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Arab revolts:

Can People Get What They Want? — an interview with Gilbert Achcar

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Gilbert Achcar is the author of the newly published *The People Want. A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* (University of California Press, September 2013). His previous books include *The Arabs and the Holocaust. The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives* (2010). He was interviewed by phone on August 6, 2013 by David Finkel of the ATC editorial board.

Against the Current: To begin, we'd like to know something about your new book. Since you've been writing it in the midst of these amazing upheavals, in what ways has your perspective perhaps changed or developed during this time?

Gilbert Achcar: I can't say that my views changed while working on the book. I've been researching and working on the region for a long time, as you know. I was expecting this region to go through some social explosion at some point, although of course events themselves surprised everyone in their magnitude and the way they developed.

The book is mostly about precisely explaining how these events are deeply embedded in the social, political and economic history of the region, with a strong emphasis on the dynamics of the uprising.

The key distinguishing feature of the book is that it is, very plainly, a Marxist analysis. I apply the tools of the Marxist conception of history and analysis of revolutionary upheavals to the current events.

From the beginning I have been emphasizing that this is a long-term revolutionary process, not a "Spring" or something that stops with the overthrow of this or that president. It's a process that won't stop before a radical change happens that can put the region back on the track of social and economic development. Short of such a change, the turmoil will be ongoing.

Through this prism I also analyze the coming to power of Islamic forces, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt and the related En-Nahda party in Tunisia, stressing that these experiences will be short-term and inevitably fail in addressing the social and economic problems — because in that regard they continue the previous regimes' policies, which are bound to fail in a period where the fundamental social-economic problems are aggravated by the uprisings themselves.

I wrote all this before the recent events [the overthrow of Morsi in Egypt — ed.], but the book gives a clear clue about the current new upheaval. At least that's my view — the readers will judge by themselves if it stands up to the acid test of helping to understand such tremendous new developments taking place several months after it was written.

Egypt's Upheaval

ATC: Egypt appears to be a three-way struggle of the mainly secular democratic or liberal movement, Islamist forces, and the military-bureaucratic-police "deep state," with U.S. imperial policy concerned first and foremost with preserving the latter. Do you think the military, at this point, has successfully hijacked the democratic movement and will it be able to "stabilize" the situation by defeating the Muslim Brotherhood without a massive bloodbath? Why did the military's apparent collaborative relationship with Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood break down?

GA: First, there's a lot of confusion about the events and, across the political spectrum, about the position to take toward them. The key point is this false posing of alternatives: Was the overthrow of Morsi the result of a revolutionary upheaval, or a military coup? This way of putting the question misses the main point, that it was a combination of both. In the book I stressed the fact that it was a similar combination that led to the overthrow of Mubarak, with dangerous illusions prevailing in the mass movement about the army.

In a sense we have had a repeat of that double dynamic. Morsi is now targeted instead of Mubarak, with partisans of the old Mubarak regime on the streets along with the left and liberal forces. The MB is now demonstrating in favor of the overthrown president instead of being with the mass movement that forced his overthrow.

The fact that Morsi was “democratically elected” doesn't contradict the fact that he, and the Muslim Brotherhood behind him, betrayed the mandate given by all those who voted for Morsi in the second round to prevent the candidate of the old regime from reestablishing its kind of order.

On a background of abysmal failure in bringing any solutions to the deteriorating conditions of living of the population, the MB has been actively working to establish their kind of authoritarian order, not a comprehensive consensual democratic one. They thus alienated any remnant of popular sympathy beyond their own dedicated constituency.

The popular movement to recall the president was not “undemocratic” but a very high form of democracy — which one would wish to see applied everywhere — instead of seeing the “elected” betray their electoral promises one after the other in ruling until the end of their mandate.

Another difference with the overthrow of Mubarak is that, when the army overthrew him in 2011, it took the reins of power directly through the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. This time they designated a civilian president because they had learned the lesson of their previous experience, which cost them much in terms of image and popularity.

The military have managed to regain a lot of popular credibility, even to increase it within some sectors of Egyptian opinion who are tired of the turmoil in the country. When they kicked Morsi out, however, they didn't expect the MB's resistance to be so stubborn. They expected it to acquiesce to the removal, and cooperate. But the MB wouldn't do that, because it would have lost its credibility among its own supporters.

The MB had to resist, and was encouraged in that by the attitude of many western governments who were embarrassed by the military's “breach of legality” after having bet on the Islamists. Therefore the Muslim Brothers are mobilizing, in what is a crucial battle for them. They know they can't really win, in the sense of reinstating Morsi; their strategic horizon is rather the intensive mediation by Washington and their own sponsor Qatar, along with other oil monarchies, to reach some kind of compromise.

