQ in the Islamic Maghreb, AQ in the Arabian Peninsula), the more bluster they're packing. What I see in these revolutions is Arab civilisation being reborn; what I don't see is any "clash of civilisations," and without it, al-Qaeda is nothing.

Iran

If anything, Iran's Green Movement served as a hope-inducing reference point for the 2.0 revolutionaries, by previewing some of the better tactics. The movement also challenged



similarly ambitious youth throughout the wider region, forcing the question: "Why are those protestors so much braver than we are?" The Supreme Leader can blather on all he wants about Iran's "revolutionary" example. Meanwhile, the Revolutionary Guard busies itself with further extending its mafia-like grip over the national economy. This rancid regime buries more in the sand than its centrifuges. Iran's day is coming.



The West's addiction to Oil

You know that tired old Thomas Friedman bit about America "funding both sides of the war"? Well, if that's true, shouldn't oil be a decent guide to who's (still) up

and who's (gone) down in this revolutionary wave? Tunisia and Egypt don't subsist on oil, and yet both regimes collapsed like a house of cards. Libya has got plenty - the most in North Africa - and it meant nothing when the wave struck. Oil-rich Algeria is still standing (for now), but the fact that it's a monarchy may actually matter more. On the Peninsula, oil-poor Jordan remains stable enough, while oil-poor Yemen does not. Among the more energy-rich monarchies, some have felt considerable heat (Bahrain), others have had an uncertain few days (Oman); the rest far less so.

Oil doesn't determine who lives in freedom and who chooses revolution, even as it can provide the right "enlightened despot" just enough resources to proceed. In the end, no matter how much national wealth is created by oil or how well it's distributed, the industry will never create enough jobs to insulate any regime from its disillusioned youth.

And now, for the perfect storm of coincidences

This is where it really gets juicy, but the "conspiracy," such as it is, is a complete cluster-f#\$! of crossed wires and unintended consequences. Try these on for size:

- A few years back some geeky Harvard undergrads, hoping to create a glorified online dating service (and yes, get laid), instead conceive of a social networking phenomenon that plants a big wet one on the planet - one face at a time. Think Mark Zuckerberg anticipated twenty-something revolutionaries in North Africa assembling their forces online before hitting the streets? Honestly, you can't make this stuff up...

THE REST OF THE USUAL SUSPECTS

The former colonialists

Check out all the boat people steaming toward Europe. This is the EU's worst nightmare: a flood of desperate Muslims.

Israel

The place is freaking out over, "Who lost Egypt?," (Barack Obama, of course). Now, jumpy Tel Aviv can't decide which grass it needs to mow first: southern Lebanon or Gaza. Don't kid yourself, Israel fantasises about hitting the skip-back button on this one.

Those 'rising' Chinese

If Beijing truly ran the world, then Sudan wouldn't be splitting in two and you could actually Google - I mean, Baidu - the word "Egypt," behind the Great Firewall. Believe me, we won't be hearing a Tweet out of these guys.



The resurgent Ottomans

Recep Erdogan and his foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu are the closest thing the Muslim world has to diplomatic rock stars. And yeah, they do come out looking even cooler as the 2.0s unfold. Why? Erdogan's AKP knows how to grow a domestic middle class and keep it happy. Everybody should be taking notes.

The mighty House of Saud

Only slightly less unnerved than the Israelis. For now, its writ extends all the way to Bahrain.

- Remember bad-boy Serbia from the Balkan Wars? Well, the evil Milosevic regime didn't fall solely because of NATO bombs. There were plenty of young insiders organising tipping-point protests. And guess what? They'll teach you their tactics for free - the revolutionary gift that just keeps on giving. Check out their crazy cool website at www.otpor.com and just keep cliqueing!



- Standing behind Otpor! (Resistance!) is the globally translated guru of non-violent protest - a soft-spoken retired U.S. academic by the name of Gene Sharp. His main inspiration? Mahatma Gandhi.

