

INSIDE THE ARAB REVOLUTION

Three Years on the Front Line of the Arab Spring

Koert Debeuf

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Foreword by Guy Verhofstadt: A Mediterranean Community



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FOREWORD

By Guy Verhofstadt

A Mediterranean Community

A New Vision for the European Southern Neighbourhood

A changed world since 2009

On 4 June 2009, US president Barack Obama gave a historic speech at Cairo University. The title of the speech was “A New Beginning”. No-one could have predicted how radical that new beginning would be. Just 18 months later, on 14 January 2011, president Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali fled Tunisia after a month of protest, following the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a fruit and vegetable seller in Tunisia. The entire world was surprised. It was the start of a series of events that changed the world.

What first looked like an ‘Arab spring’ transformed month by month into an Arab revolution. Protests started up in Yemen, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Morocco, Jordan, Syria and even Saudi Arabia. Dictators fell in Egypt, Libya and Yemen. For the first time since Kosovo in 1999, NATO intervened with a targeted aerial bombardment, this time in Libya. Protests in Syria against the regime of Bashar Al-Assad turned into a devastating war that has torn the country apart, causing more than 140,000 deaths, displacing half the country’s population and destabilising the entire neighbourhood, as a result involving not only the main players of the Middle East, but also the global superpowers.

Protests did not hit only the Arab world. Citizens contested governments massively in Brazil, Turkey, Thailand, Sudan, Mexico, Malaysia, Ukraine, Venezuela and even the United States, where Occupy Wall Street rallied against the (lack of) morality of the financial markets. It looked like the world was seeing a new 1968, or even an 1848, when protesters no longer accepted the political order in which they were living.

Many of the eruptions find their roots in the financial and economic crisis that hit the world in 2008, the consequences of which are still being felt worldwide. Not only did the crisis suddenly make many people a lot poorer, it also changed the geopolitical paradigm. The two most important victims, politically speaking, were the United States and Europe. The crisis demanded that both powers invested a lot of time, energy and money into domestic affairs in order to put their affairs in order again. In both Unions it also changed public opinion, which became increasingly inward looking. Both lost power and influence on the world stage.

One example of this changing world order took place at the Climate Summit in Copenhagen in 2009. When the summit was about to finish without conclusion, President Obama asked for a meeting with India’s Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. He received the answer that Singh had

already left for India. Suspicious, Obama went to Singh's suite, where he found the latter sitting around the table with leaders from China, Russia, Brazil and South Africa. These 'new powers' were making a deal without the 'old powers', the United States and Europe.

The (re-)emergence of the 'new powers' also became clear in the war of Syria. The United States was on the brink of attacking Syria in August 2013, but had to back off when Russia entered the game. Today it is clear that there will be no solution in Syria without the agreement of Russia or Iran. On 1 January 2010, Russia started a Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan. The Union is likely to be enlarged with Kirgizstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and even Armenia and almost Ukraine, were it not of a second revolution.

Probably the most important change in world politics at the moment is the retreat of the United States from the Middle East. There are several reasons for this retreat. First of all, the US knows that it can't play ball in all parts of the world. Some choices have to be made. Secondly, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan absorbed an enormous budget, with too many soldiers coming home in body bags and little prospect of real progress in either country. Thirdly, as the US is betting more and more on energy independence by drilling for new oil and searching for shale gas, the oil and gas providing countries of the Middle East have become less important. Fourth, no matter what the United States tries to do in the Arab world, it always seems to lose friends and appeal. Fifth, even though Israel is still seen as one of America's most important partners, the Israeli cause seems less and less attractive. The fact that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu publicly supported Mitt Romney in the presidential elections hasn't helped the Israeli cause either. No wonder that Samantha Power, America's ambassador to the UN and strategic advisor to the president, proposed that Obama make a shift in US foreign policy towards Asia, and away from the Arab world.

Finally, it is clear that the United States is becoming less and less interested in the European Union. They find the EU too complex, too slow and too unpredictable. Another long time grievance is the lack of military spending by the EU. Why should the US further invest in NATO if the EU refuses to take on board its military responsibilities? In the case of Libya, the US refused to get involved in an intervention until the last minute. Then it decided to 'lead from behind'... Quite a change compared to the world before 2009.

