

Reflections on the significance of the current Arab revolts and their implications for revolutionary theory, particularly with regard to the debate on democracy and popular power ★



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What kind of Democracy for the Arab World?



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16 What kind of Democracy for the Arab World?

Flags of the monarchy had been raised... Do you see the spectre of a comeback of the old regime of Idris?

To tell the truth, anything can happen. I think that the revolting Libyans themselves don't have clear idea about who will and how to run their country after they manage to overthrow Gaddafi. They have to learn their way. What I feel is that this is difficult to happen, that they will never submit easily to any new regime. They got to know their strength and this is not easy to be taken away from them again.

What's the immediate prospect for this revolt?

It depends. Still the battle against the dictatorship isn't over, not yet won. But we have to realize the high potential that there is. The victory of the revolution will make a big difference in the region. We have to keep in mind that the new world order was declared and implemented here for the first time during the 1990-1991 Gulf crisis. This region, since then, replaced Southern America for Washington's backyard. Added to what already has happened in Tunisia and Egypt, the changes will be deep and lasting. There are two main possibilities as ever, either to install a new elite regime, or that the masses could make their way to a really free society, organised on the model of these popular committees that the people themselves have created in the heat of the struggle.

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***by José Antonio
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Mubarak in power, the masses there created a new reality, and the US is trying to adapt to it. In Libya it looks somewhat different. The US is now like a predator, as Gaddafi's regime looks very weak and so much hated by his own people, and above all, because the Libyan territory is full of oil, it looks a very easy and big target. Besides that, this can help the main supporter of dictatorships in our region, the US, to look like a freedom fighter liberating a helpless nation from its bloody dictator, one they regarded until recently as a new friend. The bad thing about being a predator is that it cannot resist easy targets, despite all past and painful experiences. One very important thing about this possible US plan is that no one in Libya today, nor the revolting masses, nor even the Libyan opposition that resides in the West, accepts any foreign military intervention.

Of course, this would be a blow for the whole struggle of the Libyan nation, not only it would damage its independent fight for its freedom, but it would also threaten its future. The Libyans are near to overthrow the regime and regain possession of their oil and their life, I don't think they, at least most of them, are ready to sacrifice what they gained up to now for the sake of an easy victory that isn't their victory.

What's the nature of the civilian-military government declared today in Benghazi?

Still there are no clear State institutions as such in the liberated areas. There are some trying to install their elite leadership, but until this very moment, not successfully yet.

Just recently, American and pro-American Arab press started talking about an interim council in Benghazi headed by an ex-minister of Gaddafi's cabinet, just to highlight their welcoming position of a possible US intervention. Aside for this so called interim council, no other force or group in the liberated areas accepts or calls for such an intervention.

What's the role of the Libyan People's Committees? Are the masses creating their own means for direct democracy?

In fact, these committees became part of every revolution everywhere in the Arab world. I accept that these are good examples of direct democracy, the whole liberated areas are run in this way now, as was the situation after the fall of Ben Ali regime in Tunisia and after Mubarak ordered his security forces to pave the way for thugs to practice looting everywhere to intimidate the revolting masses. What is needed now is to make this a way of life, not just an interim measure: this must be our message to the masses.

14 What kind of Democracy for the Arab World?

nuclear programme, the then US secretary Condoleezza Rice declared steps as a model of restoring normal relations between US and the Third World states, including those labelled as rogue by the US. This paved the way for Berlusconi, Blair and Sarkozy to visit Libya, to sign multi - billion contracts, including arms trade, with Western companies. This led Gaddafi to attend a G8 summit where he met Obama. Like Ben Ali and Mubarak, the big capitalist powers simply ignored human rights violations of the Gaddafi regime against his own people. Even when Gaddafi was declaring himself an anti - imperialist, long ago, it was just a lip service while he engaged, as an authoritarian, in trivial terrorist acts that never meant to support the libertarian objectives of the victims of imperialism.

