

There Is No End in Sight for Turmoil in the Middle East

In this edition of the Interview, Fair Observer talks to Gilbert Achcar, professor of international relations at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London.

The Middle East and North Africa continues to reverberate from the 2011 Arab Spring protests that rocked the region eight years ago. The protests, which have also been referred to as uprisings, revolutions and revolts, led to the overthrow of lifelong dictators in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. While Tunisia emerged from the Arab Spring with new competitive elections, consensus politics and a series of democratic reforms, Egypt entrenched authoritarian rule with the election of the military commander Abdel Fattah el-Sisi after he led a coalition to depose President Mohamed Morsi.

Sisi has since ruled with an iron fist, limiting the number of opposition candidates allowed to compete in elections and cracking down on any form of dissent. Amnesty International has described Egypt under Sisi's rule as "an open-air prison for critics" and "more dangerous than ever" for activists. [\[1\]](#)

Libya, meanwhile, is fragmented between two rival governments split between the eastern and western parts of the country. The political vacuum created in the wake of the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi enabled the rise of armed groups that gain significant influence over political factions, further complicating the peace process and prospects of a unified country. General Khalifa Haftar, who heads the Libyan National Army in the east with the support of Egypt, the UAE and France, has begun advancing on Tripoli in a bid to expand his power to the west, threatening to ignite another full-blown civil war with the UN-backed government.

Then there's Syria. President Bashar al-Assad responded to peaceful protests in 2011 with a brutal crackdown that threw fuel on the fire, which grew into a brutal civil war, now in its ninth year. The conflict is being fought on multiple fronts, from a civil war between the Assad regime and the opposition, a sectarian proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and a war against the Islamic State (IS) and

other Islamist groups. The conflict has left over half a million Syrians dead and over 12 million displaced both internally and around the world. [2] With IS losing its last remaining stronghold of Baghouz in March, many are speculating whether the conflict is coming to an end in Syria.

The Arab Spring has also helped alter political dynamics throughout the region, at the forefront of which is Saudi Arabia and Iran's cold war over competing spheres of influence. Iran has undermined Riyadh's ambitions to position itself as the region's leader by bridging its Shia sphere of influence across Iraq, Lebanon and Syria. The two countries have transformed Yemen into a sectarian battleground to swing the pendulum of power in their favor. Under the Trump administration in Washington, however, Iran has found its regional influence and power waning as the US has thrown its support behind the kingdom.

While President Donald Trump has sent mixed messages with his Middle East foreign policy — from withdrawing from the Iranian nuclear deal to calling for a complete withdrawal of US troops from Syria to bolstering the US's support for both Israel and Saudi Arabia — his actions have had, and will continue to have, a profound impact on the region.

Gilbert Achcar is professor of development studies and international relations at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. Professor Achcar is an expert on the Middle East and North Africa, and has written profusely on the region, particularly on the Arab Spring and the regional order. His published work includes *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising* and *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*.

The region is a fluid environment and constantly shifting, and our interview with Professor Achcar took place prior to President Abdelaziz Bouteflika stepping down in Algeria, Haftar's advance on Tripoli and the ouster of President Omar al-Bashir in Sudan, all events that transpired over the span of the past two weeks. At the same time, much of the region is static between Saudi Arabia and Iran's relentless power struggle and the Syrian conflict. [3]

In this edition of the Interview, Fair Observer talks to Achcar about the ongoing turmoil in the region, his vision for its future and reasons for hope, if not optimism.

The text has been lightly edited for clarity.

Dina Yazdani: Last December, President Trump announced that the US had defeated the Islamic State in Syria, and that he was withdrawing all US troops from the country. Last month, after agreeing to keep 400 US troops in Syria, he claimed again that US forces had reclaimed 100% of IS territory. Is the Islamic State truly defeated — can it ever be defeated?

Gilbert Achcar: That's a good question indeed. The very nature of such networks makes it very difficult to suppress them. ISIS is the continuation of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which had morphed into the Islamic State of Iraq and then re-emerged in Syria during the civil war, turning into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, then the Islamic State tout court after it spilled over back into Iraq. This kind of terroristic enterprise will carry on as long as there are factors breeding violent hostility to the United States and the local regimes. We will keep seeing various brands of terrorist networks popping up as long as the underlying causes are there.

Yazdani: Since IS lost the territory it managed to conquer in Iraq and Syria, do you anticipate them resorting to more guerrilla warfare or splintering into smaller groups that will make it harder for US and other forces to crackdown on them?