A European in Cairo: rowing against the current

Though the United States has the option to retract resources from the Middle East, the European Union is in a completely different position. The Middle East is our backyard, and we are theirs. Trade and migration flows, cultural and economic exchange, all force themselves upon us. Nevertheless, from 2009 onwards, the EU acted as if it had the same options available to it as the United States. We became disrupted by the most important battle in the history of the Union: overcoming the economic and financial crisis that threatened the very foundations of the Union. We became so focused on our internal problems, that we stopped looking abroad.

The ALDE group (The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) in the European Parliament decided to go against this current and to recognise the historical significance of the Arab Spring. We visited Cairo as the revolution was unfolding at Tahrir Square – the first parliamentary group to do so. We also invited Mahmud Jibril – then the new and unknown leader of the National Transitional Council – to Europe. He went on to become the most important voice of liberalism/secularism in North Africa.

What started off as a sequence of loose initiatives, crystalized into a structural commitment of the ALDE group to the Arab Revolution when we decided to send a representative to Cairo on a long-term mission. The task fell on my chief of staff and the author of this book, Koert Debeuf. He had sufficient political experience and, more importantly, a passion for the Arab world and a thorough knowledge of its rich history. In the three years he was there, he delivered on the three major objectives for which he had been sent.

First of all, he gave us insight into a region we did not understand very well. What had really happened in our Southern Neighbourhood and what would come next? Several gaps were filled with reports, debates and constant feedback on the most recent evolutions in the Arab world. He wrote numerous articles and blogs stimulating debate in the ALDE group, in the European Parliament and in a much wider European and Arab sphere. Because of our permanent representative in Cairo, the ALDE group is able to act on current and accurate information. Koert, for example, was the first political official to enter Syria and report on the dramatic humanitarian crisis. This was a catalyst in the EU changing its strategy on aid in northern Syria.

Secondly, because of the efforts of the ALDE group's permanent representative in Cairo, we are proud to say we are able to support various political parties in North Africa and the Middle East. This is something Western Europe failed to do after the fall of the Berlin Wall, with a lot of political and economic instability as the consequence. We train politicians and their parties in Egypt and Tunisia and work with the National Forces Alliance in Libya, the only country where a liberal party won post-revolution elections.

Thirdly, thanks to our presence in the Arab world, we can create networks between political leaders and activists. Koert established contacts between them and gave activists a voice in Europe. He brought many Arab leaders and activists to the European Parliament: Amr Moussa (Egypt), Mahmud Gebril (Libya), Néguib Chebbi and Yassine Brahim (Tunisia), Ahmad Hariri (Lebanon), Fawaz Tello (Syrian opposition), Rami Jarah, Deiaa Dughmoch, Dany Abdul Dayem (Syrian activists) and Salim Idriss (General Commander of the FSA). For most, their visit to the ALDE group was their first appearance on the world stage. It gave them a platform and meant their voices could be heard globally.

In September 2012, Arab Leaders for Freedom and Democracy was established. A network unique in its kind, it enables top Arab leaders to inform each other of crucial events and help each other out.

Wins and losses in the EU's foreign policy

Although the ALDE group is perhaps unique in its strong involvement in the Arab world, one must admit that, during the past five years, the EU's foreign policy has made a transformation. Not only has the European External Action Service been built up, it has also done serious work. The most important 'win' was – without doubt – the landmark agreement on 13 April 2013 between Serbia's Prime Minister Ivica Dačić and Kosovo's Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi to begin reconciliation efforts. As a consequence, Serbia started EU membership talks on 21 January 2014.

A second 'win' was the deal struck with Iran on 25 November 2013. Although the EU was only one of the negotiators of the so-called P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany), the EU's High Representative, Catherine Ashton is generally credited with having kept the negotiations on the right track. In this deal, Iran agreed to scale down its enrichment of uranium and, in doing so, limit its nuclear

activity to energy. In return, the EU eased some of its sanctions on 20 January 2014.

A third 'win' was the fact that Ashton was the only non-Egyptian allowed to visit deposed Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi where he was being hidden. The Egyptian government and the Muslim Brotherhood also allowed her and special envoy Bernardino Leon to try mediate between the two camps. When Morsi was still president of Egypt, a similar mediating effort was led between the presidency and the opposition. Although neither mediation brought results, the fact that both sides gave the EU a chance to try, indicates that European diplomacy has gained respect.