We have to differentiate between being anti-American, anti-capitalist and being a real socialist, as there are lot of anti-Americans who are as authoritarian and repressive as the system of global corporate fascism or the pro-American regimes. Here we have to keep Stalinism in mind. Gaddafi himself came to power when Arab nationalism was on its peak, that was anti-imperialist in rhetoric only, while it led Arab countries from one defeat to another in all its confrontations against imperialism and its most important local agent, Israel. The last one was in 2003 in Iraq. After the June 1967 defeat of Egypt, Syria and Jordan by Israel, many leftists came to the conclusion that the regimes' repression and its exploitative nature were responsible for that defeat. Next year, the Egyptian youth and students started their demonstrations against the Nasser regime, which had libertarian character. The fact is that Egypt under Nasser, Iraq under Saddam and Syria under Assad, all were mere examples of bureaucratic state capitalism, namely, regimes that repress and exploit their own people.

What has been the role of the US and of the EU in this crisis? It is known that Gaddafi has been in very good terms with them for the last while...

In the Cold War both repressive superpowers, the US and the USSR, practiced a double play: they were repressing people in their dominant sphere and "supporting" the peoples' struggle for freedom in the sphere dominated by the opponent. Thus, the Soviet Union supported the Vietnamese people struggle against American intervention and the Cuban revolution, as well as other rebellions in South America and places which were under US backed dictatorships. On the other hand, the US and the capitalist bloc supported the wave of revolts in Eastern Europe, etc. This double game is still played until now. The US is ready and willing to support such rebellions in Iran for example, but never, never in Saudi Arabia for example. In Iraq, the Bush administration helped Saddam to regain power in Iraq after his defeat in the first Gulf War 1991, while he was facing a massive popular revolution and only a small part of Iraq was under his power. They wanted to overthrow him when it looked easier, and when doing so did not compromise its regional dominance.

But things are happening all the time, sometimes against the will of the US, as it happened in Egypt and Tunisia. Despite all of its best efforts to maintain Ben Ali and

In a previous article, I said that the events shaking the Arab world today are as relevant as those that shook the world in 1989.¹ Not only can parallels be made on the extent and depth of discontent over a vast geographical area, but also because this whirlwind of popular fury places a question mark over a particular geopolitical architecture that was hitherto believed to be as strong as steel. In this case, these long-standing dictatorships were fed, promoted and installed by the geo-strategic interests of the USA (and its junior partner, the EU) in an area of critical concern as far as oil is concerned. In 1989 the political consequences of the demonstrations were deep and long-lasting - the fall of "real socialist" regimes not only meant the fall of a few unpleasant bureaucratic dictatorships, but because of the relative weakness of a truly libertarian and revolutionary Left, represented the fall of a set of political values and horizons that were incorrectly associated with the Soviet bloc, and the overwhelming rise of neo-liberalism as the unquestioned system in the economic, political, values and ideological field.

It was the end of history, according to quite a few crusty apologists of the "New World Order". But history did continue to be written, as was dramatically demonstrated by the anti-globalisation protests in Seattle in 1999. And if further demonstration was needed, there was the cycle of open struggles between 2000 and 2005 in South America, which challenged the foundations of the model, with the people, the oppressed and the exploited classes as the protagonists of history.

The events in the Arab world which have kept us holding our breath during the past two months, have shaken the New World Order at one of its strongest links - among the dictatorships that have for decades been maintained by the "free world" to ensure the uninterrupted flow of oil and keep a military foothold in an area of enormous economic and geo-strategic importance for the empire. These mobilizations are taking place in the very heart of global capitalism, where the oil flows that keeps international trade and industry afloat. It is happening in countries which are all close allies of Washington, hence the anti-imperialist content of all these demonstrations (even the Libyan dictator, Gaddafi, had become a close partner of the USA and EU, in the era of the "War on Terrorism"). They are all countries which are corroded by serious internal contradictions, where hunger coexists with macro-economic growth and the opulence of the leading families. But there is something more - they are at the same time they are challenging and shaking the political foundations of the system. Those calling for "democracy" have sparked off an acute political debate on a global level over the political content of such a flexible term as "democracy". Above all because the "democracy" that liberals in suits and ties in the corridors of power talk about is not the same democracy that the people on the streets have in mind.

