



The Arab revolutions of 2011 have had deep local and global consequences. We are witnessing today the emergence of new challenges and fracture lines; even the creation of new geopolitical realities which will shape international and regional relations for the foreseeable future.

The United States weakened in the Middle East

In the aftermath of 9/11, the neo-conservatives within the Bush Administration began pushing wholeheartedly for radical change of Arab/Islamic societies, by force if need be, in order to bring democracy to the region. Iraq was their first experiment.

It almost failed.

However, and in a clear contrast with the rest of the turmoil-ridden Arab world around it Iraq seemed, during the course of 2011, to be headed for greater stability with better and more professional security forces and a better application of rule of law. However, Iraq is a shaky experiment and will remain so even if the last U.S. troops left behind an Iraqi state that is more stable than most of its neighbors.

The turmoil in 2011 took everyone by surprise. President Bush and his administration is now gone and the neo-conservatives are waiting on the sideline in policy circles, watching as the tumultuous events of the Arab Spring of 2011 unfolded. The way neo-conservatives feel about it remains unclear. For sure, they are not overjoyed and fear that the Arab revolutions might lead – even through legitimate electoral means - to the constitution of Islamic and not to democratic states. Given the emergence of ‘mainstream’ official Islamist parties in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, those fears might seem well-founded.

Facilitating the shift towards a multipolar Middle East has been the shift in global context, both before and after the Arab Spring. A combination of military overstretch after both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, an economic slump and a revived isolationism in domestic politics were clear signals that the U.S. position was already weakening in the Middle East. And the Arab Springs have exacerbated this, costing the U.S. one major regional key ally, Hosni Mubarak, and deeply unnerving another, Saudi Arabia. Despite this, President Obama was able to score a few populist victories in the early days of the Maghrebian unrests, eventually calling on Mubarak to step down and approving military action in Libya. However, any enhanced goodwill that this might have bought, the U.S. position and strategies were undermined by its approach to Israel, notably President Obama’s staunch opposition to the Palestinian bid for statehood at the U.N. in September 2011, which in the view of many in the region – except Israel -- stripped away any pretence that the U.S. can be a neutral arbiter in the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The U.S. though, is not about to retreat from the Middle East and will not abandon its military bases in the Gulf, though not Iraq. Moreover U.S. key economic and diplomatic relations will continue to be central tools of influence and leverage. However, the diplomatic hegemony the US enjoyed in the 1990s and the military hegemony it attempted in the 2000s looks unlikely to be a feature of the post-Arab spring world. Nor is it viewed as a model to emulate by the peoples of the region who are turning more and more towards Asia for education, travel, economic and commercial relations.

European reactions

The diminishing power of the U.S. leaves space for other powers to fill, although the neighboring European Union (E.U.) is unlikely to be one. Despite being the Middle East's largest trading partner, the E.U. has rarely made that count, and is even less likely to do so now, as it faces severe political and economic crises. The European countries – with the notable exception of a major power, Germany – played key roles in the Libyan civil war. At first, the European countries had some difficulties in understanding the tumultuous changes occurring directly at their doorstep. At one point, elements within the French government offered to send police and paramilitary units to help late President Ben Ali control the protests. This elicited outrage. As the Europeans began to assess the unfolding situations within the Arab world with greater sophistication, they realized that geographic proximity, close historical relations with former colonies, and failure to rehabilitate successfully dictators Gaddafi and Ben Ali, would mean that they would have to take forceful measures.

They moved decisively to offset the failed efforts and resulting embarrassments caused by their cozy relations with Arab dictators. European governments led the media campaign against the Libyan regime, and then took direct military action. European powers Britain and France were at the forefront of NATO operation in Libya with robust U.S. military support and the blessing of the Arab League using the cover of a “humanitarian” operation designed to protect the Libyan people from the depredations of the Gaddafi regime.

The B.R.I.C.S

The emerging B.R.I.C.S. seem likely to enhance their position. Russia under Vladimir Putin has already revived some of the U.S.S.R.'s former prominence in the region, expanding its economic, military and diplomatic presence in Syria in particular; but this is unlikely to continue in that country if and when Assad falls from power. The reluctance to approve U.N. resolutions on Libya and the steadfast refusal to do so on Syria suggests that Russia seeks to guard its expanding strategic regional position. Russia will increase its strategic heft but it still has little to offer in terms of economic benefits. As Islamist governments take over, there is a possibility, however, that its arms relationship with regional states may take off.

The other B.R.I.C.S., China, India, Brazil and South Africa seem to have restricted their regional involvement to the economic sphere for now. Unlike the western states, these powers seem willing to offer trade and cooperation without the human rights and democratic strings attached to it. As western influence continues to wane and the economic clout of these states grows further, an enhanced role for the B.R.I.C.S. in the future would seem more appealing.

Asian reactions

U.S. and Europe were not the only one surprised, confused and/or worried by the upheavals in the Arab world. The events of 2011 in MENA forced South-east Asian (SeA) nations to pay greater attention to this physically distant yet economically important region. The revolutions in the Arab countries forced South-east Asian governments to take action to repatriate their expatriate citizens working especially in violence-torn Libya. Given the large numbers of their nationals elsewhere in oil-rich MENA countries, they will have to take into consideration another series of repatriation of nationals if the regional situation worsens.

