**Chuck Spinney – Cogent Analysis pf Arab Spring Seven Key Challenges Not Available from CIA or Department of State – Plus Personal Appeal for Contributions to Keep CounterPunch Going**

Jeffrey St Claire, the editor at Counterpunch has given me permission to distribute the attached essay, "The Arab Spring at the Crossroads," by  Esam Al-Amin.  It was published in the subscription edition of Counterpunch and is not available at the CP website.  Al-Amin, who I do not know, has written a very informative summary of the crosscurrents now shaping the Arab world.  This is a subject of very great importance to the welfare of all Americans.  I urge you to read it carefully.



In addition to being informative, Al-Amin's essay is a prime example of the quality of the information now available in what the mainstream media likes to call the alternative press.  This brings me to my second reason for writing this blaster.  Counterpunch is having a rare fundraising drive and I am taking what for me is an unprecedented action of urging you to contribute.  I think it is important to support alternative news/opinion outlets like [Antiwar.com](http://Antiwar.com), Truthout, Alternet, and especially, since I am biased, Counterpunch. (Truth in advertising: I counted the late editor Alex Cockburn and still count his co-editor Jeffrey St Claire as friends.)

So, I urge you read the essay below -- you can determine whether or not you think it stands on its own merits.  If you feel this is the kind of info worth paying a little for, I encourage you to think about [purchasing a subscription or a gift sub for a friend or relative](http://www.easycartsecure.com/CounterPunch/Annual_Subscriptions.html) or sending a small [tax-deductible donation](http://www.easycartsecure.com/CounterPunch/Donations.html) to  CP's secure sever.  The Counterpunchers promise they won’t contact you to shake you down for more money or sell your name to any lists–not Karl Rove’s and especially not MoveOn’s. To contribute by phone you can call Becky or Deva toll free at: [1-800-840-3683](tel:1-800-840-3683)

Chuck Spinney

**The Arab Spring at the Crossroads**

**Seven Key Challenges**

By Esam Al-Amin

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Ever since Napoléon Bonaparte invaded Egypt in 1798, the relationship between the West and the Arab-Muslim East has been contentious and convoluted. Although this military leader of the first French Republic conquered Egypt for strategic reasons in his rivalry with the British and the Ottomans, the Muslim Arabs of the region - later dubbed "the Middle East" by an American naval officer - felt vulnerable, exposed, and weak.

However, as early as the eighth century this same landscape, the cradle of the Islamic civilization, represented the world's most advanced achievements in many fields, including philosophy, education, science, technology, architecture, administration, economic development and trade. As the Ottoman Turks took control of this vital region by the sixteenth century, the gap between Europe and the Middle East widened, especially in military technology. So it was relatively easy for the French expedition to take over Egypt. But what proved to be harder was to keep this strategic piece of geography. Egyptian resistance to this early imperial invasion was ferocious. Within three years Napoléon had to abandon his dreams and withdraw.

The immediate consequence of this brief interaction between East and West had a tremendous long-term impact. French laws and courts, as well as educational and administrative systems with their strict secular outlook, were introduced and slowly dominated the public discourse. A new class of elites was created that was tied to the much wealthier and technologically advanced European foreigners after the attempt by Egypt's new governor, Muhammad Ali Pasha, to establish a strong modern Egypt was thwarted and rolled back by the British, though independently aided by the High Porte in Istanbul.

**A Painful Legacy**

By the early twentieth century many countries in the Middle East were under direct European colonial rule, including Algeria (1830) and Tunisia (1881) by France, Egypt (1882) and Sudan (1896) by Britain and Libya (1911) by Italy. In the aftermath of World War I, the rest of the Middle East came under direct colonial dominance or influence as the Sykes-Picot Accord of 1916 divided the sphere of influence and direct occupation between Britain and France, with Iraq, Palestine, Trans-Jordan, and the small sheikhdoms along the Gulf falling to the British with the Levant (Syria and Lebanon) going to the French.