Nevertheless, as well as 'wins', there were a number of 'losses'. The most recent was Ukraine: days before Ukraine was due to sign an Association Agreement with the EU, it decided to cancel the deal and join the Russian Customs Union instead. It needed hundreds of thousands of people to protest against the deal with Russia and in favour of a European future, to turn this decision back. For the European Union, this came as a total surprise. Yet shouldn't the Commission have been alerted a few months earlier, when Armenia acted in this way? It is possible even that Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan will follow the same path. If they do, the entire Eastern Neighbourhood will have turned its back on the European Union and its policy.

From 1998 until 2006, most countries of the Southern Neighbourhood – Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Israel and Lebanon – signed a Euro-Mediterranean Agreement Establishing an Association. The Palestinian Authorities have an Interim Agreement, while Syria has initialled a Cooperation Agreement. Libya has no agreement at all, while Turkey is still (painfully) negotiating its membership.

Apart from Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian Authorities and of course Turkey, all countries within this Euro-Mediterranean Agreement had dictatorships. Not one shared the basic values of the European Union: democracy and respect for human rights. A report of the European Court of Auditors on Egypt in 2013 also stated that there was almost no control over what happened to the European money – more specifically the budget support – given to the country. A report on the other countries would most probably give similar results. Although the basic conditions of this aid – more democracy and greater respect for human rights – were never met, the EU didn't change any of its agreements. However, this

might have been understandable given the lack of perspective of change in the Arab region.

But when change did happen, the EU wasn't sufficiently supportive, not until the very last moment. Whereas Tunisia came as a surprise, Egypt could not be ignored. Instead of backing the demands of the people on Tahrir Square, the EU kept repeating messages that "all parties involved should refrain from violence". It wasn't until the very last evening before Mubarak was ousted that the EU asked him to listen to the people and step down. Even worse was the EU position on Bahrain: a top diplomat said that he understood the crackdown on the protesters taking to the streets and demanding their rights. So, it should not surprise us that the people of Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Morocco and Jordan felt left on their own by the EU, whilst risking their lives for European values. Nor should we be surprised when we are accused of having double standards.

The scenario in Libya and Syria, however, was different. In Libya, NATO (and thus the EU) intervened militarily and saved hundreds of thousands of lives. To be fair, it wasn't the EU but France and the UK who assumed the lead. And although the EU was the first to introduce sanctions on the Assad regime by blocking the bank accounts of its supporters and banning them from travelling, the people of Syria felt deserted when they needed humanitarian and logistic support, for it rarely reached those who needed it most.

The EU could have made up for its hesitation during the uprisings once the dictators were ousted. It could have come up with a plan, a vision supported by new funding in order to help the transition towards democracy. Egypt might have been reticent, but Libya, Tunisia and Jordan asked for more help. Instead, the EU did nothing more than repackage its old agreements, adding a few hundred million euro.

The result of the European absence is that other regional powers stepped in. Qatar started supporting the Muslim Brotherhood network in the entire region, from Morocco to Syria. When the Muslim Brothers took power in Egypt, Qatar provided loans. When the Muslim Brothers in Libya lost the elections, Qatar sponsored the opposition and some militias to make life difficult for the new government. When the Muslim Brotherhood was kicked out of power in Egypt, three other wealthy countries stepped in: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

While European money is considered difficult to obtain, Gulf money is easy. They don't ask for human rights or democracy, but for loyalty. Given the negotiations of the West with Iran, the Gulf is, more than ever,

looking for allies. Turkey is playing its regional role as well. Since Ahmet Davutoglu's appointment as minister of foreign affairs, Turkey is looking more to the East than to the West. With a kind of neo-Ottoman agenda, Turkey is playing the card of being a model of democracy with a moderate (slow) Islamic agenda. In short, the Arab world seems to have become divided into two (Sunni) camps: Turkey and Qatar on the one hand; Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE on the other. In the meantime, Iran has been playing its own game, supporting Assad, Hezbollah, Hamas and Al Bashir's regime in Sudan.

Migration and the problems Europe is facing on the Italian islands and in the south of Spain and Greece might have been reason enough to engage more with the Southern Neighbourhood. We didn't do this due to the financial and economic crisis and thus a lack of will to invest in this region. But we must also admit we displayed a lack of vision. Even though Europe is still an attractive idea to many Arabs, there has been very little effort at rapprochement.