4 What kind of Democracy for the Arab World?

★ *Two antagonistic concepts of democracy*

The spectre of the mob taking a leading role in politics is the worst nightmare of the ruling class for whom “democracy” means maintaining the legal and economic structure that underpins its exclusive privileges. It is no coincidence therefore that the capitalist media have been reporting calls for “stability” and “order”, together with the formal support for the need for democracy in Arab countries (“forgetting” their traditional support for regional autocracies). In “El Mercurio” (11 February), for example, David Gallagher writes a typical note: “*You cannot govern a country from the street, despite all illusions to the contrary held by some intellectuals of direct democracy of an extreme, participatory kind*”. Opinions like this have been expressed in a wholesale fashion throughout the official media.

It is interesting to mention government from the street, since it shows the limits of formal, bourgeois democracy. Let us clarify some of the concepts he employs: when he speaks of the street, what he does is to equate it with the people. When he says that democracy cannot be of an “extreme”, participatory kind, he means that the working class (the “extreme” as opposed to the class he represents) should be excluded from the democratic game. For the very reason that in his concept of democracy, we must exclude the poor, the workers, from any direct involvement in their affairs, that they must necessarily take on an air of “seriousness” and “respectability” in order to disguise the class interests behind this vision.

In an article on the Arab uprisings, the Uruguayan writer Raúl Zibechi hits the nail on the head when he states:

“The system is demonstrating only too well that it can live with any State authority, even the most “radical” or “anti-system”, but cannot tolerate people on the streets, revolt, ongoing rebellion. We can say that the people on the street are the spanner in the works of the accumulation of capital, so one of the first “measures” taken by the military after Mubarak withdrew to his retirement home, was to the demand that the people leave the streets and return to work.” ²

The street is the place par excellence where power is expressed from below. It is the symbolic space where the people fight their battle to the death with those on high. This is where experimenting with alternative ways of handling the “res publica”, public affairs. Whenever the people have burst onto the stage of history through protest, have always - through the exercise of direct democracy - established their own institutions outside and in opposition to the official institutions, the State. This has been the case since the French Revolution, when in 1792 the proletariat formed the first commune of Paris and the people set up the bodies of budding direct democracy, only to see them taken over, changed out of recognition and finally crushed at the hands of the Jacobin bourgeoisie in its struggle against the Ancien Régime.



What is actually happening in Libya and the rest of the Arab world?

It is a revolution. After 42 years of being governed by the Gaddafi regime, the masses took out to the streets. The bad thing here is that because of the brutal repression of the regime, the revolution was successful only in the eastern part, which also consists of different tribes from the western and middle parts of Libya. Soon the forces of the regime overcame the surprise factor and put down the revolt in Tripoli, the capital, and the rest of Libya by extreme and brutal force. The masses tried to go out again last Friday, which was really a day of outraged protests in a lot of Arab countries and cities, but they couldn't overcome the forces of the regime. Now there is a status quo between the two powers, that of the people and that of the regime, although both are trying to gather momentum again.

Beside Libya, Yemen is on fire for weeks now. In this country there are lots of tribes and sectarian minorities, beside the conflict between the governing north and the marginalized south that demands autonomy. University and High school students could manage, with their full devotion for freedom for all and their willingness to sacrifice for that cause, to gather all of the factions of the nation around the objective of removing the dictatorship there.

Last Friday was very hot also in Iraq, where thousands of Iraqi youth, from both Sunni and Shiia' background -that were on the verge of civil war few years back-, took to the streets protesting against the corrupt pro-American government. Police-men used the same repressive measures as happened elsewhere, which caused the death of some of the protesters.

The Sultanate of Oman just joined the rest of revolting countries now; the youth there took to the street chanting, as everywhere else, for jobs, more freedom and decent life conditions.

Many still see Gaddafi as a socialist and an anti-imperialist... is this true?

This is a very misleading and deluded statement, created by the authoritarian left before and still alive now. And this is due, partly, to the revival of this authoritarian left by figures like Chávez.

We have to keep in mind that Gaddafi's regime relations with the main Western powers improved significantly after 2003 and after the Libyan dictator gave up his

The struggle of the Libyan people, as part of the wave of popular rebellions spreading like fire in all of the Arab world, is taking a really dramatic turn, with the people advancing their struggle against a regime bent on staying in power by whatever means necessary.