The significance of the religious and cultural aspects of occupation did not escape the colonialist powers. Upon entering Jerusalem in December 1917, British General Edmund Allenby remarked, "The wars of the crusaders are now complete," while French military General Henri Gouraud, who conquered Damascus in July 1920, stood at Saladin's grave, kicked at it and declared: "The Crusades have ended now. Awake Saladin, we have returned. My presence here consecrates the victory of the Cross over the Crescent." By November 1917, British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour issued a declaration that pledged Britain's full support to the international Zionist movement in establishing a national home in Palestine for the Jewish people as soon as British control over the country was consolidated.

For the next half-century most Arab societies were engaged in national liberation and resistance movements against colonial powers leading to national independence for many Arab countries including Syria and Lebanon in the 1940s, Egypt, Sudan, Iraq, and Tunisia in the 1950s, Kuwait, Algeria and Libya in the 1960s, and the Emirates along the Persian Gulf and south Yemen in the 1970s.

**Palestine: the Center of Arab Politics**

In addition to the national liberation struggle that spread across the Arab world throughout this period, another parallel conflict in Palestine between the Zionist movement and the Palestinian and Arab peoples was taking place, eventually leading to several wars (1948, 1956, 1967, 1973, 1982, first Intifada 1987-91, second Intifada 2000-2003, 2006 in Lebanon, 2008-9 in Gaza.)

The direct impact of the 1948 and 1967 wars was the displacement and exile of over half the Palestinian population in many countries outside Palestine, but especially in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Their number today exceeds five million people. While Israel was established in 1948 on 78 percent of historical Palestine, by 1967 Israel was in total control of not only all of Palestine but also of the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula and the Syrian Golan Heights.

The direct effects of the 1973 war were not just effectively taking Egypt out of the Arab-Israeli conflict in exchange for returning the Sinai to Egypt with limited sovereignty, but more importantly, consolidating the Israeli occupation over the occupied territories, particularly the West Bank and Golan Heights. In 2005, demographic and security considerations forced Israel to withdraw from Gaza (less than 3 percent of historical Palestine with almost 1.5 million people, mostly descendants of the 1948 refugees) in order to consolidate its control over the West Bank and East Jerusalem. By 2012, there were over 440 Israeli settlements, outposts, and other colonists occupying almost 45 percent of the land and 80 percent of the aquifers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, with as many as 600,000 Israeli settlers living on these lands.

Not surprisingly, after each major war a new Arab political order was established. Before the 1948 war the Arab polity was dominated by a façade of elite parties that adopted the liberal-democratic traditions of the colonial powers and was dominated by the bourgeois class, especially in the countries surrounding Palestine, namely Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. After the 1948 catastrophe many of the Arab governments (with the exception of Saudi Arabia, the Gulf sheikhdoms, Jordan and Morocco) replaced monarchies or tribal systems with republics and revolutionary councils. Socialism replaced capitalism in most Arab societies as a new class of elites controlled by the military was established.

But these socialist republics soon lost their legitimacy in the wake of the disastrous 1967 defeat to be replaced with the new Palestinian national movement led by many Palestinian resistance factions under the PLO umbrella. In short, since the end of WWII the Arab societies conferred political legitimacy on the regimes and movements that confronted the Zionist project in the heart of the Arab world, and Israeli aggression and expansion.

In the wake of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the struggle of the Palestinian national resistance movement, dominated for two decades by secularist and leftist groups, came to a halt.  Within a few years, the composition of the resistance movement slowly transformed during the first Intifada (1987-1991) to be dominated by the Islamic movements, namely Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah. By the end of the second Intifada (2001-2003), which effectively ended the flawed Oslo Peace Process, this transformation was complete. After eighteen years of fierce resistance, Hezbollah defeated Israel, which had to withdraw from south Lebanon in 2000. In addition, Hamas was the biggest beneficiary of the 2005 Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, since no political cost was associated with the withdrawal. Soon Hezbollah and Hamas dominated Lebanese and Palestinian politics with the former dominating the Lebanese political discourse, and the latter winning the Palestinian elections in 2006 and subsequently taking over Gaza in 2007.

