

ORSAM INTERVIEWS ON REGIONAL AFFAIRS

No.39, DECEMBER 2016



ORSAM

ORTADOĞU STRATEJİK ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STRATEGIC STUDIES
مركز الشرق الأوسط للدراسات الاستراتيجية

ABDUSSELAM: THE LEGACY OF THE ARAB SPRING: IS THERE A WAY OUT?

Refik Abdüsselam



He was born in 1967. He got his BA in Philosophy from the Muhammed V University in Morocco. He got his PhD in politics and international relations in 2003 from the University of Westminster. He worked as a visiting researcher at the Oxford Islamic Studies Center and as a senior researcher at Al Jazeera Center for Studies. Also as a member of Ennahda Movement, he served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs between 2011 and 2013 during the coalition government led by the former PM Hamadi Jebali.

First of all, thank you for accepting our interview. And my first question is that why Arab Spring gave fruit in Tunisia unlike other countries in the Middle East?

It's quite clear that Tunisians succeed in their process of democratization compared to other countries during what is called Arab spring. This is due to at least, 3 factors. The first one is the homogeneity of the Tunisian society which is not divided based on ethnicities or religions. There is no sectarian or religious division in Tunisia. So, the Tunisian society is very homogenous, synthesized, and unified. There is no such division between different segments of the Tunisian society. The other element is related to the absence of the legacy of military intervention into the public life or public's fear about such a possibility in Tunisia, compared to other countries. When you have a political crisis it will disable society, and impede building bridges between different political players, political actors and to reach a consensus. The third element is the rationality of the political players and mainly the Ennahda Party which was the winning political party in this process of democratization. So, based on the norms and desire to reach consensus between different

components of the society, we reached that stage. So the Tunisian democracy is based on compromises and consensus, it's not just based on valid books. We mix the legitimacy of election with the legitimacy of consensus.

Okay. Another good example was the Egyptian case. Egyptian case was on the brink of democracy. But it was destroyed by the military regime. For you, what was the main reason behind this failure?

I think there are several main reasons behind this failure. The first element is the intervention or the legacy of military intervention in Egypt itself. The modern history of Egypt's Mohammed Ali, arrived in 19th century, was based on the role of the military in the political life and the fabrication of the social society in Egypt, a modern society. The other element is the polarization between different political forces. Different political parties, members of civil society or components of the civil society were united against the regime of Mubarak. But when the regime of Mubarak collapsed, let's say when they succeed to topple down Mubarak, they failed to build a unified position to facilitate the process of democratization. The divi-

sion and the polarization between different political parties, complicated dynamics in Egypt and provided a golden opportunity for the army to intervene and to destroy the democratic process.

The worst experience happened in Syria as part of Arab Spring. Why the Syrian case represents the worst example? Is there any hope for Syria in the future according to you?

I think there are two elements here. The first one is related to the foreign intervention in the Syrian crisis which was transformed from a local, political conflict, based on the demands of democratization and freedom of Syrian people to an intervention with certain political calculations of the international forces and regional players. When regional players intervened in the Syrian affairs, they complicated the situation. The other element is related to the division within the Syrian society. The Syria regime played the sectarian card and the regime turned against the Sunni majority. And this has complicated the situation. The Sunni majority does not seem to have a unified position in the face of despotic and dictatorial regime. So the regime deepened the polarization within the Syrian society. Well, still there

is hope. I think the problem now is that the Syrian regime is not keen to sit on the table and to reach a consensus. However, I think there is no other solution for Syria. It is not possible to continue this open civil war, where all the players are losers in one sense. There is no winner in this civil war. The other way or choice is to sit on the table and to reach a consensus based on the banishment of power on the ground. It is quite clear there is no possibility for the regime to control the whole situation. But it is also quite clear that the military opposition has no ability to topple the Syria regime. So, the best way to reach a consensus is to achieve a regional consensus between different political players, maybe between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Russia who are also players in the Syrian affairs.

