

CHAPTER ONE

Obituary of the Arab Spring

Arab children,
Spring rain,
Corn ears of the future,
You are the generation
That will overcome defeat.

Nizar Qabbani, "Hawamish 'ala
daftar al-naksah" (Footnotes to the
book of the setback), 1967

Popular rebellions reflect the urges of a people, but the people are themselves not always capable of victory. If the structure of social order in a particular formation is weakened by war or by economic turmoil, the popular rebellions might be able to move history forward. Even here, the record shows that unless there is an organized force that is ready to seize the day, historical motion can falter. Older, dominant social classes that have a monopoly over violence hastily enter the fray to their advantage. Human history is littered with failed uprisings. They are the norm. Success is the exception. But neither failure nor success holds back the frequency of revolts. These are in the nature of human desire: the march toward freedom.

Slogans defined the air of 2011—*Khubz wa-ma' wa-Ben Ali la* (“We can live on bread and water, but no more Ben Ali”) and *Yasqut, yasqut hukm al-'askar* (“Down, down with military rule”). Enthusiasm was the order of things in North Africa. Men and women, young and old, from various social classes, descended onto the squares of towns and cities to say: enough. Decades of futility had burdened their history. Intellectuals in Tunisia dusted off copies of the poetry books of Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi (1909–34), singing “To the Tyrants of the World” to a new tune,

You've taken off heads of people and the flowers of hope; and
watered the cure of the sand with blood and tears until it was
drunk.

The blood's river will sweep you away and you will be burned by
the fiery storm.

In Egypt, a young folk singer, Ramy Essam, held his guitar tightly in Cairo's Tahrir Square to sing, “We are united, we demand one thing: Leave, leave, leave.” That word—*leave* (or *irbal*)—came from a chant to a song. It defined the ambition of the people: they wanted the departure of the tyrants.

So they fell. Tunisia's Ben Ali went first, followed by Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. Ben Ali and his family went to Saudi Arabia. Mubarak went to his seaside home in Sharm al-Sheikh. Both moved to towns on the Red Sea. Courts found both of them guilty—although as events soured in Egypt, Mubarak would be forgiven. Not so Ben Ali, who still lives under the protection of the Saudis in Jeddah.

Matters began to get complex. Saudi Arabia's legions snuffed its own disgruntled population with jail sentences and handouts, and then entered Bahrain to crush its Pearl Monument encampment. NATO's jets fired up to bomb Libya and bring the force of imperial arms into the uprisings. Proxy armies and money of

the old order entered both Libya and Syria, changing the mood of the Arab Spring from jubilation to trepidation.¹ The Syrian poet Adunis, whose flinty (and Orientalist) comments on the rebellion disturbed his reputation, captured the grave pall that fell over the region by the time Libya and Syria entered the frame. In *al-Hayat*, one of the leading daily pan-Arab newspapers (31 March 2011), Adunis wrote, “A politics led in the name of religion by a cart pulled by two horses—heaven and hell—is necessarily a violent and exclusionary politics.” He continued mournfully, “The present in some of its explosions is copying the events of the past with modern instruments.”² At the time Adunis was pilloried for his pessimism.

Five years on, obituaries of the Arab Spring have now begun to emerge. The general sense is of futility: What was the point of the uprising if the outcome is worse than the situation that existed? Mass social change is rarely predictable. No people rise up with the expectation that they will fail. That is why the opening of every mass struggle is deeply inspirational. It is also the case that each mass struggle results in a new order that is not capable of its original spark. Sitting in his Turkish exile in 1930, Leon Trotsky wrote his magisterial *History of the Russian Revolution*. Thirteen years had elapsed since the 1917 October Revolution. The revolution was already being derided. “Capitalism,” Trotsky wrote in his conclusion, “required a hundred years to elevate science and technique to the heights and plunge humanity into the hell of war and crisis. To socialism its enemies allow only fifteen years to create and furnish a terrestrial paradise. We took no such obligation upon ourselves. We never set these dates. The process of vast transformation must be measured by an adequate scale.”³

How to measure the Arab Spring that began in 2011? In Tunisia and Egypt, mass political action certainly deposed unpopular

leaders, but it was not able to transform the regimes. Figureheads went, but the tentacles of elite power remained intact. The highest expectation of these revolts was that they would inaugurate an epoch of democratic governance for these two countries. In other words, Tunisia and Egypt would have experienced a bourgeois revolution.

