

# After the Arab Spring Power Shift in the Middle East?

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# ➤ Executive Summary

Nicholas Kitchen, Editor, IDEAS Reports

The events of the Arab Spring were an inevitable surprise. In a region where political oppression and economic under-development were most keenly felt among a demographic bubble of well-educated youth, the classic conditions for revolution were met. However, few could have predicted the spark that would ignite a wave of protest across the region, the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor who felt humiliated by his treatment at the hands of petty local officials.

The final outcome of the protests across the region is still uncertain, but more than a year on, events have settled into patterns sufficiently to allow an interim assessment of their success. Four dictators have been forced from power. Relatively orderly and peaceful political transitions are underway in Tunisia and Egypt, the two countries that led the revolutionary wave in 2011.

Yet the positives are few and far between. Tunisia's transition is mired in sectarian rancour and economic malaise. In Egypt, the hopes of the Tahrir protestors have given way to a military authority concerned only for its interests and no more concerned for human rights than the regime it had refused to support. The Libyan rebels that with NATO's assistance defeated Gaddafi's forces now fight among themselves for the direction of an increasing fractured transition. Syria is in the throes of civil war with no end in sight; Yemen appears to be heading in the same direction.

Moreover, the Arab monarchies, for so long coup-proofed by their oil wealth and US patronage, remain redoubtable, their survival assured by their strategic and economic importance. The world's wealthy returned to the region just last week for the Bahrain Grand Prix despite the continuing repression of protestors by the regime.

Toby Dodge concludes this report by noting that 'successful revolutions are very rare indeed'. Revolutions entail not just regime change, but a reordering of politics: the replacement of ideas as well as elites. There is little evidence that the events of the Arab Spring represent such a revolution in the region. In most cases, the regimes have emerged scarred but broadly intact. Where the protestors have succeeded in forcing regime change, the emerging new elites are conspicuous by their ties to the discredited structures of the past. Moreover, as George Lawson notes here, the protests themselves lacked a genuine narrative of change; united by little more than a generalised commitment to individual rights the protests articulated little in terms of what might replace the prevailing socio-economic contracts in the region.

Behind the headlines then, this report's conclusions are pessimistic. The authors here find little evidence to suggest that future historians will rank the events of 2011 with those of 1848, or 1989. Simply too few of the fundamentals of social, economic and political organisation in the Arab world have been successfully contested by the protests. Of course, the resistance is not over, and this can only be an interim assessment, particularly as policymakers in Washington appear set to escalate the United States' commitment to regime change in Syria, and as the prospect for greater conflict with Iran persists. The transitions underway may yet prove more far-reaching and durable than we predict. But as 2011's Spring turns into 2012's summer, the answer to the question of whether there has been a power shift in the Middle East, is a decisive 'not yet'. ■

➤ After the Arab Spring:  
Power Shift in the  
Middle East

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# ➤ From the 'Arab Awakening' to the Arab Spring; the Post-colonial State in the Middle East

Toby Dodge

**The consequences of the political turmoil that swept across the Middle East in 2011 support the claim that those twelve months have been the most politically significant in the region for over fifty years. The tragic self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid on December 17, 2010 was not just the final desperate act of an individual ground down by state corruption, repression and incompetence. His suicide gave rise to a region-wide wave of sympathy, an empathy that was quickly politicised by the mass recognition of his desperation: the long-term failure of Arab states to deliver on promises of citizenship, political freedom and economic development. Mohamed Bouazizi's death triggered a powerful movement of political mobilisation challenging the governing elites of the Middle East. Within a month this movement had forced the Tunisian President, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, to seek refuge in Saudi Arabia after twenty-four years of rule. Ten days after his departure, mass demonstrations spread to Egypt and dominated the centre of Cairo. Faced with a popular movement of Cairo's youth, the army were reluctant to face public opprobrium and chose not to fire on the crowd. By February 11, Hosni Mubarak, who had ruled Egypt for thirty years, was forced from office. The strength of popular protest was such that two dictators had been driven from office, and the remaining ruling elites in Tunisia and Egypt were compelled to hold free and fair parliamentary elections in an attempt to meet the democratic demands of its population.**

The arrival of democratic government in the Middle East has long been predicted, but, until 2011, perennially delayed. Much to the surprise of historians and social scientists, and to the anger of a great deal of their own population, the externally imposed, weak and illegitimate post-colonial states of the region had proved to be remarkably stable and militantly autonomous in the face of sustained domestic, regional and international challenges.