Any agreement has to be face-saving in order for the MB to accept it. The negotiations aren't easy, but it's difficult to imagine any other alternative.

The MB remains a huge organization, even though it's clearly opposed by the majority of the Egyptian population. Either a comeback of Morsi or a suppression of the MB would be extremely costly for the Egyptian economy and society. That's why it is difficult to imagine an outcome that would not entail some kind of compromise.

Syria's Civil War

ATC: Do you see any way out of the Syrian catastrophe? What do you think remains of the popular democratic impulse that began the uprising? Given the sectarian bloodshed and the role of various external regional and global powers, is this a war that can last as long as the 15-year Lebanese civil war? Does Washington have the desire, the will or the capacity to resolve it?

GA: Outside intervention, in the sense of direct military intervention by the United States, is very unlikely, either sending troops or even a "no-fly zone" or the like. You have read the testimony of General Dempsey assessing the high costs and dangers of various intervention options.

The only one that seemed feasible and seriously put forward as an option in Washington is granting military aid, delivering weapons to the rebellion. That's about the limit of what Washington can do, and even that isn't obvious because of the problems in making sure that weapons would not end up in the hands of enemies of the United States.

Now, if we are speaking of direct foreign intervention in general, there's a heavy one on the side of the regime from Iran and its allies in the region, Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia forces. Over the last few months this enabled the Syrian regime to launch a successful counter-offensive and regain a lot of the ground it had lost, giving the impression that it was victorious.

Indeed Assad made a very boastful speech a few days ago that he would win the war. But only a few months ago he was losing ground to the point where people were expecting the regime's collapse in the short term, the very fact that prompted its allies to intervene massively and directly. Otherwise, if the Syrian regime had been in good shape, they wouldn't have done so — it's particularly costly for Hezbollah's image as a resistance force against Israel, of course, to get involved in a war against a popular uprising in Syria.

Washington is very much worried about this intervention by Iran and its allies. It made the Obama administration appear weak — in fact confirming that the U.S. has been losing ground in the region to Iran. This indeed is what led to the administration changing its stance on arms delivery from its previous "non-lethal aid" stance.

But the key point is that Washington is doing this not in order to give the uprising the capacity to overthrow the regime. It does not want the regime to be overthrown. It took them months even to say that Assad should "step down" in the context of some political compromise. They have been sending one mediator after another for precisely this purpose.

Despite all their other problems with Russia, the U.S. administration cozied up to Moscow to pressure Assad for what Obama called the "Yemen solution."

This so-called solution was actually designed by the Saudis and the United States as a way of aborting the uprising in Yemen. The Yemeni dictator stepped down but remains in the country with his cronies in a very influential position, and the continuity of the state is fully preserved.

The "Yemen solution" Washington is contemplating for Syria requires trying to change the balance of forces, because in the context of a successful counter-offensive Assad is certainly not going to "step down." All this has been quite humiliating for Washington.

Where it is going will be decided on the battlefield. Chances for any compromise or coexistence are extremely difficult after so much killing: over 100,000 people, which many consider a conservative estimate.

The question of how long it can take is also difficult. Syria looks more and more like a three-part country as the northern Kurdish area is organizing its own autonomy similar to Iraqi Kurdistan. The rest of Syria is split between opposition and regime-held territories, but the boundaries are continually shifting. Just today, you have news of the opposition making inroads in previous regime-held areas. It's not consolidating into separate regions such as to create a de facto partition.

In the end, the Syrian regime is based on a sectarian minority — a small minority, in fact, from which are recruited men fully loyal to the regime. And even though the regime has supreme military forces, its human power is limited while the opposition has a much bigger human pool, a fact that can become determinant if it gets the weapons it needs — whether from outside, or from seizing them from Assad's army as it has recently done by taking control of an important stock of antitank weapons.

The opposition has been requesting antitank and anti-aircraft weapons, which is a very legitimate request for essentially defensive weapons in the face of a murderous regime. In this respect, I think the recent statement of USLAW (U.S. Labor Against War) opposing arms deliveries to the opposition is not logical when it claims that this will only increase the casualties: In the absence of adequate defensive weapons, the imbalance of forces is what allows the regime to destroy and kill massively. There is no doubt that the vast majority of killing and destruction is perpetrated by the regime.

ATC: There are questions about the character of the rebellion itself at this point. What's your reading of the balance of forces within the opposition itself?

GA: This is difficult to assess. One thing that complicates the picture is that some groups have been pretending to be Islamist, growing beards and so forth, to get money — because the main sources of funding and weapons have been the oil monarchies. These monarchies do not support “democracy” to be sure; on the contrary, they want to turn the democratic uprising into a sectarian one of the Sunni majority (70%) against the 10% Alawite minority (a spinoff of Shi'ism) that constitutes the hard core of the regime.