Much was expected of Egypt, but these expectations were exaggerated. Mubarak left on 11 February 2011. Two years later, on 3 July 2013, the military conducted a coup against the elected government of Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. Apart from the Muslim Brotherhood, few other parties had a link with sections of the people. This was not the *métier* of the liberals. They were professionals who had little political contact with the masses. Hatred of the Muslim Brotherhood's suffocating agenda had thrown the liberals into a convoluted alliance with the military by 2013. One of the most uncomfortable facts of recent Egyptian history is that more people came out onto the streets on 30 June 2013, to oppose the government of the Muslim Brotherhood, than in 2011 in Tahrir Square. All kinds of people took to the streets that day: Salafis alongside liberals, reactionaries alongside revolutionaries. The liberal stalwart Mohamed ElBaradei said that the military "will just come back to stabilize. And then we will start all over again." This was naive. The military dismissed the political process, began its campaign of imprisonment of dissent, and portrayed itself as the inheritors of Gamal Abdel Nasser and stability. Tensions in the Sinai Peninsula over the rise of Islamist radicalism and the emergence of chaos in Libya provided the military's new leader, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, with a *raison d'être*. But tension in the Sinai began in 2010, predating both the Tahrir uprising and the emergence of the Brotherhood to power. If anything, the emergence of terrorist

cells signals the failure of the military rather than its necessity. Human-rights groups are unable to give an accurate figure for those who are in prison under spurious charges and for those who have been killed in clashes and mass executions. The current government's own definitions of imprisonment and murder do not allow for ease of calculation. Everyone whom the government does not like, it seems, is now a terrorist. It is the term of art for *dissenter*.

Even celebrations of Tahrir are forbidden on 25 January. On the fourth anniversary of Tahrir, in 2015, the security services killed twenty-three people, including the poet and socialist Shaimaa al-Sabbagh, who was shot with flowers in her hands. Thousands came to bury her. The fifth anniversary—in 2016—was silent. The military came out to hand out flowers. They now claim the day.

Threats to the bourgeois turn in Tunisia came from all directions—the old order eager to reappear without Ben Ali, the IMF wanting cuts in the budget, extremist groups incubating in the slums of Tunis. What saved Tunisia was its trade union, the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT), which claims 20 percent of the country's population as its members. It is the most representative civil society organization in the country, although it went through decades of somnolence. When the new, post-Ben Ali period in Tunisia seemed to be on the verge of falling apart, the UGTT dragged to the table its historical enemy, the employers' association, and its allies in the human-rights field to draw up a roadmap for the country. That roadmap, created by these social forces, handcuffed the political parties into a dialogue that led to the new constitution. It was the Tunisian working class, therefore, that created the basis for stability in the new Tunisia. It is this working class that won the Nobel Peace Prize

for 2016. The classical gesture of the Nobel Committee would have been to honor the two main political luminaries: Rached Ghannouchi, of the Ennahda party; and Beji Caid Essebsi, of the Nidaa Tounes party. After all, when Ben Ali fled the country, it was the Ennahda—largely in exile and part of the Muslim Brotherhood current—that seized the political opportunity. But the old order did not fall easily. Beji Caid Essebsi had been appointed the interim prime minister. Essebsi is the perpetual survivor. He was a close associate of Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia’s main leader in the anticolonial struggle and then its first president. When Ben Ali overthrew Bourguiba in 1987, Essebsi threw his lot in with the younger generation. During the Arab Spring, Essebsi again corralled sections of the Tunisian elite out of its allegiance to Ben Ali and threw in his lot with the future to become interim prime minister. Between the Ennahda leadership and Essebsi a *modus vivendi* was established, despite great rancor. After elections in October 2011, Essebsi handed over power to the Ennahda candidate, Moncef Marzouki. Three years later, Essebsi’s Nidaa Tounes (Tunisia’s Call), a secular front, defeated Marzouki, giving Essebsi the presidency. If the Nobel had been awarded in the conventional way, the prize would have gone to the leadership of Ennahda and Essebsi for the peaceful transition from the reign of Ben Ali to the new dispensation based on the 2014 constitution. But that would not have captured the essence of what happened in Tunisia.