In summary, we can say that European foreign policy has gained visibility, respect and some important successes, but at the same time we are on the brink of losing our entire neighbourhood to powers like Russia, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, whose aims do not involve the promotion of democracy and human rights.

A vision for the Neighbourhood

Europe's neighbourhood has seen arguably the most intense changes of anywhere in the world in the past ten years. In November 2003, the people of Georgia ousted Soviet dinosaur Eduard Shevardnadze. One year later, the Ukrainians made president Viktor Yanukovich resign after rigged elections. Six years later it was the turn of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya to end decades-old dictatorships. The Kings of Morocco and Jordan were also pushed to reform.

The transformation of the entire European neighbourhood has only just begun. What we see today is only one of the stages of the transition to democracy. The people in both the Eastern and the Southern Neighbourhood have been fighting for their freedom and will never agree to a return to dictatorship. But the challenges are enormous. Each of the ousted regimes has left behind a country with a ruined economy and a

wounded society. To rebuild these countries will take a lot of time, effort and money.

The power and the success of the European project has always been its conversion of poor dictatorships into prosperous democracies. That was the case for the founding member states, but also for countries like Greece, Spain, Portugal and all of the former European members of the Warsaw Pact. The European idea is spreading peace, democracy and wealth by uniting forces and welcoming all European countries to participate.

The United States immediately understood that a democratic, peaceful and prosperous Europe would be to its benefit. This would make of Europe a strategic partner and a substantial market. It would also prevent another devastating war that would threaten the United States as well. That was the reasoning behind the Marshall Plan and behind NATO: an alliance of democracies against non-democratic enemies. Seventy years later, no-one doubts this was the right strategy.

Today we are facing a similar situation: the European Union is witnessing a neighbourhood trying to rid itself of dictatorship. It is Europe's turn to take responsibility and support its neighbourhood to become peaceful, democratic and prosperous. It should make partners and markets of these countries, which is to the benefit of all. We cannot copy the ideas of the 1940s and recycle the Marshall Plan, NATO and European integration, but we cannot sit on our hands either and just let events take their course.

In documents of the European Commission on the Southern Neighbourhood you find the following programmes and instruments: Civil Society Facility; Venice Commission; European Endowment for Democracy; European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights; European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument; Union for the Mediterranean; Security Sector Reform; EUBAM (EU Border Assistance Mission); EUPOL COPPS (EU Co-ordinating Office for Palestinian Police Support); Investment Security in the Mediterranean; Euro-Mediterranean Logistic Network LOGISMED; Association Action Plan; Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area; Instrument for Stability; Facility for Euro-Mediterranean Investment and Partnership; Neighbourhood Investment Facility; Macro Financial Assistance; Agreement on Conformity Assessment Acceptance of industrial products; Mobility Partnership; Mediterranean Science, Policy, Research and Innovation Gateway; Erasmus Mundus; Tempus and Euro-Med Youth Programme.

It is obvious that a combination of all these programmes is not the most inspiring way to convince people from both sides of the Mediterranean to cooperate more. The reality is that few citizens or even journalists in the Southern Neighbourhood have the slightest idea that the EU is running programmes on many levels in their country. Moreover, the sad reality is that the programmes are barely working. As the report of the Court of Auditors on Egypt clearly showed, the conditions of more democracy and respect for human rights are not met, while the EU has no idea how its budget support was spent. Even under the new principle of “more for more”, nothing has really changed, as this policy is not combined with a “less for less” principle.

How can we expect people to be in favour of Europe and its values if they remain unaware of European efforts? Worse still, those who are favourable to these values feel left out in the cold by the EU. If we want to support those people fighting for democracy and human rights, we have to use more creativity and imagination rather than merely relying on the current spider web of agreements and programmes originally signed with dictators and executed by malfunctioning bureaucracies.

A Mediterranean Community

The problem of the current Association Agreements is that it gives the neighbouring countries a sense of satisfaction of having signed an agreement with the European Union, but has little to do with partnership and almost nothing with ownership. The typical North-South philosophy is one of the reasons why these neighbouring countries don't feel particularly comfortable with the association frameworks. They merely see it as a way of receiving money. And if they can get a better deal elsewhere, they will jump to the other sponsor without much regret.

