

The seminar participants viewed the present developments in the countries of Northern Africa and Middle East as a large-scale historic events which are, in a number of important aspects, unprecedented for the Arab and Muslim world — even in comparison with Iranian revolution (1979) which had significant consequences far beyond the region. “The Arabic Drama” we are witnesses to will definitely affect (and already affected) the world of Islam and, speaking in a wider context, will certainly shape the future architecture of international relations. Despite the fact that some symptoms of the coming social “thunderstorm” were anticipated by the academic community, such a gigantic social upheaval was a genuine surprise for the overwhelming majority of decision-makers and policy-analysts. And these circumstances are demanding a deeper insight into the social origins and tentative consequences of the unfolding “Arabic Drama”.

First of all, one has to look for the answer to the main question: what is going on in Northern Africa and Middle East region— are there mass protests, social turmoil, political revolts or, probably, revolutions? Participants’ views on the subject varied. One group of scholars (Robert Landa, Irina Zvyagelskaya, Vitaly Naumkin) are of the opinion that revolts look rather like spontaneous happenings and, judging by its results (for example, in Egypt, where the army assumed power, there are no significant changes of the situation), social upheavals could not be qualified as revolutions. It is quite difficult to equate mass protest actions with revolution as there are no visible subject(s) and no large-scale and articulated goals yet (B. Dolgov). In contrast to Iranian revolution where since the beginning the clergy, the “grand Tehran bazaar” and the marginal social groups, acted as its subjects and dismantled the pre-revolutionary political system. On her part, Dina Malysheva emphasized that social revolts in the Arab world could not be addressed as “colour revolutions” because they were not connected with the electoral cycles.

The other discussers (Georgy Mirsky, Vladimir Khoros), while accepting reservations mentioned above, considered it possible and, taking into consideration scales and tensity of social disturbances, argued for the notion of revolution or at least pre-revolutionary development. There is every indication that the Arab world is on the threshold of significant social and political changes. In this context, Georgy Mirsky noted that the Arabic definition of “saura” regularly repeated in the numerous mass media and academia commentaries had two principal meanings, that of a “revolt” and that of a “revolution”.

It seems clear nowadays that the on-going Arab “saura” is part and parcel of fundamental social, economic, political and cultural controversies that have been accumulating for quite a long while. As argued by Alexander Filonik, social and economic controversies which were underlined by numerous analysts have materialized in the form of “abject poverty”

(glaring economic disparities), unemployment and rampant corruption. In Egypt, for example, the efficient fight against corruption, according to the same author, could raise the incomes of 40 percent cent of the population living below the “poverty line”, that is, less than 2 US dollars per day, up to 10 dollars and, probably, higher (A. Filonik).

The social and economic disparities in Egyptian society began to intensify under engineered by Anwar Sadat the “open-door” (“infittakh”) policy which liberalized foreign trade, and led to the sequential appearance of the so called “fat cats” exploiting the public sector to their private ends. Later, after 1991, in accordance with the IMF and World Bank’s “neo-liberal” advices, a substantial part of the state-run enterprises were privatized, including units in manufacturing, transportation and communication clusters. These policies gave birth to the parasitic financial oligarchy. The interventionist role of the state diminished whilst unemployment and poverty acquired tremendous proportions. On the other hand, upward social mobility, especially among the youth, decelerated.

The economic situation deteriorated also under influence of demographic factors. In Egypt the annual increase of population amounted to 1,5 million people. According to Dina Malysheva, in 1981, the year of Khosni Mubarakh inauguration, the population of the country did not exceed 44 million people whereas by 2011, the figure has nearly doubled, up to 84.5 million people. This demographic growth was not “reimbursed” by enhancing of employment opportunities, preventing food situation deterioration etc.

The January-February turmoil in Northern Africa and Middle East cannot be interpreted as an exclusively poverty and underclass phenomenon. For the last decades there is a noticeable growth of educated young generation stratum in Arab world. This generation cannot find decent employment opportunities.— qualified labour is not in demand as modern sector of national economy is narrow and relatively undeveloped. These population groups are tightly incorporated into the Twitter and Facebook networks. and can effectively use them for protest actions mobilizing. It is hardly accidental that this “revolutionary” unrest has its origins in Tunisia, the country possessing a significant percentage of higher education specialists, part of them having their curriculum in France. This is quite a recent tendency in the Arab world and many experts began to establish a fact of new social force birth — “new youth movements” (G. Mirsky, V. Naumkin). Apart from this the leftist public mood still remains to be traditional, dating back to the times of Gamal Abdel Nasser, and “academia” and mass media were under noticeable influence of its tradition for several decades. (V. Naumkin, A. Shumilin).