When matters seemed bleak in 2013, it was not the political parties that broke the mold and aligned themselves to a peaceful path. The UGTT took up that historical task—drawing in the employers’ association and the two human-rights groups to form the Quartet. Danger stalked their approach. Two important left leaders fell to assassins’ bullets in 2013. Chokri Belaid, of the Demo-

cratic Patriots' Movement, was shot dead on 6 February, and Mohammed Brahimi, of the Popular Front, was assassinated on 25 July. The Revolution of Freedom and Dignity seemed to be moving into perilous waters. Anything could have happened. Strikes and protests were met with violence. Tunisia was on the knife's edge. It was at this point that the Quartet's maneuver was essential. As the representatives of society, the Quartet forced the political parties to come to the table. Ghannouchi's Ennahda party had been accused of being behind the assassinations. This was the summer when the Muslim Brotherhood was removed from power by a Western-backed military coup in Egypt. Ennahda, which is allied to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, was at a disadvantage. It also needed a way out. The forces led by Essebsi, some of the old regime, knew that they could not crack down on the workers in the streets and on Ennahda. The army did not move on their behalf as it did against Morsi. Tunisia required a compromise. That is what the Quartet delivered. Absent that, Tunisia might have gone down the road of Egypt. It was saved from that travesty.

Tunisia's respite could very well be temporary. Behind the veneer of the Nobel lies a grave reality. A high debt overhang and frustration in the gullies of the small towns and cities provoked Essebsi in early 2016 to suggest that ISIS is in the shadows. On the Tunisian side of the Libyan border, battles are common between security forces and ISIS (as well as various other outfits). The town of Ben Guerdane was caught in such a battle in March 2016. But oxygen for Tunisia's economy—as a respite for its security threats—was not forthcoming. The policy space for Tunisia is narrow, with little imaginativeness from the World Bank, the IMF, and the commercial lenders. They are unwilling to countenance a massive investment to shore up this fledgling

democracy.⁴ For now, the multilateral agencies look the other way as Tunisia increases its public-sector employment and funnels higher wages to these workers. A proper exit from the shadows is not available. The vortex of instability remains open.

Tunisia established a constitutional democracy, although its political class—with some new faces—does not have the political wherewithal to solve some of the pressing problems of the population—namely, jobs for the burgeoning youth. Egypt has drifted back into the arms of the military.

SULTANS OF ARABIA

Freedom is an elusive idea. Ravages of history have produced institutions that favor the elite, who are resilient in the ways of metamorphosis. During antifeudal movements, petty royalty threw off their regal garb, donned the suits of the bourgeoisie, and took their places at the front of the new order. The great Arab nationalist revolutions of the twentieth century—from Egypt to Libya—rid the region of monarchs, but failed to deepen the roots of popular democracy. They roused the people, but often asked them to stand behind the military. Green uniforms stood in as sentinels of revolution. The actual revolutionaries—labor and peasant organizers, communists—went to prison. The colonels and captains seized their rhetoric.

In one redoubt of the region—the Arabian Island (*al-jazira al-arabiyya*)—monarchy fashioned itself as an ally of the gunboats of the West. It had no roots in the desert. It was a purely modern invention—1820 for the al-Khalifa dynasty of Bahrain, and 1932 for the al-Saud dynasty of Arabia. The West decided—early—that the defense of the Arab monarchs was tantamount to self-preservation. Much of this had to do with oil. The Carter

Doctrine of 1980—to protect the Saudi monarchy—merely put into legalese what had been common policy till then. It was the nail in the coffin of freedom for the Arab lands. The West, with its superior firepower, backed the Arab monarchies, flush with petrodollars, against the will of the Arab people, from Morocco to Iraq. The founding of the World Muslim League in 1962—with complete U.S. support—suggested to the Arab lands that secular nationalism and socialism were anathema—that the hand on the tiller of Arab history had to be Saudi. Saudi Arabia and the West—unlikely partners—exported Saudi Arabia’s version of Islam (Wahabbism) and the West’s paranoia about Communist intervention across the region. Prisons opened up for the Left, and Saudi-funded mosques threw their doors open for the adherents. This sets in concrete the social formation of the Arab lands.