Achcar: Well, it wasn't difficult to foresee that in the face of overwhelming power — the whole world is leagued against ISIS — they wouldn't be able to hold on for long to the vast territory they controlled at their peak. That they managed to keep a portion of it until very recently is what is most surprising indeed. It is a testimony to their determination, enhanced by the sense of being trapped in their last recesses.

But otherwise the logical response by fighters in the face of such circumstances is to abandon the territory under their control and resort to guerrilla warfare and/or terrorist attacks, whether in the same region or at large. One shouldn't forget that ISIS, or IS, has spread to other regional territories such as the Sinai and Libya, as well as territories beyond the Arab world in sub-Saharan Africa or elsewhere. So how can one claim to have terminated them when they have managed to form an extensive international network still active in several territories? [[4](#)]

Yazdani: Trump has made it clear that defeating IS was America's only

mission in Syria in his view. Since he claimed that the group has been defeated, at least territorially, what is his strategy in Syria? Do you believe that US troops are going to be gradually withdrawn, and who would replace them if they do? Does this not play in the hands of Iran, which has been pressuring the US to leave?

Achcar: There is a fundamental contradiction in Trump's position on Syria. It is manifest in that many of those who are usually very much in agreement with him are for once rather unhappy with the position he took on Syria. Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, sees eye to eye with Trump on practically everything, except on this issue. That's because Trump's desire to remove troops from Syria clashes with Netanyahu's anti-Iranian priority, for the one key function of US presence in Syria is precisely to make sure that the vast territory east of the Euphrates, which is now controlled by the US-backed Kurdish troops and their Arab partners of the Syrian Democratic Forces, doesn't fall under Iranian control.

If US troops leave northeastern Syria, Kurdish troops won't remain in the Arab parts of that territory. They will withdraw into the Kurdish areas, into what they call Rojava. The major threat for them is Turkey, not Iran. The Turkish president is seizing every opportunity to promise that he will invade the Kurdish-dominated territory in northeast Syria. The Arab-populated territory east of the Euphrates would thus become open to Syrian regime control, which means either Russian or Iranian control, or both, since the Syrian regime as an independent factor is but a fiction nowadays — it depends fully on its two backers. The withdrawal of US troops will inevitably be an invitation for other powers to get control of that large swath of territory.

For Iran, this would be a very important opportunity because it would allow it to complete the corridor that goes from Tehran through to the shores of Lebanon, which has become the main axis of the Iranian regime's expansionist drive. That's why some of the closest people to Trump on the issue of Iran were very disappointed by his announcement of US withdrawal from Syria. They exerted pressure on him, which led him to compromise and agree to keep a reduced number of troops.

Yazdani: What's next for Syria?

Achcar: Very difficult to tell, not only for Syria, but for the whole region since it

entered a protracted period of destabilization starting from the 2011 Arab Spring. The explosion was long overdue after the accumulation of so many economic, social and political problems in the region. It took a very tragic character in Syria, unfortunately. What we are witnessing now is not the Syrian regime's victory over the Syrian opposition, but indeed the victory of the alliance of Iran and Russia on the ground in Syria.

The big question, at least for the foreseeable future, is, therefore, What will happen between the two partners of this victory? How will the relations between Russia and Iran in Syria evolve? That's the big question because, although the two countries converged in shoring up the regime of Bashar al-Assad, they have quite different agendas. The issue of Iran is a major card in Vladimir Putin's hand: He is in the best position to prevent Iran from consolidating its presence in Syria. He wouldn't do any of that just for the sake of controlling Syria because he already controls what is of any need to him there. It would rather be a bargaining card in his relations with Europe and the United States.

For Europe, the refugee issue is the most serious outcome of the Syrian tragedy, the millions of Syrians who had to flee their country and take refuge either in adjacent countries or in Europe. They are concentrated in such large numbers in some countries, especially Syria's neighboring countries, that it can't be contemplated that they could remain there for many years without becoming a major source of tension.

Many countries have a major stake in getting those refugees back to Syria, and Russia holds the keys to that because it is the only power that can provide a credible safety guarantee to the refugees and entice them to go back to their homeland. Russia is seen by the Syrians as a pro-regime power, for sure, but one without a stake in the sectarian or ethnic revenge wars that unfolded in the country. Iran, on the other hand, is the exact opposite of that. A major part of Syrian refugees would not contemplate going back to parts of Syria that are dominated by Iran, a power motivated by a sectarian political agenda.

