

«In the Arab Revolutions we have to perceive a marvellous opportunity to reshape the Euro-Mediterranean relationship»

Interview with Jean-Pierre Filiu, Professor at Sciences Po (Paris)



This interview is being published on the occasion of the publication of his latest book. «The Arab Revolution, ten lessons from the democratic uprising», Hurst (London) and Oxford University Press (New York).

[More](#)

1. Undoubtedly your book represents the first attempt to make a systematic interpretation of the democratic revolutions that are now rocking the Arab world. What do you think an historic event like this means?

We are only at the beginning of a deep wave of change that will go on for many years. The democratic uprising of the Arab populations and their youth will experience victory, set-back, impasse and defeat but it will affect all of the existing regimes to a more or lesser degree. Nothing will ever be the same again in the Arab world and it is with great humility, given the scale of this historic movement, that I have tried to set out ten main themes of interpretation and assessment. Parameters set after the shock of 9/11 and the focus on Al-Qaeda did in fact mask the real face of Arab societies. An empiric approach has to be adopted once more in contrast to the ideological patterns that were the fashion in the last decade.

2. In your book you insist on the fact that the revolutionary process in the Arab world has not arisen according to religious precepts, but it came rather more from the will for national liberation from corrupt regimes within which the arbitrary ruled. Should we fear that in Yemen and Libya there will be "chaos" as in Somalia, which ultimately favours Al-Qaeda? How do you see the future political role of the Islamic, and possibly Islamist parties, notably the Muslim Brothers?

Your question is twofold. Firstly it encompasses the risk of jihadi violence. This can only grow as desperate dictators become increasingly violent, prepared to plunge their country into civil war so that their reign of absolute power can be extended. This is why I called one of my ten lessons, "The only alternative to democracy is chaos" because it really is the despots, yesterday in Libya, today in Syria and Yemen, who are the chief cause of regional instability. Then there is a very distinct theme. Your question focuses on Islamist influence in post-revolutionary situations, in view of its quite secondary role in the overthrow of these dictatorships. The Ennahda party has clearly won the contest on October 23 in Tunisia, with 90 out of the 217 seats of the Constitutional assembly. We

should then wait for the results of the Egyptian elections and remember that these will only be the first elections in a new era, and that the situation may change rapidly. The Muslim Brothers won a relative majority in the first free election in Jordan in 1989, but they suffered a resounding defeat in the following one. In any case the Islamist parties are increasingly divided and are constantly forced to negotiate compromises with nationalist, secular or liberal forces.

3. The fascinating thing about these events is that the populations of the South Mediterranean are reasserting liberal and democratic demands, in support of the establishment of pluralist, constitutional regimes, that for a long time were considered as exclusive to the West. What in your opinion are the conditions necessary for this "second Renaissance" for it to become democratically complete?

This is where the historian, by looking into the past, can provide new insight and counter stereotypes: Tunisia abolished slavery two years before France and, as early as 1861, it established a Constitution that separated politics from religion ; Egypt was also determined to become modern at an early date, whose impetus, as in Tunisia, was crushed by colonial expansion. The first Renaissance was finally suffocated with the confiscation of independence by authoritarian regimes, which are now in a state of crisis throughout the region. Hence we are witnessing a second Renaissance, which carries the former promise of individual and collective emancipation. The strength of this movement lies in its ability to integrate all components of a society which has been brutalized by despots for decades. The sustainable nature of the civil uprising depends on the integration of the immense diversity of the societies involved, whether this is religious, ethnic or linguistic. The Berber involvement in the Libyan revolution or the role of the Kurds in the Syrian protest are therefore decisive.

4. The Arab revolutions are inevitably leading to questions again about relations between Europe and the southern shores of the Mediterranean. What lessons can the European governments and more generally those in the West learn from the present events?

«In the Arab Revolutions we have to perceive a marvellous opportunity to reshape the Euro-Mediterranean relationship»

In these movements I think we should see an immense opportunity to rejuvenate Euro-Mediterranean relations. Beyond political considerations, these have suffered from major imbalance in terms of knowledge and information for a long time, whereby decision makers and societies in the South have had greater knowledge of decision makers and societies in the North. The Arab dictatorships did everything possible to maintain this imbalance together with the ensuing preconceptions, because in this way they strengthened their strategic control. The time has finally come to see Arab societies for what they are and get to know them by increasing contacts and having more meetings. We could make no greater mistake than to think that the only result of these revolutions is the opening of dialogue with hitherto boycotted Islamist groups. It is the entire political and associative world that has to be the focus of systematic investment.

5. How can the feeling associated with the support given by the West – until quite recently - to the regimes that have just collapsed complicate the revival of these relations, which are however vital, notably with regard to the problems in the Middle East and the Israelo-Palestinian conflict?

The feeling you speak of has not influenced the revolutionary uprising in either Tunisia or Egypt. NATO's intervention was welcomed by the Libyan insurrection, and it has been against Russia and China that the Syrian protesters have been directing their criticism. However the ethical dimension of this democratic wave makes the players extremely sensitive to what they might see as

"double standards" that are systematically applied to the Palestinian issue. The Obama administration is in danger of losing a great deal of hard won credit in the Arab world, if it continues to oppose the Palestinians' right to self-determination. This unalienable right really is seen as such by populations who are deeply concerned about the fate of the Palestinian people, while they care very little about one Palestinian leader or another.

6. What do you think the main framework in re-defining the political and financial content of the Union for the Mediterranean should be? What should the Europeans work on to help the new regimes?

It is not so much the "new regimes" but rather more complex transitions that we should help in a variety of ways – and this is also in the interest of Europe. Civil societies must be totally involved in this process, opposite to the technocratic approaches that have been implemented for a long time. In spite of significant investment, this is a vital condition for the European Union to recover visibility equal to the issues at stake in the Arab world right now. Finally every opportunity has to be taken to encourage regional cooperation, especially in North Africa, where economists estimate the cost of "non-Maghreb" at one or two lost growth points.



Author : Jean-Pierre Filiu

Professor at Sciences Po and has also taught in the universities of Columbia (New York) and Georgetown (Washington).

You can read all of our publications on our site:
www.robert-schuman.eu

Publishing Director: Pascale JOANNIN

THE FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France, Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organisation of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.