With the exception of Iran in 1979, after the initial phase of post-colonial consolidation it was the mid-1980s that saw the first major 'crisis' of the Middle Eastern state. This was caused by the collapse of the international oil price in 1985 and the failure of import substitution-led industrial growth. By the mid-1980s, an economically liberal if not politically democratic breakthrough appeared imminent as the capacity of states to deliver on promises of economic and social development came to an end.

The sense of democratic possibility again came to the fore after the Gulf War of 1990–1. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the liberation of Kuwait by US-led forces and the increasing influence of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank were all thought to be potential catalysts for change. Sadly, the hopes of the early 1990s were not realised.

Finally, in the aftermath of Al-Qaeda's attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, a degree of hope spread amongst the liberal intelligentsia of the Middle East. Discussions amongst democratic activists across the region and their colleagues in exile in Europe and America were bolstered by an optimism that the atrocities committed in New York and Washington would act as a catalyst for long awaited political change. This liberal optimism predicted that the outmoded and anachronistic rulers, embarrassing relics from the post-colonial Cold War era, would finally succumb to the inexorable forces of globalisation. The hoped-for result would see the rise of democratic government, eagerly anticipated long awaited in the salons, *diwaniyya* and lecture theatres of the region.

To a certain extent the pundits of the liberal *diwaniyya* were not initially disappointed. The administration of George W. Bush agreed with their analysis of Middle East state autonomy and the need for a muscular external stimulus to trigger change across the region. However, the results of the 2003 invasion of Iraq were unexpected. Regime change in Baghdad did send shock waves across the region. But, if anything, the chaos and violence that exploded in Iraq in its aftermath allowed the rulers in the region to tighten their grip, as they could portray themselves as guardians of order and stability.

Against this background, it is the indigenous popular movements triggered by the death of Mohamed Bouazizi, rather than external catalysts, that have had the transformatory effects long awaited across the Middle East. Their destabilising dynamics are still unfolding in both Libya and Syria. However, these movements raise the larger analytical question of why did it take so long? Why, until 2011, have the regimes of the Middle East been able to defend their autonomy in the face of economic failure, international change and domestic discontent?

## THE RISE OF POST-COLONIAL ARAB STATE

Part of the reason for the longevity of ruling regimes across the region rests on the fact that post-colonial states of the Middle East entered the international system at a specific economic and ideological moment. They bear the heritage of this admission both in the economic policies the regimes deployed until the 1980s and in the regime type and leadership method. The seizure of the Egyptian state by Gamal Abdel Nasser and fellow free officers in 1952 signalled not only the abolition of the Egyptian monarchy but also the rise of radical republicanism at the heart of the Middle Eastern state system. It is the final removal of the descendants of this influential regime that makes the Arab Spring so historically important.

The republican states of the Mashreq and Maghreb, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Iraq and Syria, strove to distance themselves from their former colonial masters between the 1950s and 1970s. The independence they strove to establish was influenced by the then dominant international economic and political trends that gave legitimacy, financial support and technical assistance to state-driven modernisation across the third world. Both Eastern bloc and Western aid donors favoured state-led development models, with academics in the developing world also encouraged the state's dominance of the economy, as a way of increasing the national autonomy of late-industrialising countries in the international economy.