This said, the only safe prediction one can make about Syria, or the whole region for that matter, is that the situation won't stabilize in the foreseeable future. The turmoil is not going to cease there for many years to come, if not decades.

Yazdani: Earlier this year, you wrote in Al-Quds al-Arabi that the old Arab

regimes' despotic order will eventually collapse. Can you explain what you mean by despotic order and what will it take to precipitate these regimes' collapse? [5]

Achcar: The despotic character of the order that is prevailing in the Arabic-speaking region is obvious, with very few exceptions. One of them is today's Tunisia, the only one of the six countries where the Arab Spring did peak that managed to maintain its democratic gains. Another is Lebanon, a country which has a long-standing different political tradition because of its multi-confessional political system. But beyond that, most of the states in the region are either autocracies or military dictatorships in the sense that the military controls the regime, as is the case in Egypt and Algeria, for instance. The eight Arab monarchies are all absolute monarchies, even those with a constitution and parliament. Sovereignty belongs to the king, or emir or sultan in all eight cases, not to the people. All remaining countries have authoritarian regimes.

This despotic order cannot remain in place forever. Of course, the question is, After how many years will it end, and after having done what kind of damage and caused the death of how many people? What I meant, however, is what I have been saying since 2011, from the very beginning of what was called the Arab spring: I have been emphasizing the fact that it was not going to be a smooth, peaceful and brief phase of democratic transition as the label Arab Spring did convey. The 2011 revolutionary shockwave affected the whole region. A major surge in social protest occurred in almost all its countries during that year, with six countries witnessing major uprisings. This was not a coincidence or merely a result of linguistic contagion. It was the product of the accumulation over decades of several explosive factors, most crucial among which were low rates of economic growth leading to the world's highest rates of unemployment — especially youth unemployment, male and female.

The same explosive ingredients are now being produced massively at higher speed. Unemployment, youth unemployment, and all sorts of social and economic problems are only getting worse. They are not at all on their way to ease off in the region. That's why I emphasize the fact that it is a major structural crisis that can't be solved short of radical change in the region's social, economic and political order. Of course, such a change is not easy to obtain, especially in the face of regimes that are resolved to massacre in order to remain in power.

It takes exceptional leaderships to be able to steer through such a change, and they are nowhere on the horizon for now. This means that we are facing the prospect of many years, probably several decades, of turmoil in the region. And there's no guarantee, to be sure, of a happy end. If a radical change for the better doesn't happen, the alternative is more chaos and violence, and more descent into barbarism of which ISIS was a such a crude illustration.

Yazdani: You mentioned earlier that the Arab Spring has shaken the entire region. Are the protests that we are witnessing today in Sudan, Algeria, Jordan and Gaza a second wave of the Arab Spring? I think it is also interesting to note that these countries did not undergo massive upheavals in 2011, unlike the six countries that you mentioned earlier, nor did they see any significant political transformation during that period.

Achcar: But you should have added Tunisia to the list. Tunisia was the country that opened the way to the Arab Spring when the movement started there in December 2010 and achieved a victory in January 2011. Since 2011, there has been a setback for the whole wave on the regional scale: In 2013, a shift occurred from revolutionary upsurge into reactionary backlash with a partial restoration of the old regimes in Egypt and Tunisia, and reactionary violence turning into civil war in Libya and Yemen. Despite that, the underlying structural crisis kept getting worse everywhere, leading to social and political struggles starting, or resuming, in various countries.

The ongoing upsurges in Sudan and Algeria are not lightnings in a blue sky. Sudan had witnessed a wave of protests in 2011, and then again in 2013, and a new round last year before the present upsurge. In the face of harsh repression, it took time for the movement to gather momentum into the kind of massive mobilization that we have been seeing in recent weeks. In Algeria, there were limited protests in 2011, and the regime quickly offered economic concessions, like the Saudi kingdom did. They managed to buy the people's quiescence by injecting oil money in the form of increases in wages and social spending. In Algeria, there was an additional factor that is now at play in all Arab countries, which is the fear of getting into the kind of tragic situation that developed in Syria over the last few years or the one that Algeria has been through in the 1990s.

But as we can see now, even such a deterrent as the terrible decade of war that

Algeria has witnessed 20 years ago was not enough to deter indefinitely its people from rising. The young people now came to the fore. They want to change the regime. It won't be easy, for sure. But the fact is that the Algerian people have joined in its turn the regional aspiration of the people to affirm its will. "The people want..." is the slogan that you hear everywhere. The people want to overthrow the regime, or the people want this or that. This is very important, and it will certainly carry on. Whatever defeats there may be, repression won't solve the core problems. Even in Syria itself, and despite the magnitude of the tragedy, social protest has been recently on the rise. This is to say that it is a revolutionary process for the long haul, and that more countries will join the fray sooner or later.