Therefore it is necessary to turn this North-South divide around. To ensure ownership we have to create a community rather than an association. Both the EU and its neighbouring countries must be considered equally responsible ‘owners’ of the community. Given the differences between the Eastern and the Southern Neighbourhood, we will here focus on the South and propose the creation of a Mediterranean Community.

The Mediterranean Community would be a community between the EU and its member states and the following countries: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, the Palestinian Authorities,

Lebanon and Syria. Obviously every one of these countries needs to fulfil democratic and economic conditions.

The idea behind this Mediterranean Community is to streamline all possible programmes the EU can offer: trade, education, visa requirements, energy, migration, border control... To be clear, we are not talking about a simple repackaging of current agreements, but about bringing each programme to a higher level. A key area to address is education, one of the biggest problems in the Arab world. We must give more young people the opportunity to study in Europe. In 2013, only 159 students from the Southern Neighbourhood were allowed to study a year in Europe through the Erasmus Mundus programme. It should be much more. At the same time, we should bring more teachers and students to the Southern Mediterranean and invest in education there. This is the most efficient way of helping these countries to move forward.

The success of the European project has always been that countries who become members are more successful than those who don't. That's why only very few (rich) countries decided not to join the project. It seems that we are more or less reaching the boundaries of the EU enlargement. After the Western Balkans, there is little public support to go further. However, it would be a mistake to think that the European project is fully realized. With this mindset, things can only decline.

The power and attraction of the European Union is its legacy as the most efficient tool of peace, democracy and prosperity in history. The investment of time, energy and money into this project, and into those countries joining the project, has proven to be the best investment ever made – just as the Marshall Plan and NATO are the best investment the United States has ever made. As the US is now retreating from the European neighbourhood, it is up to the EU to step in and use a method that has proven itself: creating communities. Europe has to create the dream it has represented for so long to so many citizens. That is why we have to build this new Mediterranean Community.

As Tunisia is clearly making more progress than the other Southern Mediterranean countries, the EU can start its Mediterranean Community there. When the other countries see the benefits, and when their citizens see the opportunities, joining the new Mediterranean Community will quickly become an attractive idea. Citizens will realize it is better to live within the Mediterranean Community than outside of it. Just as Slovenia was a model for the other countries of former Yugoslavia by joining the European Union, Tunisia can become a model for the Arab world

by joining the Mediterranean Community. In that case, it might only be a matter of years before Egyptian citizens wave the European flag on Tahrir Square, because it means more democracy, more security and more prosperity for them and for their children.

Guy Verhofstadt
President of the ALDE Group
Brussels, 3 February 2014



This Is an Arab Revolution

– “*C’est une révolte?*”

– “*Non, Sire, ce n’est pas une révolte, c’est une révolution.*”

Duc de la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt to Louis XVI, 1789

On 1 September 2011, the day I arrived in Cairo with my family, I received a telephone call from the Egyptian embassy in Brussels. There was a problem with my presence in Egypt. My family and my former colleagues in the European Parliament were panicking. When a friend called his old friend, the Egyptian minister of international cooperation, he was shocked to hear she knew everything about me. She knew where my house was, where my children would be going to school and – of course – the exact day I had arrived. She told him that my activities were not welcome in Egypt. When my friend asked what I should do, the minister answered immediately: “He should pack his bags and leave the country”.

As a ‘welcome present’ to the Arab spring that could count, I realized that, seven months after President Hosni Mubarak had been ousted (after eighteen days of protests on Tahrir Square), the revolution wasn’t over. But that shouldn’t have come as a surprise. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the countries of Central Europe didn’t become fully-fledged democracies overnight. I remember well that the people of Poland could choose between no fewer than ninety political parties in their first parliamentary elections. Everyone wanted to have his own party. There was even a Party of the Beer Drinkers. We also saw how people thought democracy would bring paradise at once. Disappointed in every president and government that came, the Polish people consequently sacked each of them in every follow-up election. It took more than twenty years before a prime minister (Donald Tusk) succeeded in being elected for a second term. We often forget how messy politics was, and still is, in many of the former communist countries, even though the European Union did everything it could to help and support them.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 came totally unexpected. Amid confusion and lack of clear orders, thousands of East Berlin citizens crossed the border on the evening of 9 November. On the very same evening, Berliners from West and East started to demolish this symbol of separation, injustice and dictatorship. The rest of the world was perplexed.