Long before the Arab Spring came Arab nationalism—the ideology that the Arab people must create their own destiny outside the confines of Western control. The contours of Arab nationalism were wide—mostly secular, often socialist, typically with a resounding emphasis on the “Arab people.” The early Arab nationalism—rooted in the *Nahda* (Awakening) of the nineteenth century and made manifest in the Arab Congress of 1913—was initially elitist and chauvinist. An echo of that old chauvinist Arab nationalism can be heard from Saudi Arabia today when it speaks of “Arab solidarity” (particularly against Iran). Grandees of the Ottoman administration with talents frustrated by the preferences toward the Turks sought their own national project—with themselves as the main beneficiaries, and with the peasants (*fellabin*) as political cannon fodder. People like Rida Pasha al-Rikabi, Izzat Darwazeh, Shukri al-Quwatli, and Saad Zaghlul Pasha held the reins of this movement. Their

nationalism whipped from the widest Arab canvas to their localities—whether Egypt for Saad Zaghlul Pasha or Syria for Rida Pasha al-Rikabi. That both were pashas—the title of a high-ranking Ottoman official—says a great deal about their social position and their ambitions.⁵

Gamal Abdel Nasser and his military associates, after the 1952 overthrow of King Farouk's monarchy, seized this mantle of Arab nationalism. It would then sweep through Iraq, which overthrew the monarchy of King Faisal II in 1958, and into Libya, which overthrew King Idriss in 1969. Nasser, Brigadier Abd al-Karim Qasim of Iraq, and Colonel Muammar Qaddafi of Libya wore uniforms, but they were not initially defined by them. Arab nationalism was greater than the men who became its icons. It was an ineffable sensibility for self-rule and for an end to Western intervention (including the colonization of Palestine by Israel). Grand images of Arab efflorescence spread from city to countryside; boldness had arrived in the region. Nasser's speeches traveled the region through *Sawt al-Arab*, the Voice of the Arabs radio, interspersed with the revolutionary poems sung by Abdel Wahab and Umm Kulthum and long paeans to the revolutionary Algerians, Yemenis, and Palestinians.⁶ Pan-Arabism was the revolt of the common Arab people (*al-sha'ab al-'arab*). Linkage of Arab nationalism to the Third World Project at the Bandung Conference (1955), in the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization (founded in 1958), and in the Non-Aligned Movement (founded in 1961) sharpened its anti-imperialism. Antipathy to monarchies and imperialism became its ethos. Support for Arab nationalists across the region became axiomatic. Nasser put resources into the Yemeni civil war and encouraged the union between Egypt and Syria. But there were limits to this Arab nationalism. It distrusted Communists, whom it threw into prison. It could not fathom non-Arab minorities—particularly the Kurds,

whose national aspirations ran counter to the Arab nationalism prevalent in Iraq and Syria during the 1950s and 1960s. (It did not help that Jalal Talabani pushed the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria to change its name to the more provocative Democratic Party of Kurdistan—announcing the name of the country rather than merely the population.)⁷ Arab nationalism could not contain all the energy of nationalism, with older animosities between Iraq and Egypt—say—coming in the way of true unity. Antipathy to Zionism and to imperialism drew them together, even as other fissures kept them apart.

When Egypt took control of the Suez Canal in 1956, the Israelis, British, and French invaded the country. Although the United States brokered the withdrawal of this intervention, U.S. President Eisenhower nonetheless felt that Nasser “embodies the emotional demands of the people of the area for independence and for ‘slapping the White Man down.’” This was not said with approval. Later, Eisenhower suggested that the “underlying Arab thinking”—which desired independence—was rooted in “violence, emotion and ignorance.”⁸ Arab nationalism had to be opposed. It was in this endeavor that the United States found its major political allies in the region—not the secular nationalist forces, but the decrepit monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Iran. When the flavor of Third World nationalism came to Iran in 1951 through the unlikely patrician Mohammed Mosaddegh, it had to be removed. Mosaddegh’s attempt to get the Iranian people a fair deal for their oil was scandalous to Washington and its oil barons. A CIA and British intelligence coup removed Mosaddegh and returned the shah—a mediocre man—to the Peacock Throne. “It was a day that should never have ended,” wrote a CIA internal report. “For it carried with it such a sense of excitement, of satisfaction and of jubilation that it is doubtful whether