Morocco is another country that has already witnessed important waves of social protest. The crisis is simmering there, and sooner or later it will explode. Anyone believing that Egypt has reached long-term stability under Sisi's dictatorial rule is fooling themselves. That's another country where the boiling point will be reached again, rather sooner than later, because the social and economic conditions are becoming unbearable.

Yazdani: There's increasing scrutiny of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman — his growing litany of human rights abuses, from the Saudi-led war on Yemen to the brutal killing of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi and, more recently, the mass detention and torture of high-profile activists, particularly women rights activists. Do you think that the kingdom is feeling any pressure either politically or economically from the international community to reverse course, especially as it is positioning itself as a regional leader and even as a global player? And is the Trump administration's close relationship with MBS helping or hurting human rights in the country?

Achcar: Reversing course in the Saudi kingdom would take the dismissal of the crown prince from his position — he is basically a spoiled brat. He grew up in an environment where he believes everything is permissible to him. And he is very ambitious and without scruples. He's the product of a rotten monarchy where a few thousand princes have almost unlimited access to state resources. What we see today concentrated in one person does not represent such a major change in the situation of the country. It's just that MBS has become the single embodiment of the ruling elite at the expense of the other members. But for the rest of the

people, the climate of terror has always been there.

The fact that MBS is backed by Trump and his family — Jared Kushner being in a central position in this regard — played a key role in limiting the domestic impact of the damage that resulted from Jamal Khashoggi's botched assassination. The Saudi kingdom is so closely linked to the United States that if Donald Trump were to leave the scene and be replaced by a president with a different attitude, it might well lead to the dismissal of the crown prince. It is certainly a problem for a regime that is so dependent on the United States for its security to be ruled by a person who, aside from Trump and Kushner, is loathed in the US and the rest of the world.

Yazdani: I would like to ask a question that would invite some optimism or flowery picture of the future of the Middle East, but I don't want to manufacture any optimism if it doesn't exist. So instead I'm going to ask, What is the biggest threat to stability in the Middle East today?

Achcar: Well it's not a threat — it's a reality. The main factor of destabilization is the socio-economic blockage of the region. Add to that several factors that are pouring fuel over the fire. One of them is, of course, the Israeli state. Netanyahu's provocative policies have tremendously increased anger at the regional level, not only among the Palestinians. The war in Yemen is a major source of tension in addition to its being the worst humanitarian crisis of our time. Iran's behavior in the region and the Saudi-Iranian sectarian rivalry are also key factors in increasing tensions all over the region. So, there are many factors of destabilization and hardly any at all working in the opposite direction.

But as you said, we can't manufacture optimism, and it would be utterly artificial to end on an optimistic note when dealing with such acute and immense problems. I make a distinction, however, between optimism and hope. Optimism is, of course, the belief that the best will occur, but hope is different — it is conditional. Hope is the acknowledgement, while hope exists, that there is a potential for something better.

And from that point of view, I would assert categorically that there are reasons for hope. The potential exists. There's a new generation that is not willing to be subservient as previous generations have been, a generation of young rebels who will keep fighting, especially when their own future and even their own present

are at stake. The key issue is that of leadership, as I mentioned earlier. Will we see the emergence of organized movements and leaderships capable of coping with the immense task of transforming this part of the world? If the young generation manages to produce an organized movement able to channel their formidable energy into bringing the needed transformation, the region could get out of this very dark tunnel and back on the track of modernization and development.

This is a big “if,” for sure, but in the face of the pessimism that prevails today, it is important to emphasize that the potential exists. When optimistic euphoria prevailed in 2011, I sounded pessimistic to some, and today I would sound optimistic to others or even the same. But I’m neither pessimistic nor optimistic: It’s just a matter of recognizing the scale of the problems and the existence of a potential that has not been crushed and would be very difficult to suppress.

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/01/egypt-more-dangerous-than-ever-for-peaceful-critics/>.

[2] <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/syria>.

[3] You can find his most recent take on the revolution unfolding in Sudan [here](#).

[4] https://www.fairobserver.com/region/middle_east_north_africa/islamic-state-isis-caliphate-defeat-baghouz-syria-middle-east-news-71241/.

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