Gaddafi, in spite of his past as a thorn in the side of the US, had become a key ally in their War on Terror, as was proved by the late and clumsy reaction of the US to the events unfolding in Libya and the late suspension by the EU of their considerable trade in weapons with the Libyan regime. While the US and the Western powers re-discover, for public image purposes, that they really did not like Gaddafi after all (after a decade of friendly relations), talks have started about a possible intervention and US carriers have moved into waters close to the Libyan shores. The result of such a prospect would be terrible to say the least. In the meantime, the US and their Western allies are exploring the way to make sure that the revolt of the Libyan and the Arab masses does not settle down in revolutionary terms, as well as making sure that their economic and strategic interests are served in the best possible way in the post-Gaddafi scenario.

To understand better what is going on there, we held another dialogue on February 27th with our friend and comrade, the Syrian anarchist Mazen Kamalmaz, who works on the revolutionary blog www.ahewar.org/m.asp?i=1385

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Democracy always has limits and the bourgeoisie knows this - the problem is who sets those limits. In classical Greece, where the concept was born, democratic rights were the privilege of only the "citizens", a minority of the population that lived off the labour of the enslaved majority. In Western democracies, for a long time, democracy was denied to the colonies that fed the cities or to the local workers who were without property or education. In Israel, the "only democracy in the Middle East" as the famous cliché has it; the Palestinians are completely excluded from the delights of democracy. In the USA itself, the most "democratic" country in the world (according to themselves), despite the election of a black president, one out of every four African American men languishes in the ubiquitous US prison complex, many of them on death row. The others live in the vast majority of cases in ghettos, while the two-party system works like a charm for the military-industrial elite. Let us take for example any Western democracy, those so-called "representative" democracies: make a simple survey of the social class and gender to which the majority of parliamentarians belong. The result is overwhelmingly: males of the capitalist class. Entrepreneurs make up a tiny minority of society, but almost all parliamentarians are entrepreneurs. You will also notice that oppressed ethnic or national groups are also underrepresented. Who then is the democracy representative of? The capitalists, the rich, the powerful. The whole electoral and institutional engine is protected by a thousand and one tricks to prevent popular participation.

By contrast, the concept of participatory or direct democracy is the polar opposite of the concept of representative democracy as advocated by the capitalist class and their hangers-on. Its limits are set by the mobilized people, who during the process of the struggle acquire a new awareness of their abilities and their own existence. Direct democracy in the French Revolution, in the period 1792-1793, placed limits on the speculators, and momentarily consolidated the fight against them. All the various experiences of people power and direct democracy that have occurred throughout history have excluded the notion of economic exploitation. The direct participation of each and every member of society, the collective exercise of power, drowns the capitalist minority in the ocean of the people's interests that are freely and directly expressed. It is no coincidence that direct democracy ignores the distinction between the political and the economic (horror of horrors for the capitalists) and tends towards the socialization of property. The street is an important symbolic space. But it is not enough in itself. Gradually, the people always end up realizing that "democracy", their direct democracy built in the struggle, also includes the socialization of businesses, mines, land, factories and offices.

When the people take charge of their own affairs, we see clearly that there can be no political equality without economic equality.

★ **Direct democracy in the popular committees**

In Egypt, as elsewhere in the Arab world, popular committees have emerged that have demonstrated the political capacity of the working classes. Gallagher is wrong

6 What kind of Democracy for the Arab World?

when he says that a country cannot be governed from the street. In fact, for several weeks in Egypt and Tunisia, the “street” was the only place of government.

There are numerous witnesses to how direct democracy works in the popular committees of Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, which we know about thanks to the good offices of certain international correspondents. Let me quote one from the “commune” of Tahrir Square in Cairo, which I think is fairly representative:

“Egyptians of all social strata have voluntarily taken to street cleaning; directing midday traffic; co-ordinating neighbouring patrols amidst early outbreaks of looting; and even organising self-defence committees during the sporadic February 2nd clashes with the baltagiyya (thugs), fully equipped with security checkpoints, look-out posts, and makeshift hospitals to treat the wounded (...) People have not hesitated to share or willingly give away for free what little they possess in the way of food or drink.