- And don't forget **Julian Assange, founder and chief anarchist of Wikileaks**. Note how virtually every mainstream media story on the 2.0 Revolutions comes with some juicy tidbit culled from Wikileaks' recent massive dumping of US diplomatic cables. I know, I know. He has to be fronting for the CIA! Unless you believe one twenty-two-year-old Army private, armed with a thumb drive, can do that much damage

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to U.S. diplomacy. Where is Robert Ludlum when you need him?

- Speaking of international intrigue: Osama Bin Laden pulls off 9/11 and the U.S. invades countries to Iran's east and west. Iran, go figure, reaches for the Bomb. The U.S., in response, sells tonnes of sophisticated military hardware to all of Iran's neighbours - just before a wave of destabilising revolution strikes! This is déjà vu all over again!

- My personal favourite: blame it on the U.S. housing bubble. It triggers the global financial crisis that forces all those bailouts and stimulus packages. Then, when the U.S.

federal deficit shoots through the roof and the Fed steps in to reflate the money supply (thank you, Beijing, for staying pegged to the dollar!), Washington basically deflates its way out of some debt and inadvertently exports inflation by flooding the world with dollars - primary denominator of commodities in poor countries. It's almost like Ben Bernanke decided on his own that it was time for Mubarak to go, dropping a key Arab ally in the process! Too much to swallow, you say? Let me keep weaving my web here.

- It's not just monetary inflation that America is exporting. Heck, it's all the commodity inflation China is exporting - and will continue to do so. Because China wants more of everything, everything costs more - especially food. The Middle East is extremely dependent on food imports, and energy-poor countries, like Egypt, are similarly vulnerable on higher oil prices - again, driven primarily by China's amazing thirst. Who knew Mao-less China was still in the business of exporting so much revolution?

- It gets even better! Mother Nature does her bit too. Climate change is creating longer droughts and these have helped drive up the cost of grains. Guess who's the biggest wheat importer in the world? Egypt. Wheat prices in the Middle East have already doubled over the last year, helping to precipitate the 2.0 Revolutions - just like spiking bread prices have throughout human history. An ongoing winter wheat drought in China is just more grist for the mill.

- And here's where you might want to page a Nobelist other than Obama, like **Al Gore**. Because it's either America's "addiction to oil" or China's unquenchable thirst (take your pick) that drives U.S. farmers to divert more than one-third of their corn harvest to ethanol. That helps drive up the cost of food, which in turn



triggers revolutions in the Mideast, which in turn drives up the cost of oil, which, you have to believe, makes it even more important that America reduce its oil addiction, meaning even more corn-for-ethanol-for-blood-for-oil-for-revolutions-for . . . spot the hidden hand here?

But the real culprit is...

I digressed for a while. Let me now lay the blame for the 2.0 revolutions where it ultimately belongs - on the **United States of America**.

I know. I was zigging there for a while, and now I've hit you with the most clichéd zag out there. But give me a minute.

As World War II drew to a close, America, under the leadership of **Franklin Roosevelt**,



decided it had had enough of Europe's wars and its globe-spanning colonialism. It decided to internationalise its states-uniting, economies-integrating model of multinationalism. Not

interested in picking up any colonies itself, FDR set in motion his plan for an international liberal trade order that eventually became known as The West, which eventually became a truly global economy, which is now known as globalisation. That was all part of the plot.

Central to the conspiracy was the goal of a global middle class, the notion being that a world economy concentrated in the middle would eventually be politically ruled by the middle. That's how it works here in America (some days better than others), and that was the gift we imparted. Frankly, we succeeded beyond our wildest dreams, creating the Frankenstein that now roams the planet, sucking up resources and demanding free elections.

That global middle class has but a toehold in the Arab world, but it's a stubborn toehold. And when you have a huge coming-of-age youth bulge with so many of them right out of college and wondering now why they bothered with an education if there aren't any jobs, then buddy, you deserve the kick in the pants you're now getting.

Bob Dylan once penned that, "It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you gonna have to serve somebody." Well, I'm here to tell you that we're all - entrepreneurs and emperors alike - gonna have to serve that global middle class in the decades ahead. Growing your middle class and keeping it happy: it is the only mandate that matters. ☹

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