As the Arab post-colonial republican regimes strove to consolidate their power, they faced indigenous economic classes that lacked the financial power or social coherence to pose an effective challenge to the state's dominance of its population. The military bureaucrats that now staffed the main institutions of the state were comparatively unrestrained by domestic interest groups as they attempted to transform society by unleashing what Ellen Trimberger aptly described as a 'revolution from above'. Their aim was to 'modernise' both economy and society without mobilising a mass political movement that could threaten their newly obtained political power. This strategy of sustained demobilisation was broadly successful until 2011.

The 'revolutions from above' pursued by republican regimes in Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Iraq and Syria were pragmatic, and implemented in a step-by-step manner. However, the economic goals of state-driven development served political ends. By intervening directly in the economy, by instigating widespread land reform in the name of national development, the republican regimes directly attacked the foundations of the ancien regime and replaced those formerly empowered by colonial state building. The policies of state-driven development were intended to destroy large landowners whose prestige and economic wealth had constituted the unstable social base of the previous regimes. In addition, by taking the dominant role in the economy the republican regimes denied space for an indigenous Arab bourgeoisie to gain enough economic weight or political influence to challenge the state.

The legacy of this political and economic approach was ambiguous to say the least. After taking power, the Arab republican states quickly developed all the trappings of modern government, with large and complex bureaucracies, powerful armies, urbanisation and a degree of welfare provision. But, as Nazih Ayubi persuasively argued, although they acquired the ability to deploy violence frequently against their populations, they lacked the institutional capacity to extract resources regularly and efficiently in the form of taxation. In this sense they were certainly 'fierce' states, but not strong ones. They lacked the institutional power and political legitimacy to implement government policy effectively and regulate society throughout their territory. State intervention in society was often unwelcome; regarded by the population at best to be a necessary evil and at worst as an illegitimate intrusion.

Against this background, the Arab governments involved in post-colonial state formation proved unable or unwilling to institutionalise legal-rational bureaucratic links to their populations. This led to the creation of more informal and personal networks of social control and mobilisation. Individuals were forced to rely on personal contacts with people in positions of power in order to guarantee their economic survival when state institutions and market mechanisms alike failed to provide resources. As a result, neo-patrimonial structures of political organisation predominated.

Clientalism provided the link between the ruling elite and its immediate trusted circles and, by way of widening circles of patron–client relationships, a sizable minority of the population. This system did not link politicians with the 'public' in a democratic contract but tied patrons personally with their associates, clients and supporters.

Neo-patrimonialism as a method of political rule is inherently unstable. It is based on unequal access to government resources and it constantly creates and recreates constituencies of the dispossessed and resentful. It was these constituencies that eventually united in 2011 to unseat Ben Ali and Mubarak in Tunisia and Egypt. However, clientalism does have advantages for Middle Eastern leaders who control the pinnacle of the neo-patrimonial networks. By the very nature of neo-patrimonialism, the relations between state and society that it nurtures are unofficial, diffuse and for the most part implicit. This means they are organic and flexible, changing to suit the needs of both patron and client in times of political turmoil or economic scarcity. Ultimately, access to state patronage has defined the shape of the public sphere across the Middle East. Economic opportunities, group loyalties and social and political identities have all been shaped and reshaped, based upon where a specific individual stands in relation to the state-sponsored patronage networks that prevailed in the region.

## **THE CRISIS OF THE ARAB STATE**

The combination of state-driven development policies and dependence on neo-patrimonialism to secure the political loyalty of key constituencies ensured that the economies of Middle Eastern states were shaped in the image of the regimes that came to power between the 1950s and 1970s. Already modest private sector, perceived as economically unviable, were swept aside in the name of national development. The state gradually took more and more responsibility for the economy, moving from a planning and coordinating role to direct investment in and management of industrial production. This worked well as a strategy for increasing regime power, both by integrating potentially influential entrepreneurs directly into the state and making their success heavily dependent on state

favours. But it also had the effect of politicising the performance of the economy. Post-colonial Arab governments that promised rapid modernisation in return for loyalty were taken at their word. When economic success was meagre or non-existent the blame was directed at the policy and behaviour of the ruling elites.

