

THE FALL OF THE ISLAMIST SCARECROW AND THE NEW ARAB AWAKENING

Lea Basma Zerouali

Ph.D. in Middle Eastern and Mediterranean Studies

INALCO, Paris, France

The earthquake which originated in Tunisia and has been shaking the Arab World since the end of December 2010 may rightly and for many reasons be called historical. In this brief article, we shall limit our analysis to two erroneous ideas widely fed for many decades to the Arab people, particularly by the advocates of the so-called "Clash of Civilizations", ideas shattered in the most striking way by the Tunisian and Egyptian popular revolutions. The first one is considering the authoritarian regimes currently in power in many Arab countries as a necessary bulwark against radical Islam. The second is denying the Arab people any capacity to construct free and democratic societies by carefully concealing the remarkable evolutions and progressive movements the Arab World has known since the beginning of the 19th century.

The Arab World, numbering today about 300 million inhabitants, has been since the 1950s the target of an attack aiming to deprive it of its Arab national identity and replace it with the identity of the "Muslim Alien", created by the designers of neo-colonialist ideological ready-to-wear. The "Muslim Alien", unlike the rest of human beings, does not aspire to live as a free, dignified and respected citizen, able to provide for him/herself and his/her family. No, the "Muslim Alien" has only one and single preoccupation haunting him/her night and day: to take revenge on the infidel Crusaders. This inevitably leads him/her to be an enemy of the West and a would-be terrorist, as Bernard Lewis has taken the pain to explain to us in the clearest possible way in "The Roots of Muslim Rage" (*The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 266, No. 3, September 1990, pp. 47-60). And it goes without saying that when given the occasion to choose democratically his/her government, the "Muslim Alien" cannot but choose representatives of political Islam, all lumped together, no matter the huge differences between movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, considered as legitimate by many Arabs, and the jihadist networks rejected and condemned by Arab public opinion.

Unfortunately for those who have been waving the Islamist scarecrow for so many years, the Islamists were utterly absent from the movement that led to Ben Ali's fall and Rashid Ghannouchi, the leader of the main Tunisian Islamist party "Al-Nahda" (Renaissance) return from exile on January 30. He was greeted at the airport of Tunis by signs reading "Yes to Islam, no to extremism". As for Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood did not join the call to protest on January 25 and its participation in the mass demonstrations that took place in the following days has been quite limited.

The truth is that the obsessive emphasis on Islam and its role in Arab societies, obvious in the Western media, as well as in academic circles and foreign policy think-tanks, acts as a distorting mirror concealing, on one hand, the presence of Judaism and Christianity in the Arab World for thousands of years and, on the

other, the participation of the Arab World to movements of universal dimensions calling for social and political progress, including those advocating a greater secularization of society.

How could we forget that Christians were granted equal rights with Muslems by the Viceroy of Egypt Muhammad Ali in 1833, 23 years before the ottoman *Hatt-i Humayun*? How could we forget that the first parliamentary assembly in what we call today the Middle East was established in Egypt by the Khedive Ismail in November 1866, ten years before the short-lived Ottoman Parliament? How could we forget that on the placards which appeared on the streets of Beirut in June 1880, calling for Arab independence from the Ottoman Empire, claims included "the complete freedom of thought and the press: books, newspapers, publications of all kinds", as well as "the freedom of action according to the needs of progress and civilization"?

How could we forget that in 1882, students of the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut (today American University of Beirut) stood in defense of one of their professors expelled from the institution for espousing Darwin's theory of evolution? How could we forget that in 1919, on the eve of the occupation of the country by the French Army, the first Parliament in Syria was about to adopt a law granting women the right to vote, only one year after Great-Britain, one year before the United States, fifteen years before France and fifty-two years before Switzerland? How could we forget that the first woman ever to be granted the military rank of General was the Damascus-born and resistant against the French Mandate Naziq Al-Abid (1898-1959)?

After decades of defeats, humiliation and division, the movement initiated in Tunisia puts the Arab World back on the tracks of its modernity, giving a new impulse to inter-Arab solidarity. On their first day of mobilization, the Egyptian demonstrators did not hide the source of their inspiration, telling the Tunisians: "You are the pioneers and we are the followers". The Arab people, condemned by those who ignore or prefer to ignore their history to an eternal apathy, have now overcome their biggest enemy: fear. But this should not frighten Western diplomacies, as it is time for them to realize that the only safeguard against instability and all sorts of extremism in the region lies in the establishment of true democracies and the respect of the aspirations and dignity of the Arab people.