Most of what the oil monarchies send goes to Islamic forces, from the relatively “moderate” Muslim Brotherhood to the al-Qaeda type. So in that sense the inaction of the West, combined with the privileged regional funding of the Islamists, has resulted in the increasing influence of such forces within the opposition, although for the first year to eighteen months the dominant character of the uprising was that of a popular, democratic, youth-led movement.

It's a fact of life that the only possible source for support of the rest of the Syrian opposition happens to be the western countries, with Russia and Iran heavily supporting the Assad regime and the oil monarchies privileging the Islamists.

This said, the majority of the Syrian people remain attached to the democratic spirit they started with, and the recent and increasing role of the Islamist forces, especially the extreme Salafists who try to impose their moral codes where they prevail, leads to clashes between them and the population that has stood up against the regime. It is to be hoped and wished that the secular opposition will be able to improve the coordination and organization of its own forces.

This is a country where Islamists were much weaker than in Egypt prior to the uprising. If the regime were to fall, the tens of thousands of young activists now in Assad's prisons, who organized the coordination committees that launched the uprising, would hopefully be freed and contribute powerfully to change the balance of forces in favor of the secular democratic camp.

The situation is shifting rapidly in all respects, militarily and politically. I don't think anyone attached to left-wing values can be neutral in this confrontation, let alone support the bloody (and economically neoliberal) regime of Assad.

Note that people on the left had much less hesitation supporting the Iraqi resistance to the U.S. occupation — although that resistance was much more heavily Islamist-dominated than in Syria.

In both cases, the people's struggle is justified and legitimate, and must be supported as a right. Of course, defending the right of Iraqis to resist the U.S. occupation of their country, but not forces engaged in operations that were sectarian killings.

So one must also condemn sectarian killings in Syria, including when these are done by forces fighting against the regime, but the struggle against the regime remains a legitimate fight that must be supported.

Libya After State Collapse

ATC: How do you assess the events in Libya following the overthrow and assassination of Qaddafi?

GA: The Libyan operation is a major failure for the United States. No Western power is in control of the situation, contrary to what so many people said would happen when NATO intervened.

I predicted this outcome during the fighting there: NATO with Washington behind it tried through its intervention to steer the uprising with the same purpose of state preservation they are pursuing now in Syria. They wanted Qaddafi to step down and hand power to his son. However, the uprising thwarted their plan, all the more easily in that it had refused from the start any foreign "boots on the ground."

The result is that Libya is the only country in the region where the old state has been radically dismantled by the uprising, to the point that the new government is finding it very difficult to build a new state in the face of a myriad of local militias.

The Qaddafist state has been dismantled to a greater extent than occurred in any other country in the region. Actually. In Egypt and Tunisia the "deep state" is still there, whereas in Libya it has been dismantled and a very chaotic situation ensued, as in any country where the state collapses.

The local militias, from Islamic fundamentalist to regional, are clashing with a real democratic process involving important participation in politics, which included a higher rate of electoral participation than in the post-uprising elections in Egypt or Tunisia. And there are all the time demonstrations protesting the government, or the militias, or the Islamists; there's a women's movement, a new trade-union movement; the whole country is boiling politically.

This is quite positive in the wake of 40 years of Qaddafi dictatorship, given the absence in the whole region of progressive alternative forces with clear strategic direction and values, capable of leading toward the kind of change that's needed to bring this whole process to a positive end.

ATC: Finally, to touch briefly on the new U.S.-sponsored round of Israel-Palestinian Authority negotiations: To be blunt, is there any reason to take this seriously?

GA: No, not in the sense of expecting anything substantive to come out of it. But the fact that this is happening is related to the increasing worries among western powers about the Palestine-Israel conflict since the beginning of the Arab uprisings. It's a major source of anti-western resentment in many Arab countries. As long as dictatorships and despotic regimes were cooperating with the West, that was acceptable. But since 2011 people are in the streets, that's where politics are happening, and people have learned that if they express their will strongly they can change things.

The quite significant step of the European Union to enforce the boycott of Israeli settlements is a sign of these worries. No money that the EU sends to Israel is to reach the settlements or companies that assist the settlements. This has irritated the Israeli government, which retaliated by stopping EU aid to the Palestinians.

So there's increasing pressure on Israel to make concessions, but it would take much more and stronger economic sanctions — as were imposed on apartheid South Africa — to force the Israeli government to change its stance.

The real Israeli base of support is in Washington, which has remained entirely conciliatory to the Israeli government despite all of Israel's provocations and insults to the Obama administration. When the U.S. "envoy" to the talks is a longtime committed Zionist like Martin Indyk, you know what can be expected.

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