Of course, there were political preconditions of social revolt. And they include not only refusal of authoritarian state leaders to give up power (for decades!) but also existence of not too numerous surrounding groups. The Jordanian scholar and former diplomat Marwan Mausher,

defined the members of these circles as “old guard” or “traditional ruling elite”. “Traditional” not in the literal sense of the term but “traditionalistic” as these circles have no ideology of its own and maintains only sheer pragmatism and a permanent lust for power. This symbiotic formation consists of top-business people (referred to as “oligarchs”), high-positioned bureaucrats and senior military officers. This community of excessively corrupt top part of the state elite with practically changeless membership is also a hindrance to political reforms. Their mode of far-fetched reasoning is very simple: political liberalization will open doors to the Islamists, and any political reforms have to be preceded by economic transformation (“bread is prior to liberty”). Nevertheless, the economic reforms demand political providing, and that is why such situation creates a “vicious circle”. In the end “traditional elites” has become alienated from the rest of society, thus lacking feedback communication (V. Khoros).

Certainly, social tensions in the Arab countries have intensified for a number of years. Maria Volodina noted that strikes and other forms of protest actions in Egypt, for example, took place at least three years prior to the recent revolts. But spontaneity and swing of the “second wave” of mass actions in Islamic world (after Iranian revolution) exceed any expectations. In contrast to the “first wave” the second one appeared to be quite contagious (and this is not the only distinction), the chain reaction of protest movements in various countries is growing like snow ball.

The participants have paid peculiar attention to the other noticeable distinctions of the present “Arabic drama” from Iranian revolution: the muffled role of Islamic factors, limited use of purely Islamic slogans in mass protest meetings where mostly social and civic demands have been articulated etc. The question was put in a straightforward way: is political Islam is vanishing as a factor shaping social development in the Islamic areas? Many of participants consider such assumption as premature. Alexander Umnov concentrated on the protest potential of Islamic religion. According to the scholar, the Sunni Islam, the dominant denomination among the Arabs is politically less viable and powerful than the Shia Islam predominant in Iran. Nevertheless, the Islamic values are still vital in the Arabic context. Boris Dolgov noted that sociological researches demonstrate the strong adherence of the population majority (to 80 percent and more) to the Islamic values. The “Muslim Brotherhood” of Egypt, along with the Army, still remains one of the most efficient social actors in the country. It is only a matter of time for the “Brotherhood” to join the political struggle, and not only in Egypt, the scholar summarized.

One also has to take into consideration the following reasons. Before the Arab countries stands the task to speed up modernization which is far from completion. And successful modernization in Muslim world is hardly possible without ideological, moral and, to certain

extent, political involving and influence of Islam. (The Turkish, “kemalist”, experience was rather exception to rule in the history of Islamic world; and, by the way, Turkish Islam little by little is returning its positions, including the state power sphere). Revolution in Iran have been not only fundamentalist “returning to sources” but the attempts of Islamic circles to be presented on the world political proscenium and to work out “Islamic” variant of modernization (not excluding use of suitable Western models). If something like this happens as a result of political transformations in the Arab region, it would be possible to look at the case in the light of historical logic. In reality, however, various regimes and various figuration of political forces will pursue differing policies (V. Khoros).

The political processes in the Arab countries are affected by many factors, both domestic and international. Naturally, the participants actively discussed the problems of foreign influence on mass protest arising and probability of expected reforms in perspective. Among analytical and mass-media commentaries in Russia some times one could meet assertions that the protest actions in Northern Africa and Middle East were inspired from abroad, by the information centers and secret services of the USA. The participants voiced against such superficial versions of the events, for instance, the notion of “creative destruction” engineered by “the hand of Washington” to secure its own influence in the region. At the same time, participants did not deny certain contradictoriness of the USA policy in the Arab world (including support of “friendly” autocratic regimes for pushing slightly various political forces to instability).

An external factor can be quite influential in indirect ways as well. Russian authors V. Pantin and V. Lapkin suggest that a link exists between the events in the Arab countries and globalization coupled with the world crisis. Their argument is rooted in the methodology of the Kondratiev cycles. Both authors have worked out an analytical and prognostic model according to which the “big cycle” of a global economic and political evolution consists of four consecutive phases, one of them being the so called phase of “great upheavals”. This scheme made it possible for V. Pantin and V. Lapkin to forecast the 2008 world crisis. They now maintain that the phase of “great upheavals” will last until 2017-2018, its lowest point being the years 2011- 2012. Well, up to the present their forecasts have proved correct...