During the 1980s and 1990s two related phenomena arose that placed distinct limits on the political autonomy that Arab states had enjoyed for thirty years. The first was the growing influence that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank came to have over the indebted non-oil-producing states of the region. By the mid-1980s the Bretton Woods institutions insisted that the economies of recipient states were 'structurally adjusted' as a condition for further borrowing. The economies of Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt all succumbed to the prescriptions of market reliance at the heart of the neoliberal 'Washington Consensus' promoted by the IMF and World Bank. In return for receiving large loans those states had to limit their involvement in the economy, removing import quotas, cutting tariffs and interest rate controls and moving towards the privatisation of state industries. Even states like Syria that fought hard to maintain control over their economic sovereignty had to conform to some extent to the new economic zeitgeist in the face of poorly performing economies and increasing indebtedness.

The second, and in many ways more shocking, threat to the autonomy of Middle Eastern states arose from the dynamics of operating in a unipolar world. A number of republican regimes – notably Syria and Iraq – depended on the Eastern bloc for weapons and technology, and more importantly, for diplomatic leverage in their relations with Israel, the United States and the United Nations. With the sudden demise of their Communist allies their international autonomy was radically curtailed. Diplomacy became a more delicate operation; it had to be carried out unilaterally and with a greater sense of vulnerability.

International threats to the political and economic sovereignty of the Middle East were compounded by the fall in the price of oil, which had a significant effect at the regional level. State-driven development

strategies pursued from the 1950s onward had been directly and indirectly sheltered from the dynamics of the global economy by increasing oil wealth and its associated inter-Arab aid and worker remittances. By the mid-1980s this oil-based autonomy was in serious doubt. OPEC had become a victim of its own success, as the high cost of oil forced Western consumer economies to improve fuel efficiency and made exploration for oil in non-OPEC areas more cost-efficient.

The repercussions of the oil price collapse of the mid-1980s can be gauged by noting the dependence of non-oil-producing states on inter-Arab aid and worker remittances sent home from the Gulf states. For Syria the assistance it received from the oil-producers was equal to 25 percent of the state budget. The Middle East's real gross national product in the 1980s fell by a yearly average of 2.4 percent. The end of bipolarity, the increased power of the IMF and the World Bank and the collapse of oil prices placed severe pressure on Arab regimes, which were forced to search for alternative sources of finance, further limiting their capacity for autonomous policymaking.

Domestically, there seemed to be little alternative to the neoliberal prescriptions for the socio-economic woes facing Middle Eastern states. The failure of the statist model was as apparent to Arab populations as to their leaderships. Trade imbalances and increasing foreign debt forced governments to cut back expenditure, further depressing employment and growth. State-imposed austerity highlighted the structural crisis of the economy, the ineffectual nature of previous government policy and the state's dependence on external funding.

The inability of regimes to maintain, let alone improve, living standards directly affected their legitimacy. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its statist ideology undermined comparable regional ideologies and liberal triumphalism at the end of the Cold War influenced domestic Arab political opinion. By the early 1990s, in the immediate aftermath of the Gulf War, the predictions of proponents of globalisation seemed to be justified and the republican regimes of the Middle East appeared increasingly anachronistic. State-driven development had failed to deliver economic

modernisation to the vast majority of the population. Tens of thousands of graduates produced by ambitious education programmes were facing a very bleak future as urban unemployment increased. The states themselves were increasingly indebted and were imposing austerity measures to meet balance-of-payments crises. Food subsidies were cut and the Egyptian government faced bread riots. The triumph of liberal democracy (if not quite the 'end of history' predicted by Francis Fukuyama) appeared well-grounded, even inevitable, and not just the bombastic celebration of market capitalism.

