**The Tunisian axis**

BY Z A R R A R K H U H R O 2021-08-02

THE revolution may not be televised but the Tunisian coup is certainly being livetweeted. As soon as Tunisian president Kais Saied, with the backing of the army and police forces, suspended parliament and sacked Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi, Twitter burst forth with messages of support for the coup and condemnation for Mechichi and the `Islamist` Ennahda party that backed him.

When these tweets were analysed a curious, if pre dictable, pattern began to emerge: Marc Owen Jones, an assistant professor of Middle East studies at Hamad bin Khalifa University, analysed a particularly popular hashtag, `Tunisians revolt against the Brotherhood` examining about 12,000 tweets from 6,800 unique accounts in the process. He found that most of those tweeting on this hashtag were Emirati and Saudi influencers, and that the vast majority of the pro-coup tweets originated from accounts reporting their locations as being in the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Tunisians, who prefer Facebook over Twitter, were noticeably absent.

The use of the word `brotherhood` in the hashtag is a dead giveaway, referring as it does to the Muslim Brotherhood, a party that is considered enemy number one (or maybe two or three, depending on the day of the week) by the rulers of the aforementioned countries. This, then, was a clear attempt to link Ennahda to the Muslim Brotherhood, a group that is persecuted and proscribed in these countries, and which was crushed in Egypt following the coup that deposed Mohamed Morsi. If that wasn`t obvious enough, the most prominent influencer in this campaign, Saudi Monther al-Shaykh called the deposed prime minister the `Khamenei of Tunisia`, thus equating him with the Iranian arch-enemy.

It didn`t take long to make it official, with the UAE`s foreign minister Shaikh Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan, soon calling his Tunisian counterpart, expressing his country`s `full confidence and support` for the actions.

This is par for the course for the UAE, and to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia, who have been obsessed with halting and rolling back any hint of democracyin the Arab world ever since the Arab Spring swept over the region.

This was also the genesis of their current rivalry with Turkey, which backed the Arab Spring in the hope of seeing potential regional allies emerge.

From supporting the Sisi coup in Egypt and backing Sudan`s brutal regime against popular protests, to arming Gen Haftar in Libya and conducting military operations in Yemen, these allies have used a combination of largesse, influence and military might to make sure the map of the Middle East doesnot change in a way that leaves them out in the cold. The `siege` of Qatar was also a part of this strategy, as was the outreach to Israel.

And despite some tensions in their ties, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have remained largely united on these multiple fronts, along with their shared desire to contain Iran.

Tunisia, despite being on the periphery of the Arab world, was always an important prize, being the country where the spark of the Arab Spring was lit. Despite ups and downs democracy has prevailed here ever since, and worse still, it is Ennahda that emerged as the dominant political force. The problem is that Ennahda is a representative of `moderate` political Islam, and in the words of scholar Mustafa Aykol, is in fact `post-Islamist` having evolved from its genesis as a religious opposition movement into a consensus-seeking mainstream political party.

Its leader Rashid Gannouchi has for decades advocated not only freedom of speech but also freedom of religion, stating clearly that a non-Muslim has as much right topreach his religion to Muslims, as Muslims do to non-Muslims.

Naturally, this sort of thing is anathema to the UAE and Saudi Arabia who, in Ennahda, see a model that could one day challenge their hold intheir own countries. Thus, a proactive and aggressive strategy was needed to strangle this troublesome infant in its crib.

Interestingly, Daesh has also expressed pleasure at the situation, claiming that the `failure of democracy` proves that their approach is the only way forward. One should also note that Tunisia was the highest per capita contributor of fighters for Daesh in the entire world, with 6,000 Tunisians leaving to join Baghdadi`s forces.

I do not presume to say that all was well in Tunisia or that there was not popular anger or resentment at a struggling economy, widespread inequality and the government`s abysmal handling of the Covid crisis. Far from it. There was also disillusionment with democracy itself, given that the great hopes that sprung out of the deposing of Tunisian dictator Zainul Abidine ben Ali have not resulted in any significant improvement in the lives of ordinary Tunisians. But there is more at play than just that, and in the great game underway in the Arab world, Tunisia is just the latest front in what promises to be a decades-long war of influence. The writer is a journalist.

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