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FORUM

The Arab Spring and International Law

The Arab Uprisings Under the Light of Intervention

JEAN-YVES DE CARA*

ABSTRACT: Diverse uprisings took place in the Middle East and North Africa due to various political, tribal, sectarian, religious, social, and economic factors. In several cases they turned into civil wars. As a principle of international law, intervention is undoubtedly prohibited. A request from a government may justify intervention or even annul its very nature as interference. Humanitarian intervention or the new doctrine of responsibility to protect, have also been invoked in that context. Interventions in Bahrain, Libya and Syria are discussed here. However, there is no coherence duty in politics, and States may decide to intervene or not on variable legal basis.

KEYWORDS: Arab Uprising, Intervention, Civil War, Legal Basis, Intervention on Invitation, GCC, Responsibility to Protect, Humanitarian Intervention, Authorisation by Security Council, NATO, Assistance to Insurgents, Political Interests

I. Introduction

The Arab uprisings were received with bewilderment by the international society. Aware of the risk of destabilisation of the whole region, foreign States reacted through diplomatic channels,¹ however the preferment of peaceful settlement proves more difficult where disputes do not oppose two States but rather undefined groups, factions or parties within the same State. Advices have been given. Resignations and changes have been duly noted. The United Nations (UN) took a cautious approach. The UN Secretary General insisted "on respect for the rights of peaceful protest and assembly," recalling that in responding the protesters "authorities have an obligation to respect human rights," and urged all parties to exercise restraint and engage in

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¹ *Louis Balmond* (under the direction of) Chronique des faits internationaux, Revue Générale de Droit International Public (RGDIP) 115 (2011), 551, 560–561.

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dialogue and a process to respect and reflect the will of the people and their legitimate aspirations.²

Although there are common challenges in the region and major principles to uphold, each country is unique and all situations are different. Diverse factors – tribal, religious, demographic, sectarian, military, and geopolitical – may explain every national unrest and in most cases the issues raised are not yet resolved. There is no general explanation for the Arab uprising nor was there a common cause. In Bahrain, the Shi'a majority demanded more power with the alleged support of Iran, in Yemen tribal and political tensions prevailed. In Libya tribal rivalry and misuse of national wealth by a despotic leader infuriated the people. Nepotism and misappropriation destroyed the regime in Tunisia, just as in Egypt where the military played a key role. In some countries like Morocco, the traditional bond between the nation and the King, *Amir al-Mu Minin* (Commander of the Believers), helped the initiation of reforms.³

Inevitably, such an upheaval in the Arab world challenges security of international relations and raises international legal issues related to recognition, assistance to foreign governments, implementation of humanitarian law in civil war, or the role of international organisations.⁴ As the blast wave has not yet subsided,⁵ it seems difficult to appreciate, at this early stage, the invariable or the changing features of international law through these events. However, the theme of 'intervention' seemingly dominates: and every national crisis has affected, in its own way, the balance of powers in this region (the Middle East and North Africa), which is of crucial importance for the international society.

² Ban Ki-Moon, Opening remarks to the press at stakeout, United Nations News Center, 17 February 2011, available at: http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/sgspeeches/statments_full.asp?statID=1075#.UOBCg2-NtEs (accessed on 30 December 2012).

³ Charles Saint-Prot/Frédéric Rouvillois/Jean-Yves de Cara, Le Maroc en Marche: le développement politique, social et économique du Maroc (2009); Ahmed Bouachik/Michel Degoffe/Charles Saint-Prot, La Constitution marocaine de 2011 (2012).

⁴ See ICTY, Appeal Chamber, Case No. IT-94-1, *Duško Tadić*, Judgment of 2 October 1995, 96 *et seq.* These points have been extensively discussed by the Institut de Droit International (IDI), see *Dietrich Schindler*, Le principe de non-intervention dangs les guerresciviles, Rapport provisoire, Annuaire de l'Institut de droit international (Annuaire IDI) 55 (1973), 416; IDI, The Principle of Non-Intervention in Civil Wars, Wiesbaden Resolution, 14 August 1975, available at: http://www.idi-iil.org/idiE/resolutionsE/1975_wies_03_en.pdf (accessed on 27 February 2013). See also *Guiseppe Sperduti*, The Protection of Human Rights and the Principle of Non-intervention in the Domestic Concerns of States, Annuaire IDI 63 (1989), 309.

⁵ At the time of writing.

For *Talleyrand*, "non-intervention is a term meaning almost the same thing as intervention." The realistic aphorism of the famous diplomat summarises the punctilious questioning of lawyers who have consistently struggled to define the concept.⁶

Intervention is undoubtedly prohibited.⁷ That is the consequence of sovereignty, political independence, self determination and territorial integrity, particularly when it involves the use of armed force. That prohibition is embodied in many treaties,⁸ resolutions⁹ and rulings from the International Court of Justice (ICJ).¹⁰ For the United Nations General Assembly (GA), prohibition covers:

armed intervention and all other forms of interference or attempted threats against the personality of the State or against its political, economic and cultural elements [...] the use of economic, political or any other type of measures to coerce another State in order to obtain from it the subordination of the exercise of its sovereign rights or to secure from it advantages of any kind [...] activities consisting in organizing, assisting, fomenting, financing, inciting or tolerating subversive, terrorist or armed activities aiming at the violent overthrow of the regime of another State, or interference in civil strife in another State.¹¹

Within such a comprehensive concept, many actions have been loosely defined as 'intervention' by governments from a mere statement or inclusion on the agenda of the UN, while an armed operation followed by occupation would not be described as such.¹² Classification depends largely on circumstances and political expediency:

⁸ *Jennings/Watts* (note 7), 428, footnote 6; Charter of the League of Arab States, 22 March 1945, reprinted in: International Human Rights Reports 12 (2005), 893.

⁹ GA Res. 2131 (XX) of 3 December 1965; GA Res. 2625 (XXV) of 24 October 1970.

¹⁰ International Court of Justice (ICJ), *Military and Paramilitary Activities in and Against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v. United States)*, Merits, Judgment of 27 June 1986, ICJ Reports 1986, 14, 106–111.

¹¹ GA Res. 2131 (XX) and GA Res. 2625 (XV) (note 9).

⁶ Jacques-Alain de Sédouy, Le Concert européen. Aux origines de l'Europe, 1814–1914 (2009); Alan Vaughan Lowe, The Principle of Non-Intervention: Use of Force, in: Alan Vaughn Lowe/Colin Warbrick (eds.), The United Nations and the Principles of International Law: Essays in Memory of Michael Akehurst: Essays in Honour of Michael Akehurst (1994), 66.

⁷ Nguyen Quoc Dinh/Patrick Daillet/Mathias Forteau/Alain Pellet, Droit international public (8th ed. 2009), 48; Sir Robert Jennings/Sir Arthur Watts, Oppenheim's International Law, vol. I (9th ed. 1996), 427; James E. S. Fawcett, Intervention in International Law: A Study of Some Recent Cases, Recueil des Cours (RdC) 63 (1961-II), 343, 347; Lowe/Warbrick (eds.) (note 6).

¹² For the examples of the United States (US) opposing the inclusion of Puerto Rico on the GA agenda on the basis of Art. 27 of the UN Charter, the same about Korea in 1950, or France opposing Morocco in 1953 and Algeria in 1956 being on the agenda, see *Bruno Simma/Hermann Mosler/Albrecht Randzelbofer/et al.* (eds.), The Charter of the United Nations: A Commentary (2nd ed. 2002), 153.