The world crisis has contributed to the deterioration of the situation in the Arab East in diverse ways including the fall in prices of raw materials, the reduction of opportunities for obtaining external credits, the growth of global food prices, which is particularly sensitive for an ecologically vulnerable region. V. Pantin and V. Lapkin argue that the conflict phase of the global evolution that we are now witnessing brings about a change of the former model of the global system as such. They maintain that the events in North Africa and the Middle East should

be regarded as first symptoms of this change, signaling that global leaders will find their chances of control over peripheral areas significantly reduced.

The round table participants debated Russia's position in regard to the events in the Arab world. So far, this position has been very prudent and pragmatic: maintaining the status quo looked like being of primary interest resulting in an implicit support for the Mubarak regime in the midst of popular uprising against it; statements were being made to the effect that appeals to revolutionary actions were counterproductive; concern was expressed about the Islamists possible coming to power. As a result, some Arab politicians, political activists and journalists have claimed that Moscow distanced itself from the scene at the very moment when its voice would be appreciated. Memory is still alive of the time when its participation in the area's affairs was quite substantial. Russian diplomacy should be more active and precise as well as ready to make contacts with Arab constructive opposition. For instance, it would probably make sense to correct the FSB list of terrorist organizations where the Moslem Brotherhood is included. Also, it would hardly be useful to worry beforehand about the Islamists ' taking charge since there exist moderate fractions within their movement, not to mention the virtual impossibility of politics without Islam in Muslim societies / (E. Suponina, A. Volodin) /.

The prospects. Various possible scenarios can be envisioned. The worst one is "fitna" in Arabic, total disorder, chaos and large-scale bloodshed (the Libyan variant). This kind of calamity can follow a struggle between Islamic extremists and the army after a period of power vacuum and anarchy as irregular armed groups emerge jockeying for positions and a single authority is lacking. In extreme cases, disintegration of some states cannot be ruled out, first of all Libya and Jordan. Such countries as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kuwait, however, have reasonably good chances to avoid that sore destiny. As to international implications of the fitna scenario, they are utterly unpredictable, especially in regard to such issues as oil prices, for instance, or Iran's capacity to influence the course of events.

Another scenario- the area's Islamization, as power in some key states is being captured by salafi radicals, Muslim fundamentalists right up to Al Qaeda jihadi militants. The extreme wing of that motley and ungovernable movements is represented by Hizballah, Hamas and the Algerian terrorists who have recently joined Al Qaeda. Moderate forces include the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. After they come to power, however, radicalization of the moderates cannot be ruled out and the apprehension of many an expert may come true, namely the formula "one man, one vote, once". The concept of Islamization as such appears rather ambivalent, encompassing various types of governance from an Islamic republic of the Iranian brand or the Taliban Emirate up to the thoroughly respectable Turkish model. As regards the Shia Iran, it cannot serve as an example for Sunni societies, and the Taliban's barbarous and medieval ways

have no chance to be reproduced anywhere except for Algeria and Yemen. Egypt, Syria, Tunisia and Lebanon have already reached a much higher degree of development.

The third scenario ("Burmese") is a prolonged military dictatorship. This sort of rule is always possible in a country lacking mature democratic institutions and traditions and threatened by fitna. In the Arab world, practically no country can be considered safe and immune from military rule. History has demonstrated, however, that military regimes are transient phenomena, and after their inevitable departure everything comes back to square one. The military do not cure the illness, they just lower the temperature for a while.

The fourth scenario can be called optimal: this is a gradual movement towards a pluralist multiparty society that would not be a copy of the Western model but would rather resemble the Indian one or – even more likely – the Turkish one. Egypt and Tunisia have most chances in this respect.

The fifth scenario – maintaining major features of the current status quo, although without former rulers. Tempests gradually die down, people return to their everyday life. It is business as usual. Corruption, rigged elections, massive unemployment – all of this remains in a softer version as governments will do their best to preclude another outburst. Muddling through will continue.

A few words about Saudi Arabia. This state can in fact be exempt from any scenario involving drastic changes due to its oil riches ensuring high living standards, and to the absence of modern political institutions whatsoever. The Bahrein case has shown, however, that even these conditions do not guarantee the rulers from turmoil. True, the Bahreini upheaval was initiated by the angry Shia majority of the population but in Saudi Arabia, too, there are plenty of discontented Shias. The Shia community in Saudi Arabia is just a minority of the population but it is located in the main oil-producing area (G. Mirsky).

An integral text of the round table discussion will be published in the monthly "World economy and International Relations".