The political legitimacy of the Islamist groups was further consolidated in the Arab world when Israel failed to defeat the Islamic resistance groups in the 2006 war against Hezbollah, and the 2008-9 war against the Hamas government in Gaza. Although Israel inflicted massive deaths and destruction in both wars, it could not exact a political price on its nemeses. In both conflicts it was demonstrated to peoples across the region that Israel, which imposed its policies by force on most of the impotent Arab regimes, could not dictate its ultimatums against these popular movements.

**The Arab Spring**

By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, frustrated citizens across the Arab world had had enough: corrupt and weak regimes had stolen billions while relying on a ruthless security state to protect them, Western humiliation overflowed in Iraq and central Asia, untamed Israeli aggression and arrogance peaked, economic stagnation spread, and senseless violence by al-Qaeda-like groups that did not represent the aspirations of the people erupted across the region. Meanwhile, countries such as Turkey, Iran, and Israel developed economically and progressed in many fields while their societies either stagnated or drifted backwards.

Furthermore, the political horizons across the Arab world were closed shut. In November 2010 the Mubarak regime in Egypt brazenly held parliamentary elections that resulted in no seats to any opposition group. In many countries regimes that supposedly came through "free and fair" elections were so dismissive of their citizens' aspirations and concerns they even started preparing their societies for their sons' succession or family rule including in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Tunisia (the countries of the Arab Spring), just like the other monarchies in the Arab world. In Syria, this succession had already taken place as it was imposed a decade earlier without much opposition because of its sectarian nature, while it prided itself as a regime that resisted Israel and the West as it supported the resistance movements.

As the Arab world boiled, all that was needed was the flame to get even hotter. It came when a frustrated Tunisian vendor was prevented from selling his goods and suffered humiliation by a police officer and set himself on fire in December 2010. Within days, a revolutionary spirit engulfed the country and resulted in Ben Ali, its dictator of 23 years, to flee the country after 28 days. Soon the same spirit swept across Egypt as millions took to the streets forcing the ouster of Mubarak, its dictator of 29 years, after only 18 days. By February 2011 tens of thousands of people in Yemen, Libya, Morocco, Jordan, and Bahrain were in the streets demanding freedom and change, and were soon to be joined by thousands of Syrians in March of that year.

What was once unthinkable became routine. Within 18 months, four regimes were toppled and democratic elections were taking place. **In Tunisia**, democratic elections took place in October 2011. The Islamist Ennahdha party won the elections with 41 percent of the vote and formed a coalition government with two other leftist parties. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the Salafist Al-Noor party won the elections in early 2012 with almost 73 percent of the vote. Five months later the elections were invalidated by the Supreme Court for technical reasons. A subsequent presidential election resulted in Dr. Muhammad Morsi, the head of the MB's political party, winning the presidency in a hotly contested race. Soon the new president was able to out-maneuver the military council by retiring most of their leaders and revoking their power-grab decrees.

**In Libya**, after militarily defeating the Qaddafi regime loyalists and killing its dictator of 41 years with the help of NATO, free elections were held for the first time in decades. It was based on 40 percent party lists and 60 percent individuals. Although a coalition of liberal parties won almost half the party lists, the Islamist parties still came on top as their allies won most of the individual lists. Their candidates for Congress leader and prime minister won the posts, although with very small margins. In Yemen, the ouster of its dictator of 33 years, Ali Abdullah Saleh, proved very difficult as Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states and the United States imposed Yemen's vice president to head the transitional period and allow Saleh a face-saving exit, even though his army killed thousands of demonstrators in his attempt to hold on to power.