any other can come up to it.”⁹ The message across the Persian Gulf to the Saudi royal family was clear: if the United States would go to such lengths to return the shah to his throne, the Saudis need not fear the urges of the people. During the Mosaddegh period, as oil flow from Iran seemed less certain, the United States shifted its gaze to the Arabian Peninsula. By 1953, the United States had become a major purchaser of oil from Saudi Arabia. Not only did the CIA coup settle the anxiety in the palaces of the Saudis, but the purchases of oil from the peninsula suggested American dependence.¹⁰ All this was underlined by 1954, when the U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia wrote to his handlers in Washington that the special friendship between the United States and ARAMCO (the Saudi oil company) was “the most important single American interest on the face of the earth outside the US.”¹¹ The Eisenhower Doctrine provided material support to any state in the region threatened by Communism. This meant, effectively, that the monarchies would be protected against any threat to their existence. The United States, then, became the protector of monarchy in West Asia. It casts its nuclear umbrella above them.

The blow to the growing Arab nationalism came not directly from either the West or the Saudis. It came from the defeat of the Arab armies in the 1967 “battle of destiny” (*al-Ma'raka al-Masiriya*) against Israel. That broke the spirit of Arab possibilities. Nasser resigned his post. A million people went out to Tahrir Square in Cairo to ask him to rescind his resignation. He did, but he was a broken man (much like his friend Nehru after the India-China war of 1962). Nasser died in 1970. (Nehru died in 1964.)¹² The defeat corroded the confidence of the leaders at about the same time that their economies went into a tailspin. Huge expenditure for defense was a poor stewardship of the social wealth. It meant

debt to foreign commercial banks. In 1973, Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, started the *infitah* (openness) policy of inviting private—including foreign—investment in Egypt. Nasser's confidant Mohamed Heikal described the changes in Egypt with a wry play on language—the era of *thawra* (revolution) had been supplanted by the era of *tharwa* (fortune). No doubt the old socialist journalist had a sneer as his hand flourished the word for “fortune”—concentrated with increasing volume at the top of the class structure.¹³ The decade that followed saw more and more states governed by Arab nationalism find themselves in economic crisis and foreign debt and then, after 1979, catapulted into the Third World debt crisis.¹⁴ The exuberance of the Palestinian fedayeen gave Arab nationalism a boost in a time of great gloom. Even the Palestinian defeats—in Jordan in 1970 and Lebanon in 1982—did not diminish the role it played for an otherwise rendered Arab nationalism. It is no wonder that it was networks that organized on behalf of the first and second Palestinian intifadas of 1987 and 2000, respectively, that created the groundwork for the Arab Spring of 2010–11.

From the standpoint of the West and its regional allies until the 1980s, anti-Communism and anti-Arab nationalism defined their narrative of events in the region. The states governed by Arab nationalism typically remained governed by one party or a small coterie, although they promised to take care of the basic needs of their populations. Surrender political power, they seemed to say, and we shall provide you with lives of reasonable dignity. With the economic crisis that opened up in the 1980s and 1990s, the basis for social goods began to evaporate, and access to basic goods through the private sector became more and more expensive. These states—once the providers of a social floor—now became merely mechanisms of repression and cronyism. It

was easy, therefore, for the West to pivot from its language of anti-Communism to one of “democracy promotion.” Saddam Hussein was the poster child of the autocrat by the 1990s. It did not matter that he was a close ally of the United States and the Gulf Arabs in the previous decade. His break with the Gulf Arabs revoked his privileges. With Communism no longer a threat in the 1990s, the West painted Iraq as the modular “rogue state.” Syria and Libya were not far behind. The undemocratic Gulf Arab monarchies and the security state in Egypt were insulated for being U.S. allies. Ideology was all very well. More important than that was the maintenance of the old pillars of stability in the region—Saudi Arabia and Israel, with Egypt bought off with an annual \$1 billion payment to pledge peace with Israel.