You're talking about compromise. Maybe this is from the Tunisian experience. In Syria, compromise is possible of course. But domestic actors are not so keen to make such kind of compromise. Do you think their external supporters for example Turkey, Saudi Arabia, United States and Russia, can play a positive role to create such a compromise?

I think the problem now is that the Syrian regime is not keen to sit on the table and to reach a consensus. However, I think there is no other solution for Syria. It is not possible to continue this open civil war, where all the players are losers in one sense.



Definitely. I think there's a need for a regional and international consensus; about the Syrian affairs and about this Syrian crisis to finish this civil war, which complicated the situation not only in Syria, but in the whole region due to the political vacuum. This power vacuum also gave rise to the rise of terrorism of DAESH and other terrorist groups. This is due to the political climate within this context of civil war. It provided a ground full of flourishing opportunities for the radical and extremist groups. So, the best way for the international community and for the regional players is that Russia, Iran definitely Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United States and other countries sit together and reach a consensus about the Syrian crisis.

When we compare these 3 cases; Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, many commentators argue that the main dynamics which differentiate these three cases are domestic dynamics. But what do you think about external dynamics which differentiate these three cases?

Well, I think the internal dynamics also play a crucial role, we can't deny this. We can't say that one hundred percent of the cards are in the hands of the international forces or regional players. If the local players succeed to reach a consensus, they will close the door to the intervention of the international forces which pursue their own interests. That's why the role of local forces is very important.

If they fail to solve their own problems, then they can invite external intervention.

That is correct.

The main obstacle before any external intervention in Tunisia is the fact that Tunisian domestic actors play their own role. They created their own compromised situation.

Absolutely. We encourage the regional as well as the international players to support the consensus that was made by the Tunisians. We know there are certain countries in the region which are not happy with this consensus, and they try to de-civilize the country. But based on the awareness and full political consciousness of the political players, at least we close the gates for these regional forces to intervene in the internal affairs and to de-civilize the country. So, the role of local players is very important.

The strongest actor in Tunisia in the post Arab Spring area was Ennahda. Ennahda stepped back and this created a compromise. Why other Islamic movements did not do same thing in their own countries like in Egypt, Syria and other post-Arab Spring countries?

Maybe there are differences in the political context. Egypt is, strategically speaking, more important than Tunisia and there are a lot of international and regional players. Definitely we stepped back because we found ourselves in a difficult position to make a choice. We could either choose the interest of the party or the interest of the country; to give priority to the process of the democratization or the interest of the party. At the end of the day, we chose the country's interests and the interests of the continuing process of democratization over the ones of the party. In other context, maybe in Egypt political polarization, the conflict between the forces of revolution itself are very deep. When there is no such political awareness within these different components of the political life and the civil societies. And this is the main difference. In Syria, the political conflict was so strong than the military conflict. And this has also complicated the situation. So, what is positive in Tunisia? When we have political problems, they remain within the political sphere as political problems. It's not transformed into sectarian or religious divisions or a military conflict.

I will come to the role of Turkey but before this let

We could either choose the interest of the party or the interest of the country; to give priority to the process of the democratization or the interest of the party. At the end of the day, we chose the country's interests and the interests of the continuing process of democratization over the ones of the party.

me ask this question: There are some great and regional powers which play a role in this picture. Regional powers are Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey. Great powers are Russia and the United States. Do you think there is any room for regional powers to play a positive role when great powers are playing a more significant role in this kind of atmosphere?