**In Bahrain**, aided by the Saudi army and the political support of the West, the monarchical regime was able to frustrate the demonstrators and keep them at bay. Because the opposition to the regime was mostly Shi'ite in this tiny majority Shia' country controlled by a Sunni dynasty, the traction in the Arab street to this uprising was limited. But the opposite is true **in Syria** where the uprising is being led by majority Sunnis against the minority Alawite regime in Damascus. Thus, the Syrian revolution is widely supported across the Arab world.

But despite eighteen bloody months that may have resulted in over 25,000 deaths and 250,000 refugees, mostly in neighboring Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, the Assad regime remains in power. There are many reasons the government has not fallen. First, the opposition is divided and unable to unite under a unified leadership and political discourse. Second, the Assad regime is strongly supported by regional players such as Iran, Iraq, and Hezbollah, and international powers, namely Russia and China, which cast three vetoes in the UN Security Council during this period to shield the Syrian regime from any accountability. Third, as a sectarian regime, most of its army leaders and elite units are from the minority Alawite sect that tie their future to the fate of the regime and are willing to use brutal tactics to maintain power. Fourth, most of the Western countries that support the opposition are not willing to use military might to oust the regime in the same way they employed NATO in Libya, not only because the regime is much stronger militarily than the Qaddafi regime was, but also because they are not sure who might ultimately benefit from decimating the Assad regime. They would rather clip the regime's military power first, then supervise an orchestrated transition as in Yemen.

**In Morocco**, King Muhammad VI immediately recognized the trend and preempted the revolutionary spirit by giving up symbolic powers and allowing a free election that resulted in the victory of a moderate Islamic party to head the government. The revolutionary parties including a more popular Islamic party boycotted the elections and continued to wait in the background for a more opportune time to resume their protests.

**In Jordan** the demonstrations haven't stopped since early 2011. Although King Abdullah II tried desperately to appease his constituents by replacing governments and offering free elections, the Muslim Brotherhood - the best organized political movement in the country - has rejected his overtures and insists on major reforms that transform the regime into a constitutional monarchy.

**In Algeria**, the military is still largely in charge even though it rules behind a civilian president. But the conditions for a major eruption in the streets are ripe even though the populace is weary of the confrontation with the military, which resulted in tens of thousands of casualties over two decades when the military cancelled parliamentary elections in 1991.

Similarly, the conditions for an uprising **in Sudan** are strong. The government is desperately trying to deal with the breakup of the country as it lost more than 70 percent of its foreign currency income while failing to offer a national reconciliation program to appeal to the opposition parties to join.

**In the West Bank**, economic conditions have reached the brink of disaster, as the Palestinian Authority (PA) could not even pay the salaries of its employees after the total collapse of the Oslo peace process. All that is needed for a major uprising against the PA and the Israeli occupation is a spark, that once ignited would not only end the façade of Oslo and the PA, but possibly spread to other countries in the region as well.

**Key Challenges Facing the Arab Spring**

The revolutions and transformations taking place in the Arab World are nothing short of remarkable. Although generally they have been following a positive trend, it is far too soon to predict the course they will follow. There are seven key challenges facing the Arab Spring. How the political players in the region deal with these challenges will ultimately seal the fate of the greatest phenomena the Arab world has witnessed in half a millennium. These challenges are:

**1) The Challenge of Legitimacy**

For decades political legitimacy in the Arab world was bestowed on the basis of hereditary rule, the barrel of the gun, or resistance and opposition to Israel and Western colonialism. However, after the Arab Spring it is clear that legitimacy is now conferred through the will of the people. The future of political stability in the Arab world, including the monarchies, will ultimately be tied to free and fair elections. If this trend continues, it is clear that over the long-term people across the region will no longer accept dictators or dynasties and will insist on constitutional governments and institutions, democratic governance and non-corrupt political systems, peaceful transition of power, the rule of law, free and fair elections, and guaranteed freedoms and rights. Many political observers hailed the nascent experiments of the past year in the Arab Spring countries as hopeful signs of free and fair elections that embodied the will of the electorate.