After Nasserism, the next threat to the Saudi-Western order came from the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The World Muslim League and its ancillary groups had made the argument that secular nationalism and socialism were anti-Islamic. The Iranian Revolution now arrived in the region and proposed the existence of an Islamic republic. Iran directly threatened the ideological claims made by the Gulf Arab monarchies. It was this challenge that had to be routed—initially by Iraq’s failed invasion and long war (1980–88). Iran held fast against both the Saudi-backed attempts and the U.S. attempts at destabilization.

AMERICA’S WAR, IRAN’S VICTORY

When U.S. President George W. Bush prosecuted his war against Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001–03, he delivered a major geopolitical victory to Iran. Two of Iran’s historic adversaries—Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath Party and the Taliban—fell by the wayside as Iran’s allies—the Iraqi Dawa Party and the forces of

Ismail Khan of Herat—took center stage. America fought the war; Iran won it. Iran stretched its influence to the Mediterranean Sea and to the Hindu Kush. It rattled the doors of the Saudi palaces and of the White House.

Attempts to hem in Iran came immediately. The U.S. Congress passed the 2003 Syria Accountability Act, which was premised on breaking Iran's ties to Damascus and through there to Beirut and Palestine. The Damascus airport provided Iran with the main resupply route for the Lebanese political and military force Hezbollah and the Palestinian political and military force Hamas. Israel's war against Lebanon in 2006 was the next feint—this time targeting Hezbollah, who have close ties to Iran. The nuclear-sanctions regime that began in 2006 pushed hard against Iran's geopolitical allies and its own economy. Israel's threats against Iran and the assassination of Iranian scientists as well as the Western strike on Iran's computer system (Stuxnet worm) provided the next blow. None of these succeeded. Iran continued to find trading partners among the assertive Global South—China certainly, but also India.¹⁵ By the turn of the decade, it had become clear that Iran was not going to bow easily to Western pressure and return to its isolation. It had become a regional power, and that was that.

The Arab Spring allowed Iran a wider role than had previously been possible. Iranian diplomats traveled the region to suggest that this was less an *Arab Spring* and more an *Islamic Spring*. It was, for them, a sequel to what they began to call the “Iranian Spring” of 1979. Iran's leadership made noises about new alliances with the new governments, which seemed—at first—as if they would have less of a prone relationship with the West. The post-Mubarak regime in Egypt allowed Iranian warships to cross the Suez Canal, and Egypt's President Mohammed Morsi visited Tehran—

both firsts since 1979. The dynamic of the Arab Spring—fought over between the regional powers (Turkey, Iran, and the Gulf monarchies)—seemed in doubt. Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdoğan traveled to Cairo in September 2011 to claim the uprising for his neo-Ottoman foreign policy. But in fact, Erdoğan’s party—the Justice and Development Party (AKP)—and the Qatari government had close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. They had already begun to funnel money and assistance to their fraternal parties in North Africa. This rankled Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—both of whom did not want to see either the Iranians or the Brotherhood in the saddle. Morsi’s dance with Tehran showed that the Muslim Brotherhood was not a serious bulwark against Iran. The Saudis and the Emiratis went alone.

In the early days of the crisis in Libya in 2011, at the most hopeful point of the Arab Spring, a senior Saudi diplomat told me scornfully that it would come to nothing. The Saudis feared—more than anything—that the waves of enthusiasm would cross into their kingdom and threaten their dispensation. The endangered Gulf Arab monarchies went on the rampage to protect their order. Breathing fire, the Saudi, Emirati, and Turkish proxies caused havoc in Syria and Libya, as Saudi money bankrolled the coup by General Sisi in Egypt and opened a new war against Yemen. Qatar—tail between its legs—retreated from its position of adversary, as Turkey spiraled out of control with its war against the Kurds. The West backed the Saudis fully, although it was wary of the Saudi initiative in Syria. Disagreement over Syria did not prevent the Saudis from prosecuting their own game there—largely through their proxy Jaysh al-Islam and others. It was not enough to push back against Iran itself to make Syria into a geopolitical struggle. The Saudi and Gulf Arab temperament is geared toward bringing sectarianism