## **TRANSFORMATION POSTPONED**

The political and economic transformation of the Middle East predicted in the 1990s did not transpire for the rest of that decade and well into the new century. Although Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia all sustained structural adjustment, their leadership remained stubbornly in place. The structures of political power remained robust after the Cold War ended despite the increasing influence of the Washington Consensus. Even the retreat of the state from the economic sphere was halting and ambiguous. From the 1990s until 2011, the post-colonial autonomy of Arab leaders proved robust in the face of sustained political and economic challenges from the international system.

The survival strategies of the Arab ruling elites persisted during the 1980s and 1990s because the challenges they faced were not constant, homogeneous nor wholly indigenous. Regimes muddled through successfully by partially or temporarily addressing problems in one sphere while ignoring or using intimidation in another. Key players in the international system could be bought off with limited but well-timed diplomatic initiatives.

Egypt's extended flirtation with restricted economic and political liberalisation became both a template for others and a warning about the threat to regime autonomy if strict limits were not placed on the whole process. Egypt's *infitah* or economic opening, declared in April 1973, was the consequence of state economic failure but also of the availability of regional assistance and international support. Egypt's problems sprang

from the collapse of the statist economic model in the mid-1960s and an accompanying foreign exchange crisis that effectively brought import substitution-led industrial growth to an end. Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, saw the opportunity for redress by seeking financial investment from the Gulf states in the immediate aftermath of the 1973 oil price rises. Sadat realigned Egypt's foreign policy with Washington, judging the Americans would be able to broker a favourable deal with the IMF and the World Bank in return for the strategic alliance he offered.

Domestically, Sadat's move away from the state's dominance of the economy allowed him to forge a new alliance with the entrepreneurial section of the upper middle classes. The breaking of landowner and bourgeoisie political and economic power under Nasser enabled Sadat to integrate a weak, fractured and dependent business class into the lowest levels of the patronage system without threatening his power base. This limited economic liberalisation was accompanied by the theatre of elections and the installation of a parliament. However, the dangers of political and economic liberalisation became apparent when the new bourgeoisie developed autonomous links with the international economy and social unrest flared as a result of the unequal distribution of the new financial resources. The ensuing crackdown by the state set the template for Egypt's *infitah* – slow and sporadic economic liberalisation followed by authoritarian state action when the process appeared to be moving beyond state control.

Egypt's pioneering if ambiguous experimentation with liberalisation accentuated the strategy the majority of Arab ruling elites adopted to stay in power. They continued to rule from the 1990s through to 2011 because they put political survival above the welfare of their populations. The post-colonial states of the Middle East carefully constructed the economic setting within which economic liberalisation unfolded. The bourgeoisie, identified by theories of liberalisation as the shock troops of reform, were highly dependent upon the state. As a consequence, until the Arab Spring, political and economic changes were successfully managed by incumbent regimes for their own ends. Liberalisation was never allowed to threaten a regime's power base or its ability control the population.

The main ambition of the reform process was to manage economic imbalances without damaging political autonomy. To that end financial resources were sought from donors who would minimise conditionality. The most attractive source of finance was indigenous capital that had been removed from the domestic economy in order to escape the reach of the state, capital that often belonged to elements of the bourgeoisie and landed classes decimated in the early years of state-building. Ironically, the very regimes that set out to destroy the power of the ancien regime in the 1950s and 1960s were by the 1990s basing a major element of their survival strategy on them. Expatriate capital was welcomed to fill the space vacated by the state's reduction of its own economic role, with the hoped-for economic growth produced by this new wave of investment meant to lessen the social tensions created by government austerity. Yet whilst this crony capitalism brought the bourgeoisie back into the domestic economy, it heightened their dependence on the regime and its maintenance of the status quo and further exacerbated inequalities of wealth.

The privatisation process in Algeria, Egypt, Syria and Tunisia was thus dominated by a small set of businesspeople with close links to the highest echelons of the regime. The relationship became symbiotic, with those in positions of political power increasingly developing private economic interests. This process went a step further as the old Nasserist elites in Egypt were sidelined in the 1980s and replaced by economic technocrats. The change in personnel and in government rhetoric was indicative of a realignment in the social coalition the regime was based on. The urban working class and the peasantry, previously carefully mobilised to support the regime, were marginalised as the newly empowered bourgeoisie were integrated into the regime as subordinate partners, leaving both urban and rural populations alienated from the state and the ruling elites.