Overcoming a long legacy of mutual hostility and suspicion along traditional sectarian lines, there is an Egypt for everyone in Tahrir Square: men and women, young and old, Muslim and Christian. Lively and vigorous debate - free and full of meaning, for once - have filled all four corners of Tahrir Square, conveying by loudspeaker the full array of diverse political views and opinions present. Any formal adoption of proposals has been decided democratically by clear majority-vote (...)

*The people of Tahrir Square actually held a vote at one point about whether or not to elect representatives to make key executive decisions on behalf of the protest movement; they overwhelmingly and decisively voted ‘no’.”*³

This testimony is consistent with others that have circulated regarding these committees, which are reminiscent of the proliferation of direct democratic institutions in Argentina after the crisis and the popular uprising in December 2001. Even the conservative newspaper “The Economist” (5-11 March 2011, p. 41) says, without explicitly mentioning the popular committees in Libya, but referring to organisation in the “liberated zones” that:

*“In areas in rebel hands, a feared descent into chaos has not materialised. Despite a dearth of policemen, crime has not risen. Female students attending celebrations have not reported harassment. For almost two weeks, restaurateurs have been offering free tea and sandwiches. To display their new-found sense of fraternity, businessmen have helped sweep the streets.”*⁴

Of course, direct democracy won in the street, alone, is not a panacea to magically resolve the problems facing the Arab peoples. Neither unemployment nor the exasperating inequality, nor the high prices of food have gone. Clashes between Christians and Muslims in Egypt this week show that corrosive sectarianism has not been entirely overcome. But direct democracy creates public spaces in which the people’s demands can become devastating whirlwind, a collective leadership that seeks to promote equality and socialisation.

“The Libyan People’s Committees should be the foundation of a new life, not just an interim measure”

Interview with Mazen Kamalmaz

by José Antonio Gutiérrez D.

Notes:

1. www.anarkismo.net/article/18678
2. <http://alainet.org/active/44376>
3. www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/467.php#continue
4. www.economist.com/node/18290470?story_id=18290470
5. www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2011/0304/1224291282861.html
6. <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90780/91343/7308634.html>
7. The antics of the Libyan dictator, who until recently was the West's best friend and a role model according to the former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, have turned him into little more than a pro-American clown in the eyes of his people. Moreover, in countries to which the USA was, objectively, interested in extending the protest such as Syria and Iran, the protests have been or are very weak or non-existent. This confirms that we are talking about different dynamics.
8. *The Economist*, 5-11 March 2011, p.45. www.economist.com/node/18291501
9. I refer here to an excellent article by Roland Astarita, who summarizes some of the debates in the Latin American left in this regard. Even if you do not agree with everything in it, it is a sharp and insightful article and, at least in spirit, I believe mostly correct. "La izquierda y Libia" <http://rolandoastarita.wordpress.com/2011/03/07/la-izquierda-y-libia/> and a reply to critiques of the article, <http://rolandoastarita.wordpress.com/2011/03/10/criticos-nacionales-y-libia/>
10. www.anarkismo.net/article/18923 [See following article below - ZB Ed.]

★ Revolution in the Arab world - not just an end to the dictatorships

While the USA and its local puppets bring up the spectre of Al Qaeda in order to create distrust among Westerners of their rebellious Arab brothers and sisters, the rebellion in the Arab countries has managed to reach unexpected levels of vitality, going far beyond the narrow demands to replace a government. The journalist Michael Jansen, writing in "The Irish Times" (4 March 2011), gives us a quick look at the profound changes within Egyptian society that are coming about under the transitional government and how the winds of change have not left anyone indifferent:

"Secondary school students have formed a movement calling for revision of the Egyptian educational system. Women's organisations are demanding equal rights and full representation in government and civil society. Journalists are calling for an end to restrictions on the media and removal of editors and board members who toed the government line under the Mubarak regime.

Scholars, preachers and students at Egypt's ancient educational institution al-Azhar University call for its liberation from 1,000 years of government control. The turbaned revolutionaries insist that Sheikh al-Azhar, the university's rector and the world's leading Sunni jurist, and other senior figures should be elected for fixed terms rather than appointed for life. (...)

