

**Politics & Society** 

## MIDDLE EAST/ Risks involved in the "double-standard" policies of the US and Europe

INT. Georges Corm

sabato 30 luglio 2011

Some months after the beginning of the "Arab Spring" the spotlight of Western media has been turned off about the transformations in act in North Africa and the Middle East. From Libya to Yemen, by way of Egypt and Tunisia, there are many variables that can decide the future of these countries: wealth, war, oligarchies, transformations of the middle classes, and the new political parties. *Ilsussidiario.net* spoke with Georges Corm, a Lebanese jurist and economist, Professor at the Saint Joseph University of Beirut, about all of these things. According to Corm, one of the greatest risks comes from the new oligarchies who are attempting to monopolize power and to compromise the fragile evolution of democracy, as well as the grave responsibility of the "double standard" policies that inspire the US and Europe.

### In a recent article, you wrote about a hot summer after the Arab Spring. In your opinion, how is the situation in the Arab countries evolving? And what are the differences between the various countries?

Indeed, it is unfortunately a very hot summer with violent situations of different degrees in some countries, Libya with a full civil war in which NATO members are involved, Yemen and Syria where there is a stalemate between a "revolutionary" camp and more conservative groups who do not approve of a full regime change. In Egypt, there is a growing impatience of young secular groups continuing to put pressure on the Military Council to accelerate the change. Muslim Brotherhood in this country seems clearly to shift to be at the center of conservative forces. Only the Tunisian political changes seem to progress in a more orderly way. But still, we will have to see the outcome of elections as well as the economic and social changes that are required.

#### To what extent are economic reasons at behind these events, besides the demand for more freedom and democracy?

I personally believe that poor and marginalized social groups that were a main

component of the revolutionary movements every where are almost exclusively motivated by socio-economic reasons. If they share the middle class aspiration to freedom and the end of autocracy, their main aim is to attain a substantial improvement in their standard of living through more employment opportunities, more educational and social services offered by the State.

## Economic development and a greater equity in the distribution of wealth are crucial for the stability of the Arab countries. Is this possible without aid from non-Arab countries? And how is it possible to avoid this aid becoming a political influence on the Arab countries?

I believe that we need to develop a new economic paradigm for the future of the Arab countries. Aid or emigrant remittances have been flowing in very large amounts during the last fifty years but did not succeed in creating diversified and dynamic Arab economies. These economies have been kept in a very low state of productive activities able to compete on globalized markets.

## Wealth distribution is not unequal only in the single countries, but also between countries, and oil is the main differentiating factor. How can these differences be reduced and how can this wealth be put as a gear to set in motion the development of the whole area?

Wealth distribution is highly unequal between Arab countries and inside Arab countries because both oil and non oil economies are rent based economies discouraging productive activities and enriching without any efforts a clientele of very rich businessmen associated with those ruling the Arab countries whatever is their political system (monarchies or republics).

## One of the problems to be faced is how to avoid a simmering conflict of interests between the middle-class, largely at the helm of the uprisings, and the lower and poorer classes. What is your opinion about this?

Yes, this is going to be quite difficult. But the middle class itself is not an homogeneous group. It is composed of a high income sub group linked to the global economy, a middle income group and a rather poor middle class group. You might see in the future an alliance between the lower strata of the middle classes (civil servants, blue collars in the State owned enterprises, badly paid blue collars in the private sector) supporting the strikes and pay raise demands of the labor unions.

The masses of people going to Europe to escape turmoil and bad economic situations are becoming a big problem. On the other side, a return of expatriate talents could revamp the Arab economies. How can this difficult situation be handled? Highly skilled workers back to Arab countries and low-cost workers to Europe or do other ways exist?

Well up to now numbers of new illegal migrants is not so high (estimated at twenty or thirty thousand people, mostly from Tunis and Libya). You have to compare such numbers with the influx of refugees a country like Syria has received from Iraq (one and a half million) or Jordan who received also one million Iraqis. Europe is trying to attract more talented people from the Southern rim of the Mediterranean while rejecting those without skills, although there is a need for such people in European economies. I believe this is not a very rationale policy for both shores of the Mediterranean. Brains and skilled people should be kept at home in the Arab countries, while Europe should better plan its need for low qualifications. Europe should develop a strategic vision of the real possibilities existing for economic complementarities between the two shores of the Mediterranean in the global competition, instead of being obsessed with free trade and the so called "flexibility" of the labor markets. Without such a strategic vision of how to improve the competitivity of the Euro-Mediterranean zone *vis à vis* Asia and North America, regulating migratory movements will continue to be irrational and inefficient.

# From the outside, this region looks very diverse in terms of ethnic, religious aspects and state structures. Is it possible to reach a common understanding of what democracy is? And how different will an Arab concept of democracy be from the European, or Western, one?

Well "democracy" is a very vague concept and there are so many different forms of democracies. Democracy can sometimes hide the absolute power of an oligarchy, especially in the present time where billionaires have been allowed to enter into politics and be elected. Such people can own media empires, large banks, commercial distribution channels, industries, large plot of rich agricultural land. When they enter into the political arena they create a total imbalance and other political actors can not compete with them. They rather have to ally themselves subserviently with those tycoons. As shown by the wave of Arab mass movement and slogans, for the ordinary Arab democracy means securing the "dignity" and respect of all human beings irrespective of their economic, social, ethnic or religious status. We are not far at all from the famous "Republican principles" that the French Revolution spread around the world, whereby the notion of "citizenship" is so close to the notion of "dignity". If this notion of citizenship including right to be treated with dignity and respect by other citizens or by those who exercises State power is implemented, then we are not far from what is the essence of citizenship in the European revolutionary patrimony. Members of specific ethnic or religious groups in the Arab countries should then enjoy full political, cultural or religious rights. The right to choose one's religion or political affiliation and to practice a specific language (Kurd, Turcoman, Armenian, and Berber) should be part of this notion of dignity or citizenship which supposes also the feeling of common belonging in spite of these differences.

#### A final question, how can the US and the EU help Arab countries in this exciting

#### but difficult juncture?

They should abstain from interfering in the domestic affairs as they are doing it on a daily basis, either through their official declarations or appreciation of the situation in certain Arab countries, but not in others. Double standards is again the rule governing the Western policies *vis* à *vis* the Arab countries. The Declaration of the G8 meeting in Deauville on the Arab Spring does also show the desire to control what is happening in the Arab World, to obtain change in some cases, but statu quo in others. Handing money to the new regimes with IMF type of conditionality is the road to disaster.

© Riproduzione riservata.