The ramification of this controlled economic reform was the birth of a 'liberal' authoritarianism in the Middle East during the 1990s. The state surrendered some of its economic roles, but only in order to consolidate its political position. The ruling coalition was broadened and the bourgeoisie were brought

back in, but having been given a large stake in the status quo they were not inclined to push for democratisation. Until 2011, elections were held and parliaments stocked with representatives who debated and passed laws, but the locus of power never moved from the presidential palaces as the day-to-day management of politics remained largely untouched by democratic trappings contrived to please the international community. The system created glaring inequalities of wealth, increasingly obvious government corruption and uneven economic growth. For the best part of the three decades preceding the Arab Spring a cynical, demobilised population struggling to get by in a poorly performing economy was constrained by a brutally coercive state.

## **THE CAUSES OF THE ARAB SPRING**

William Quandt has astutely argued that authoritarian regimes base their survival on four ingredients: 'ideology, repression, payoffs, and elite solidarity'. In Tunisia and Egypt the ideological justifications for rule had long since failed to have any purchase on the population. The acceptance of neoliberal rhetoric by the governing elite stripped them of their socialist and developmental justification for authoritarian rule. In its place they increasingly resorted to a conspiratorial nationalism, blaming economic failure on a shadowy and shifting coalition of external actors. Given Hosni Mubarak's close working relationship with the Israeli government and Egypt's financial dependence on American aid, the use of nationalist paranoia as a justification for rule was bound to have a limited appeal. This was especially the case amongst an increasingly youthful population who had no memory of the post-colonial glory of Nasser in Egypt or Bourguiba in Tunisia.

The increasingly brazen nature of regime corruption in both Egypt and Tunisia was enabled through the exclusion of the majority of the population from the economy. Family members of the ruling elite flaunted their wealth in the streets of Tunis and Cairo as standards of living for the majority of the population stagnated. The constituency for revolutionary change steadily expanded as the percentage of the population between 15 and 29 years-old rose, by 50 percent in

Tunisia and 60 percent in Egypt since 1990. Finally, as the membership of the coalition of the dispossessed increased, the ability of the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes to provide pay-offs was also put under increasing pressure. In order to buy off its population the Egyptian government was reportedly spending \$3 billion a year subsidising the price of bread (Egypt is the world's largest importer of wheat with Tunisia coming in at number seventeen). Through 2007 and 2008 the world price of wheat steadily rose, causing a thirty-seven percent increase in the price of bread in Egypt.

Although the death of Mohamed Bouazizi acted as a catalyst for the sustained protest against the formerly robust dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt and then Libya and Syria, the structural drivers had long been in place. Finally, in the face of extended street protests Quandt's fourth pillar of regime stability, elite solidarity cracked. In Tunisia, Ben Ali ordered Rachid Ammar, the head of the army to fire on protestors. With a strategic eye on the president's increasing unpopularity and his own place in any future post-regime change Tunisia Anwar refused, and sealed the fate of Ben Ali's rule. A similar dynamic was soon at work in Egypt, where Field Marshall Mohamed Hussein Tantawi refused to order the army to fire on demonstrators, thus guaranteeing his survival after the regime change that inevitably followed his refusal to sanction violence.

Unlike the arrival in the Middle East of the World Bank and the IMF in the 1980s or the demonstration effect of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the liberation of Kuwait in 1989 and 1991, the Arab Spring of 2011 was a wholly indigenous movement driven forward by the brave agency of young people in Cairo and Tunisia. The contrast between the hesitant, contradictory and reactive approach of the Obama administration and the dynamic behaviour of the Arab Street only served to highlight that it was Arabs once again making their own history, in spite and not because of the international dynamics that had long been predicted to bring change to the region. ■

# ➤ The Arab Uprisings: Revolution or Protests?

George Lawson

**R**ecent years have seen a surge in radical protest, from Occupy Wall Street to Indian Naxalites, from North African youth to Chilean teachers, and from Muslims in Xinjiang to indigenous peoples in the Pacific. The uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa during 2011 provide the most potent articulation of these multiple sites of protest.