Teachers, civil servants, university professors, lawyers, judges and workers in the country's public and privatised industries are venting their fury at officials, inept managers and rampant corruption. Tens of thousands of workers in the textile industry, communications firms, iron and steel plants, hospitals, universities, military industries and the Suez Canal have gone out on strike, first to support the democracy movement and then to claim higher wages and better working conditions. Workers are calling for the dissolution of the government's Egyptian Trade Union Federation. On Wednesday several unions established an independent association." ⁵

Like Pandora's Box, the Arab revolution has opened the door to all these demands and these complaints which had been repressed for decades, if not centuries. The masses have created a unique historical moment, a historical hinge that will shape the future. And the people have proved to be a tough player, despite their youth and relative inexperience. Those forging the young Arab direct democracy are preparing to make a qualitative leap in their revolution, to turn it into a formidable social revolution in the mid-term.

That is why both the local ruling classes and the agents of the former regime, together with their imperial masters, set as their first task the containment of direct democracy through the process of "transition", of "institutionalisation" and of "democratic reforms" that are altering the participatory content of these rebellions,

channelling it into a safe and harmless “representative democracy”. It is the *raison d’être* for all civil or military transitional governments - to be the friendly face of the counter-revolution.

★ ***The challenges ahead: spreading and rooting the revolution***

The USA knows what is at stake in their backyard. The chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mike Mullen, admits that there have been rapid changes in the region and that they are trying not only to keep up with events but to influence things in the direction they want according to their particular interests.⁶ They will be helped in this regard by the “transitional” governments and dictators who, still clinging to power, offer cosmetic reforms. But they still have an arduous task ahead, as it does not seem that the Arab masses have even the slightest appreciation or enthusiasm for the “American Way of Life.” Furthermore, resentment against the Americans, a mainstay of the regional tyrannies, is crucial to understanding the protests in the Arab countries. Decades of complicity with Israel and collaboration with the US imperial escapades in the region have undoubtedly helped to erode the legitimacy of these regimes.⁷ This is what we meant by the undeniable anti-imperialist content of all these demonstrations, something even the Yemeni dictator himself, Ali Abdullah Saleh, has noticed. Recently, in a fit of demagoguery and appalling hypocrisy at a conference in the capital Sana’a, he said that all these events were nothing more than a Tel Aviv operation to destabilize the Arab world, that everything was being “controlled by the White House”.⁸ He said it because he knows the deep resentment in the region to his US ally and was cynically trying to exploit it - while pocketing the tidy sum of US\$300 million a year from the White House for his contribution to the “War on Terrorism”. Nobody in the Arab world was impressed by this clumsy demagoguery, even though it seems that outside the Arab world, it has had some effect among some sectors of the left, particularly given the events in Libya.⁹

The revolution in the Arab countries is not over, not even in Tunisia or Egypt. Indeed, maybe even less so in those two countries. The revolution, this gigantic awakening of the Arab peoples, has just begun, as evidenced by the protests that in recent weeks have forced the resignation of two recently-appointed prime ministers - the Tunisian, Mohammed Ghannouchi (along with five members of his cabinet), Ahmed Shafik in Egypt. Popular protests are continuing to force the removal of all elements of the old regime and dismantle its security apparatus and implement a very long list of popular demands.

As the experience of Argentina reminds us, these periods of open crisis are pretty fluid, political changeovers are common, and if the people’s alternative does not win out, then alternative of the powerful will soon do so and regain the ground it had lost. What is unsustainable is any long-term political crisis. And that is where we should remember the words of our Syrian comrade Mazen Kamalmaz, who said

that the *“People’s Committees should be the foundation of a new life, not just an interim measure”*.¹⁰

These committees are the basis of a new democracy of the people that is direct, participatory, assembly-based and built by men and women day by day in the Arab revolutions.

But the challenges are by no means easy. How are we to project these experiences over time so that they can be something more than a sporadic episode in the struggle, the germ of the new society? How are we to ensure that unco-ordinated, sectoral proposals can mature into an alternative social project? The Arab masses have the potential to deepen and radicalise the movement, as well as to project beyond the current crisis. They are wary of the cosmetic reforms of these “transitional governments” that they know are, ultimately, only a way to contain the masses. Only time will show how to solve the crisis/crises, but what is clear is that however it turns out, nothing will be the same for the Arab peoples or for the rest of the world.

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