Moreover, several SeA nations – facing economic pressures, legitimacy crises, and the presence of religious extremist groups – have been alarmed by the revolutions in the region and by the seemingly rising star of Islamist movements in the countries of the MENA. SeA nations such as Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Myanmar, all of which have serious political and socioeconomic problems, have paid close attention to the events in the MENA region as evidenced by the extensive media commentaries over the course of 2011. They have warned their populations against any attempts to emulate the ‘revolutionary chaos’ and vacuum occurring in the MENA region, and are scrambling to immunize themselves politically and socio-economically from the contagion of violence by trying to resolve their deep-seated internal issues.

In its Annual Report 2011, the World Organization against Torture suggests that there is a strong correlation between the impact of the Arab uprisings and the dramatic increase in repression in various countries around the world, including ten Asian states such as Bangladesh, China, Laos, North Korea and Vietnam. During the “People National Congress” in March 2011, Chinese Prime Minister, Wen Jiabao, announced an increase of 13.8% in the annual budget of the police for a total of 68 billion Euros.

In North Korea, the population was overflowed with pamphlets from South Korea describing the popular uprisings taking place in the Arab world. Pyongyang responded by creating a new anti-riot special unit equipped with Chinese material and arms. Many countries are rightly worried by the growing rise in popular discontent and have been forced to take a wide range of measures ranging from consenting to reforms and changes in domestic politics to beefing up their domestic security forces.

Regional impact Turkey and Qatar

Turkey certainly is one of the major winners of the Arab Spring. Even in the years leading up to it, Turkey's 'zero problems with neighbors' policy had considerably expanded its political, economic and cultural influence in the region. And the Arab Spring has boosted its soft power. Firstly, Turkey has mostly found itself on the right side of events. Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was the first foreign leader to call for Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak to resign and he eventually turned on Muammar Qaddafi in Libya and Bashar al-Asad in Syria in favour of pro-democracy protestors. Secondly, most of the moderate Islamist parties that are now likely to dominate the Arab world, such as Tunisia's Ennadha and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, claim that the combination of Islam, democracy and economic success implemented by Turkey's ruling party, the AKP, is their goal. Although some of its business links with these states may be lessened in the short term as they undergo transition and some economic difficulty, in the longer term Turkey can expect to translate its early support for and ideological affinity with the new regimes into strong relations and enhanced influence.

The other big winner is Qatar, though the country had also expanded its regional influence prior to 2011. With its security guaranteed by hosting the US military and with its oil and gas-based economy booming, Qatar has used both its wealth and media influence, primarily via its satellite channel, Al-Jazeera, to punch above its weight. The government reacted quicker than most to the Arab Spring. Al-Jazeera led reporting on the unrest in Tunisia and Egypt and helped it spread across the region. Similarly, Qatar led Arab League efforts against Qaddafi and Asad. Some accuse Qatar of hypocrisy for being vocal on Libya and Syria yet quiet on similar unrest in Bahrain, one of its allies. Others claim Qatar is using the Arab Spring to spread an Islamist agenda, particularly in Libya and Tunisia where it financed Islamist political parties. The region is changing and Qatar has been among the quickest to realise that it is well placed to shape a future that will enhance its own interests.

Israel worries

Israel is most worried by the sea-changes that are occurring within its Arab neighbors. The list of Israeli concerns over these changes is almost endless and they will reshape and redefine Israeli regional policies and threat perceptions. The biggest worry for Israel is what has happened in Egypt since the overthrow of its partner in peace and regional stability, Hosni Mubarak. The regime change in Egypt has the potential to bring about a serious reevaluation of the peace treaty signed in 1979.

Israel did not face serious domestic instability due to the Arab Spring but the country ends 2011 considerably weaker and more isolated than ever in the region where it physically belongs. And even before 2011, the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had fallen out of grace with Turkey and was increasingly relying on US diplomatic cover.

The Arab Spring has increased this isolation. The new government in once-reliable Egypt looks likely to be a more hostile Islamist-led regime. Although Syria is an enemy, it was at least predictable and stable: a civil war in the land of Sham may threaten Israel's north-eastern border. Even the friendly Hashemite regime in Jordan may have to make concessions to its revived Muslim Brotherhood, which wants to abrogate the Jordan-Israeli peace. The threat of popular unrest has finally brought together the rival Palestinian factions, Hamas and Fatah, in a unity agreement – which, however, remains tenuous and in permanent danger of collapsing -- to Netanyahu's chagrin. Furthermore, the success of the Muslim Brotherhood as a result of the revolution in Egypt is likely to boost Hamas in time for the Palestinian elections in 2012. Isolated Israel may soon be entirely surrounded by unfriendly Islamist governments, forcing it to either compromise or become even more insular. There is very little chance of a break-through in Israeli-Palestinian 'peace' negotiations in the coming years.

