

# The Winter's Tale and an Arab Spring:

## Observations on the Middle East/ North Africa (MENA) Uprisings

TRANSFORMINGBUSINESS

by Peter Heslam



**The current Arab revolutions reflect the power of commercialised technology, of the universal quest for dignity and freedom, and of social, economic and political pluralism. So claims Peter Heslam in this groundbreaking article that reflects on the upheavals in the Islamic world.**

Reflection on the Arab Spring provokes three key observations. The first is the power of commercialised technology. Not weapons but websites, digital imaging, social media and mobile phones have facilitated the uprisings. Malcontents in one country have instantly been able to see what protesters in another country were up to. The Arab Spring reflects, therefore, the familiar truth that we now live in a globally networked society made possible through advanced technology.

But less often acknowledged is the development potential of this situation. Economic growth is virtually synonymous with increased productivity, which relies on technological advance. The hands of workers controlling machines and computers can be far more productive and wealth-generating than those wielding only traditional tools. That is why the history of economics is largely the history of commercialised technology. Modern prosperity is forged by innovation in the fire of entrepreneurship.

The history of clocks illustrates how technology needs business to fulfill its potential. Clock technology developed slowly over millennia, primarily in the Far and Middle East. It only began to undergo rapid development in the early modern era, when European clock makers spotted a market opportunity in the commercial

advantages of accurate time-keeping for Europe's rising class of shipping merchants, shop keepers, middlemen, and workshop owners.

The integration of Arabia into global society is, like the development of universally accurate measures of time, not the result of technology *per se* but of *commercialised* technology. It has occurred as firms like Microsoft, Vodafone, Sony and Toshiba have responded to the demands of millions of Arab consumers for products to enhance their lives. Images and messages that brought protesters out into the streets were not sent by 'technology' but by Facebook, YouTube, Orange or Twitter. This reflects a lesson from history: commerce is a keystone to the socio-political order, a lesson reflected in the prohibitions, prophecies and proverbs of the Hebrew Bible, many of which concern business conduct.



Mapping the Arab Spring - the MENA region

▶▶ The Arab Spring also reflects, secondly, the universal quest for dignity and freedom. The MENA region is beset with poverty, unemployment and despotism. Most of its people want jobs, decent pay, better services and the ending of corruption and repression.



*An Arab protestor highlighting the power of social media*

They see increased freedoms as the only effective means to secure these things, given the failure of their political leaders.

Some forms of work can, of course, be an affront to dignity and freedom.

But it is difficult to see how these two primary universal benefits can be secured without work, most of which is provided through commercial activity.

The link between work, dignity and freedom is another common scriptural theme. Beginning with the story of Adam and Eve, the Bible highlights the importance of all three, warning of the damage that is done to them by human waywardness and promising their restoration in the coming kingdom.

Finally, the MENA revolution reflects the importance of the differentiation and relative autonomy of the various spheres of human life, especially the spheres of organised religion and the state. To the consternation of many Islamist clerics and their followers, the Arab Spring was largely a ‘secular’ affair. ‘Secular’, that is, not because most demonstrators considered their religion irrelevant to politics but because they did not wish to see religious power standing in the place rightfully occupied by political power.

The wisdom of differentiating religious from political power also finds sound biblical basis, most notably in the threefold offices of prophet, priest and king in the Hebrew Scriptures. In western Christianity from Constantine to Calvin, however, this separation is more apparent in its breach than in its observance. It was only when the state,

and other social spheres, were released from ecclesiastical control about three centuries ago that the technological revolution took off. As a result, Europe’s cultural winter was turned into the type of spring that now seeks to bud once again in the still fertile, diverse and richly endowed MENA region.

There is even evidence to suggest that, had western Christianity put this principle of social differentiation into effect earlier in its history, many internal and external conflicts would have been avoided. After all, Syria and Egypt had major Christian communities living relatively peacefully long after the Arab conquests. In fact, Asia was home to over a third and Africa to around a tenth of the world’s Christians as late as the 11<sup>th</sup> century. And while the book of Acts has focused westerners’ minds on the church’s westward expansion, many Christians at this time were travelling east along trade routes to present day Iraq, Bahrain, Oman and Yemen, where they established thriving trade-based communities.

But the lack of commitment to social ‘pluralism’ amongst the church’s official leaders, reflected in their general hostility towards economic, scientific and artistic innovation, helped contribute to medieval Europe’s backwardness in comparison to the Islamic world of the time. Indeed, the dominance of the Arab caliphates and of the early Ottoman Empire over an impotent and inhibited medieval Europe indicates that Christianity probably provided no significant economic, scientific and cultural advantages over Islam when these religions were wedded to the state.

Christian and Islamic cultures have something in common that is generally ignored – they are constantly threatened with the winters that result when political and religious power are amalgamated. When this happens, the fire of entrepreneurship has proven able to help melt those winters into springs. For its capacity to turn invention into prosperity, whilst maintaining human dignity and freedom, is what makes the destruction it brings so creative. ■

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