**2) The Challenge of Identity**

There is no doubt that the Arab-Islamic culture has shaped this region for over 1400 years. Thus, Islam as a religion, history, culture, and legal framework has been an integral part of its polity and society. The Arab Spring phenomena that brought political freedom and openness has also allowed the question of identity to become front and center. Many secular groups, liberal and leftist, have resented the success of the groups that belonged to so-called political Islam. But on a more fundamental level, some of the secular and liberal groups, especially in Tunisia and Egypt, that have so far garnered very little popular support, also reject any public role for Islam in society.

But every time an election has taken place in the past year, whether in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Kuwait, or elsewhere, the forces of political Islam have easily won the contested elections. Even Western governments that for decades supported corrupt dictators for fear of Islamic political parties have come to realize that they must accept the will of the people and respect their choices. Furthermore, moderate Islamic parties such as Ennahdha in Tunisia or the MB in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen have repeatedly rejected the notion of the religious state, and have all vowed to accept the concept of a civil state and democratic governance as the basis for the future political institutions governing the country, albeit with Shari'a as its framework (with its vast capacity for interpretation including by lay people) and constitutional guarantees of freedoms and protections for minorities.

Increasingly it seems that this challenge is being settled by the people of the region who continuously choose to affirm their cultural identity all while rejecting religious extremism and unrestrained secularism.

**3) The Challenge of Independence**

Lacking political legitimacy, the regimes toppled by the Arab revolutions and uprisings as well as those who desperately now cling to power have for decades relied on their patrons in the West, the Soviet Union or Russia, its successor, to stay in power. But people across the region no longer accept that their elected governments be client states to, or follow the dictates of the West. Rather, they expect their governments to chart an independent course of action notwithstanding foreign pressures as long as they respect the will of the people, adhere to the national interests of the country, and value public opinion. It should be emphasized that independence in this context is not only political but also includes the economic, social, and cultural spheres.

However, the current governments in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, for example, will soon be challenged as many Western governments, especially the United States, start demanding them to make unpopular choices. But the litmus test will not be whether these elected governments and others in the region accept or reject every Western favored option, but whether decisions taken undermine the long-term interests and sovereignty of each country especially with respect to strategic issues such as the Palestinian cause, political alliances in the region and internationally, or economic and military policies.

**4) The Challenge of Sectarianism and Ethnocentrism**

This challenge is probably one of the most dangerous threats facing Arab societies from within, particularly the Sunni-Shi'a and the Arab-Kurdish divides. There are at least four countries in the region with majority Shi'a populations: Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and a plurality in Lebanon. There are also significant Shi'a populations in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. It appears that this challenge could be overcome on two levels, namely, religious and political. On the religious side the major scholars of both sects must come together and reach a historic rapprochement and resolve their traditional disputes. But more importantly a political understanding or alliance must be achieved between the major countries in the region, including Egypt, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia - a very difficult feat to achieve in the current regional power structure and state of affairs.

Perhaps the best example of the complexity of this challenge is demonstrated by the cases of Syria and Bahrain. The regime in Syria, which is ruled by the Alawites, an offshoot of Shi'ism, is strongly supported by Iran, Iraq, and Hezbollah, while the opposition, mainly led by Sunni groups, is strongly supported by Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the rest of the regional Sunni countries. It is difficult to see how the conflict would end as over 25,000 people have already lost their lives with no end in sight. But a deal could actually be struck between the major regional powers, namely, Egypt, Iran, and Turkey where Assad and other senior officials leave power while a broad coalition including elements from the regime takes over. In Bahrain, the opposite is true where Iran and other Shi'a powers support the opposition. In this context, Sunni powers must pressure the Bahraini authorities to share power with the Shi'a majority.

Another threat is the potential insistence of the large Kurdish population to establish a Kurdish state at the expense of the territorial integrity of four countries: Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria. So far many Kurds have been content with full autonomy. However, outside forces including Israel have been quietly encouraging the Kurds to secede and establish their own country despite a potential devastating conflict with their neighbors.