Israel's northern front is a significant source of tension in the MENA region. A minor border skirmish between Hizballah and Israel, or another Hizballah kidnapping operation, might lead to another war between Hizballah and Israel. With increased military capabilities, including Scud-D missiles, Hizballah can now hit any place in Israel from anywhere in Lebanon. Therefore a new war would no longer merely engulf southern Lebanon and northern Israel.

Hizballah is about to lose one of its closest allies: Bashar al-Asad. Without al-Asad, the Lebanese Party of God risks losing legitimacy as an "Arab organization" and being thus perceived (much more than it already is) as an Iranian pawn. Already, Hizballah has become unpopular in the Arab streets due to its unequivocal support for al-Asad and its threats to those who oppose him.

Invoking another war with Israel would once again burnish its reputation as a scion of the resistance and increase its popularity. Bashar al-Asad may also urge an Hizballah-Israel war to divert attention and thus permit him to rebound. On the one hand, Hizballah is much better armed now than ever before and the movement may even obtain a significant percentage of al-Asad's arsenal if the latter falls. On the other hand the party of God has spent the last six years training for another war with Israel.

For Hizballah, including its cadres as well as its leadership, Israel's ultimate destruction is a matter of "when", not "if". And they might conclude the time is now.

War may also serve Israel's purposes. Israel has been the object of increased diplomatic

pressure ever since Abu Mazen's September bid for Palestinian statehood in the UN. If Israel is attacked by an unpopular Hizballah, attention is diverted away from the Palestinian issue and towards an issue where it enjoys greater international support, Hizballah and Iran. Israel as well has been preparing for war with Hezbollah, and she believes that many of the mistakes that plagued her during the previous war have been rectified (such as overconfidence, unobtainable goals, poor coordination between the services, tanks without adequate missiles defense, a lack of a civilian missiles defense shield, etc.).

Key countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt (at least General Tantawi and S.C.A.F), and Jordan will once more remain relatively quiet out of their own interest to see Iranian power diminish. If there is a new Syrian government in place, it too will not be unfavorably disposed towards Hizballah.

Hizballah's support is now ever more precarious due to a weakened (if not fatally wounded) patron in Syria and a decreased legitimacy at home and abroad. Starting a war will not be a popular decision amongst Lebanese, especially if it provokes large-scale destructions in Lebanon. Nasrallah himself admitted that had he known the scale of the Israeli response in 2006, he would not have launched the operation. Furthermore, Hizballah's decision is significantly influenced by Iran, and Iran may not wish to risk the dismantling of a second ally after the al-Assad regime falls. Sectarian tension in Lebanon has increased over the last year, and if Hizballah provokes another war, it is relying on the "rally around the flag" effect. It worked, to some extent, last time. Hizballah may not be so lucky in 2012.

While Israel considers Hizballah a formidable adversary, the group does not represent the same existential threat as Iran does. By engaging in a destructive war with Hizballah, where civilian casualties are assured, Israel will be wasting its already limited political capital, and will have none left for greater action against Iran. Furthermore, though a vehemently Saudi regime remains entrenched, other anti-Iranian countries may no longer be such reliable—if not clandestine—allies. The Egyptian military still holds the reigns, but it can no longer ignore the popular will as Mubarak could and did. The Jordanian monarchy has not experienced significant turmoil, and has no interest in doing so, and therefore may be quicker to heave opprobrium onto Israel. After the withdrawal from US troops in Iraq, Iraq is no longer as beholden to Western interests. In fact, it is increasingly susceptible to Iranian interests, and will therefore certainly take a harsher stance than it did in 2006.

Egypt is uncertain

Even if the composition of the future Egyptian government is uncertain, some signs of a new pattern in the Israeli-Egyptian relationship have already become evident: the Gaza border

re-opening, the statements of politicians from different factions calling into question the current status of the peace treaty and the strident dislike of Israel within large sectors of the Egyptian population. The Muslim Brotherhood never hid its opposition to the peace treaty, and the declaration of its leader, Rashad al-Bayoumi, few days before Mubarak's fall, confirms this position: "After President Mubarak steps down and a provisional government is formed, there is a need to dissolve the peace treaty with Israel."

The Muslim Brotherhood will have a key role in the new government given their solid showing in the legislative elections in November-December 2011. Israel is dismayed that "moderate" and "secular" politicians have adopted hostile tones. Ayman Nour called for its revision, while Mohamed al-Baradei suggested a popular referendum on the treaty. According to a recent poll, 56% of the Egyptians are in favour of cancellation, a referendum as suggested by al-Baradei could have dramatic consequences on the Israeli-Egyptian relations.

However, it is quite improbable that any future Egyptian government cancels or totally revises the peace treaty, simply because of stark realities. Firstly, Egypt's military is highly dependent on the United States for support. Secondly, the Egyptian economy cannot afford to go back on a war footing; this was not why the people made the revolution. The bilateral relationship will be certainly less comfortable or friendly but probably not catastrophic.

Egypt's weakness on the other hand, as the most populous Arab state and formerly a lead player in the US' bloc of allies, will be felt regionally. Its involvement in Arab-wide concerns has lessened. Even if elections go smoothly and a democratic order takes shape, it is likely to be several years before Egypt returns to its previous role of a leading power in the Arab world.

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