I think the role of regional forces or players is more important than the international players, due to the political vacuum that was left in the region after the American withdrawal from the region, after two failed wars in the region in Iraq and Afghanistan. So, the Americans do not have an active policy in the region now. And this has provided an opportunity for regional players to prove their presence in the region and to pursue their interest. Definitely, Turkey is very interested in the Syrian affairs due to a simple reason. It directly affects its national security and stability which is also the case regarding the Iraqi crisis. So, it is up to the regional players to make a consensus amongst them, and to preserve the stability in the region as well, maintaining a balanced relation between the regional players,

between Turkey, Iran, Russia which is in close proximity to the region. It is quite clear that they have important interests in the region. Sometimes they are threatened by the rise of terrorism in the region. That's why the compromises and consensus amongst regional players, mainly between Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Russians are very important to stabilize the region.

My last question is about Turkey and its role in these three cases. Turkey's relations with Tunisia are quite good in those days because of the success of the Arab Spring in Tunisia. However, when we come to Syria and Egypt, maybe because of the failure of Arab Spring, Turkey's relations are quite worse with these two countries. What are your thoughts about how Turkey can play a positive role in the settlement of the Syrian crisis, or in terms of the political situation in Egypt? Is there any room for Turkey to play a role in these two cases?

Definitely. I think mainly in Syria, Turkey has a very important role. You share a long border with Syria. Thus, the problem is part

of the national interest and national security of the country. I think you have no other choice other than being active in the Syrian affairs and to encourage other regional players to sit together and reach a consensus. The Egyptian case is more complicated because the Egyptian regime is neglecting any demands of political openness.

What do you think about Turkey's role in these three different cases and the future relations of Turkey with Syria, Egypt and Tunisia?

I think Turkey has a very important role in the region in within the neighboring countries and regarding this crisis alongside Turkey's border with Syria and Iraq. Turkey could play a very constructive role in building bridges amongst different parties of the conflict and with other regional players. Definitely you are more interested in the Syrian crisis because you shared a long border with Syria and it is part of the national security for Turkey. The same one is also true for the crisis in Iraq. You cannot neglect the Iraqi crisis because it affects your economy as well as your political stability. So, it is by this necessity that Turkey has to play an active role

in neighboring countries as well in the region. I think you have problems with Egypt for the simple reason that the Egyptian regime is neglecting the minimum demands of freedom. I think regardless of the difficulties you are facing in Turkey today or you may face in the future, Turkey puts itself in the right position, in the right side of history. I think there is no escape from political change. You may hear very frequently that the Arab Spring came to an end but I think there is no escape from political change in the region. It is a matter of time, because the demands and the needs for freedom, dignity, and democracy are still there among the people. I think the Egyptian regime might have an intention to go back to the previous era of Mubarak or even before Mubarak, but I think change is just a matter of time; there is no stability now in Egypt, it is fragile. The stability is based on military forces. It is quite clear that the military forces or the police forces will not guarantee real political stability. We discovered this in Tunisia after the Arab Spring as Egyptians and Libyans also realized after the era of Qaddafi. They also discover that what is called political stability was a fragile one.

ORSAM is an independent think-tank specializing on Middle Eastern affairs. ORSAM seeks to diversify sources of knowledge on the region and establish a channel of communication between the local experts and Turkish academic and policy circles. Toward that end, ORSAM facilitates the exchanges of officials, academics, strategists, journalists, businesspeople and members of civil society from the region with their Turkish counterparts. ORSAM conducts studies on the regional developments and disseminates their results to the policy and academic circles as well as the wider public through various publication outlets. ORSAM publications include books, reports, bulletins, newsletters, policy briefs, conference minutes and two journals *Ortadoğu Analiz* and *Ortadoğu Etütleri*.

© Content of this report is copyrighted to ORSAM. Except reasonable and partial quotation and use under the Act No. 5846, Law on Intellectual and Artistic Works, via proper citation, the content may not be used or re-published without prior permission by ORSAM. The views expressed in this report reflect only the opinions of its authors and do not represent the institutional opinion of ORSAM.



Ortadoğu Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi (ORSAM)

Süleyman Nazif Sokak No: 12-B Çankaya / Ankara

Tel: 0 (312) 430 26 09 Fax: 0 (312) 430 39 48

www.orsam.org.tr