**5)  The Challenge of Social Justice and Economic Development**

The main slogan of the people in the street during the Arab Spring was "Freedom, Dignity, and Social Justice." If constitutional and democratic governance promise freedom, and independence yields dignity and respect, the challenge of establishing social justice cannot be achieved without fundamental restructuring of the power and wealth relationships within the whole society. If Islamic businessmen in Egypt were to replace the Mubarak regime businessmen while maintaining the unjust and unrestrained capitalist mentality of monopoly, exploitation, and without protections, regulations or limits, then the whole experiment will ultimately collapse.

In all spheres and indicators of economic development such as poverty rate, GDP, unemployment, literacy rates, lack of healthcare, sub par educational institutions, deteriorating infrastructure, corruption, nepotism, rigid bureaucracy, etc., the new democratic governments have to not only deliver vast improvements within a short period of time, but also develop a system where all the gains and reforms are legally protected and institutionalized.

**6) The Challenge of Modernity**

As Islamic groups take over power across the Middle East and Islam becomes a dominant cultural and legal framework, many issues will come to the fore as the forces that champion the literal interpretations of Islam clash with other moderate Islamic and secular voices. What is needed is for the outside forces to give space for the issues to be sorted out internally and without interference. In the most important Arab societies such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, and Tunisia, voices of moderate interpretations of Islamic law and culture are much stronger than the extremists. Over time even most of the conservative voices tend to accept modern interpretations and viewpoints. But outside forces must stay in the background and refrain from meddling in this internal debate.

**7) The Challenge of Geography (and Israel)**

Most geopolitical experts consider North Africa and the Middle East as the world's most important strategic region with its control of over half of the world's energy resources, and vital trade routes and sea lanes such as the Suez Canal. Moreover, Europe feels vulnerable with the proximity of over 200 million people on their southern shores, which makes it imperative that the region does not explode or export chaos and instability. Furthermore, there are three powerful neighbors to the Arab world that present strategic challenges, namely Iran, Turkey, and Israel- though rivals, the first two are considered potential allies, while the latter as a strategic threat because of its aggressive and expansionist policies, as well as its continuous persecution of the Palestinians and denial of their rights.

In addition, there are eight monarchies within the Arab world (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Jordan and Morocco.) As democracy takes root in the region over the next few years, it is difficult to see how these countries might escape the transformation to either constitutional monarchies or republics. Indeed, their resistance to change may pose a significant threat to the complete transformations of the new Arab democracies.

Moreover, within the next decade there will be shifting alliances within the region and with forces outside it including, not only the NATO countries, but also China, Russia, and other emerging international powers. Such alliances will determine the future of this region and the world. As the countries of the Arab Spring continue to develop and assert their power, it is very difficult to see how Israel can remain viable in its current state of affairs. It will have to either give up the entire territories it occupied in 1967 to the state of Palestine or yield to the bi-national one-state solution.

In his groundbreaking study Orientalism, Edward Said captured the essence of imperialism when he spoke of the French enterprise in Egypt from the perspective of the colonizer, as it was "To restore a region from its present barbarism to its former classical greatness; to instruct the Orient in the ways of the modern West."

But from the standpoint of the colonized, Middle East historian Juan Cole perceptively concluded in his book Napoléon's Egypt, that the West's colonialist enterprise ended because "Middle Eastern politicians and public ceased being willing to cooperate with it, and because they had gained the tools to stand up to it."

***And therein lies the real potential of the Arab Spring.***

As a relatively new phenomena, the Arab Spring holds tremendous promise to the hopes and aspirations of the people across the region. But with this promise comes enormous challenges. How the new Arab democrats and Muslim patriots deal with the internal and external challenges will ultimately seal the fate of the Arab Spring and determine its place in the annals of history: either as an asterisk of a potential historical moment that quickly dissipated, or as one of the most significant events in the history of mankind - a new renaissance for the Arab people. ***CP***

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