Sure, there were some signs – not least in Hungary, where people started to cut holes in the fence of the Iron Curtain in June 1989 – but few observers really saw the importance of it. However, when the Berlin Wall fell, people from all over Europe jumped in their cars and drove to Berlin to join the historic celebrations. I didn't. At sixteen, I was just old enough to realize that something big was happening, but unfortunately too young to drive to Berlin.

This first wave of revolutions took two years to change the world. Not only the Berlin Wall collapsed, it was also the end of communist dictatorships in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and, in 1991, the Soviet Union itself. The West was euphoric. In these two years, the ideological war between communism and capitalism, between democracy and dictatorship, had come to an end – with a clear and decisive victor. The events inspired political scientist and economist Francis Fukuyama to write his *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). From then on, we thought, we had only to wait until all the other countries of the world recognized the supremacy of liberal democracy, the rule of law and free markets.

My family had a weak spot for Poland. During the martial law of 1981, my uncle had smuggled food and clothes from Belgium into Poland in the middle of winter. There he met with the leaders of Solidarność, who were at that time hiding in the famous church of Chestochowa. One day, in 1982, one of the priests active in Solidarność stood at our front door. After he had told for more than an hour the most fascinating stories I ever heard, he gave me a sticker of Solidarność, which I proudly stuck on my toy box. I remember clearly the moment he said goodbye at our front door: we were staying in the comfort of our cosy home, while he was going back to resist dictatorship and fight for freedom.

In the 2000s, a second wave of revolutions seemed to prove Fukuyama right. It started in Belgrade, where a student movement, OTPOR, managed to coordinate the resistance against Slobodan Milošević. After a few months, they succeeded in getting rid of him. In 2003, the Rose Revolution led by Mikail Saakashvili ousted Soviet dinosaur Eduard Shevardnadze. In 2004, people filled Independence Square in Kiev to protest rigged presidential elections that had brought Victor Yanukovich to power. It was an exhilarating time. Again, I wished I could be there, but at the time I was working as an advisor to the prime minister of Belgium. Thanks to this position I was able to meet with people like Saakashvili and Yulia Timoshenko (Victor Yushchenko's co-revolutionary), but, of course,

this was not the same as *being there*, on the square, sharing the hopes and the fears of the people.

On the evening of 14 January 2011, I was in Amsterdam, where I had a meeting with Farid Tabarki, a Dutch friend of Tunisian origin. He was constantly distracted by telephone calls from his father. When I asked what was going on, he replied that Tunisian president Ben Ali might be resigning in the hours to come. I was shocked. Why hadn't I seen this coming? Of course we had all heard on the news about violent protests in a few Tunisian cities – but who would have thought this would result in a dictator fleeing his country? While on the train back to Brussels, Farid called to say: “Ben Ali is gone.” Due to a lengthy train delay, I had plenty of time to reflect. The film of 1989 played through my mind, I wasn't sixteen anymore... I could jump into that car and go to Tunis! I just had to decide when.

But events were quicker than I. After Tunisia came Egypt. Then Yemen. Then Libya and Bahrain. Protests started in Morocco, Jordan and Syria. We saw an ‘Arab 1989’ unfolding. It makes sense to call it a third wave of revolutions. The dictatorships in the Arab world were established in the slipstream of the post World War II socialist dream. Gamal Abdel Nasser removed the Egyptian King in 1952 and then installed a military-socialist regime. In Libya, Muammar Gaddafi followed suit in 1969. In Syria, Hafez Al Assad (the father of current Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad) came to power in 1970. Each of them – as well as Saddam Houssein in Iraq – was inspired by the Ba'ath party, a socialist pan-Arab political party that was first established in Syria in 1943.

Their ties with the Soviet Union were obvious to all. When Nasser kicked out the French and the British during the Suez Crisis of 1956, it was the Russians who paid for and built the Aswan Dam. During my stays in Syria with the Free Syrian Army, I was surprised to see that the majority of the Syrian generals spoke fluent Russian. They had all been trained in Russia, or in one of its former satellite states. Even when a country like Egypt turned away from the Soviet Union and chose an alliance with the United States, the Soviet-like intelligence apparatus remained in place. This is true even today – as I discovered that first day I arrived in Cairo, when I learned that the government knew everything about me and my family.