to the table. In 2009, UAE Crown Prince Mohammed Zayed al-Nahyan told a U.S. official that Iran had established “emirates in south Lebanon and Gaza, sleeper emirates in Kuwait, Bahrain, the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, and the mother of all emirates in Southern Iraq.”¹⁶ That same year, UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed said that Saudi Arabia fears that the new Pakistani president, Asif Ali Zardari, “is Shia, thus creating Saudi concern of a Shia triangle in the region between Iran, the Maliki government in Iraq and Pakistan under Zardari.”¹⁷ Here is the hallucinatory spirit of the Gulf. Anti-Iran morphed rapidly into anti-Shia rhetoric and practice. It is how Saudi proxies have operated in Syria and in Iraq and why Saudi Arabia began its endless war in Yemen. It is why the Saudi regime executed the Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqr al-Nimr on 2 January 2016. These are provocations along sectarian lines. They are what the Saudis know.

DEFEATS

The Arab Spring was defeated neither in the byways of Tahrir Square nor in the souk of Aleppo. It was defeated roundly in the palaces of Riyadh, Doha, and Ankara as well as in Washington, Paris, Tehran, and Moscow. From there came the petrodollars and arms to scuttle the ambitions of the people. Tunisia was saved because it has a strong trade union. Otherwise the Saudis and Erdoğan’s regime—with Western support of various enthusiasms—have laid waste to the Arab world. What began as great hope has now reached a point of great disappointment. Embers of the future remain burning—but only here and there.

On a September day in 2013, the novelist and journalist Sahar Mandour and I are sitting in the outdoor section of Beirut’s

T-Marbouta—the restaurant and café that gathers Beirut’s intellectuals and artists. Mandour is the editor of the Palestine supplement of *as-Safir*, one of the Arab world’s fine newspapers. We are talking about the war in Syria and the political morbidity in Egypt. But as we sit here in Lebanon, other premonitions hang over us. Almost a million Syrian refugees had already come to Lebanon. That number would only grow in the years that followed. On the pavements of Hamra, outside the café, young Syrian children—refugees in Beirut—earned meager amounts of money selling flowers (girls) or polishing shoes (boys). The Lebanese state has been weakened by the long civil war (1975–90), the Israeli occupation (1982–2000), and the constant threat of the return of both. “There is always that shadow,” says Mandour.¹⁸ A former chief of police in Beirut during the civil war tells me that the civil war never ended; it is merely now “at halftime.” Like many Lebanese writers, Mandour cannot escape from the civil war. She writes of the mundane existence of ordinary Beirutis who struggle to find their place in the moral and sexual economy of our age. Her novel 32, for instance, is about five young women whose transit to adulthood is blocked by various anxieties—each one rooted in the legacies of the civil war but refracted in the present.¹⁹

We are not talking about Lebanon alone. We are talking about the region and the sense of gloom that has descended with the dampening of the Tahrir dynamic. Mandour’s father is Egyptian and her mother is Lebanese. One eye is focused on Cairo, the other on the Levant. Around the time that we sat in that café, Sahar wrote a surreal essay on Egypt’s revolution and its stasis. She quotes a song sung by Umm Kulthum, and then writes, “Yesterday was love. Yesterday was also the break-up. And today is but one moment in a succession of stories which were born and grew

out of another point in time, and which will continue on into other points in time.” This is cryptic. But it anticipates this: “For hope, like despair, is but a passing emotion in the flood of human life.”²⁰ Over her coffee, she bemoans the complexity of our time. “During the lead up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003,” she says, “we took a clear position against war and against dictatorships: *la li-al-barb la-al-dictatoriyat*. Today, no such simple slogan is possible. That slogan is old. We need new positions, new slogans. We need to find our way out of the confusion of today.” The general mood among intellectuals of Mandour’s generation, those who came of political age with the Bush war on Iraq, is somber and introspective. The “confusion of today” is the best description of the situation. It is where the Arab Spring has brought them. They are nonetheless eager to go elsewhere. Somewhere beyond the obituary, to what comes next.