In carrying out an assessment of the Arab uprisings, it is worth recalling that very few such movements lead to successful revolutions. Crucial to revolutionary success are three factors: first, levels of state effectiveness (in particular, the resilience of intermediary institutions which can channel grievances between state and society); second, the degree of elite fracture (particularly its hold over the coercive apparatus); and third, the commitment of the opposition (both in terms of its ideological unity and its organisational capacity). Although the first two of these factors have remained consistent features of revolutionary movements over time, the third has changed markedly. In particular, there appears to be little adhesive within contemporary revolutionary ideologies that can act as the binding agent of a new social order. This means that, for all the amendable conditions for revolution today, and for all the willing capacity of many movements to demand radical change, there is little sense of what an alternative order would look like once such processes have taken place. This too is the case with the 2011 uprisings.

On the one hand, therefore, there is considerable scope in the contemporary world for revolutionary challenges to occur. On the other hand, many of the movements that promote radical change lack a sense of how social relations could – and should – be re-ordered. These issues form the background to any assessment of how the 2011 Arab uprisings emerged, how they are developing, and what their outcomes are likely to be.

## **NEGOTIATED REVOLUTIONS 2.0?**

The Arab uprisings sit downwind from the ‘negotiated revolutions’ that accompanied the end of the Cold War in 1989. Negotiated revolutions shifted the meaning and character of revolution in two main ways: first, because negotiated revolutions were rooted in movements for political justice rather than driven by programmes of economic and social transformation, they sought to limit rather than extend state power; second, because both sides of the struggle sought recourse via negotiation rather than armed conflict, non-violence became their dominant trope. The result of these dynamics was that negotiated revolutions strengthened rather than challenged liberal international order.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, it was easy to see the appeal of negotiated revolutions. Uprisings in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and elsewhere chimed with the spread of liberal international order. It was, therefore, little surprise that the 2011 Arab uprisings shared considerable overlaps with negotiated revolutions, including the promotion of non-violent protest, an ethos of democratisation, and a transformation rooted in negotiation rather than military victory.

However, the Arab uprisings also led to discussions over whether a further amendment to revolutionary anatomies was being constructed, particularly when it came to the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Do the Arab uprisings represent a shift in the anatomies of revolution, perhaps marking the advent of negotiated revolutions 2.0?

## REVOLUTIONARY SITUATIONS

Before examining the role played by ICTs in the Arab uprisings, it is worth exploring the basic causes of the uprisings themselves. Although the uprisings were surprising, they were not out of keeping with the revolutionary pathways associated with negotiated revolutions. First, there was a weakening of state effectiveness. For example, in Egypt, the strong links between the elite, the United States and Israel were deeply unpopular amongst the general public. In the years leading up to the Arab uprisings, Egypt was the second largest recipient of US aid (worth around \$1 billion dollars each year in military aid alone), one of the main sites for the torture and rendition of suspected Al-Qaeda suspects, and a supporter of Israeli policies in the region, including the blockade of Gaza. Such policies generated a sense of distance between the regime and the people.

Most important, however, in the weakening of state effectiveness was the legacy and evolution of the 'revolutions from above' which these states experienced during the 1950s and 1960s. During the 'revolutions from above', an 'independent force' of high ranking military officials and civilian bureaucrats seized power, using the state as a means by which to carry out projects of social transformation. For many years, these regimes appeared stable, so much so that much academic debate revolved around the resilience of authoritarianism in the Middle East.

However, Middle Eastern states proved as vulnerable to revolution from below as the regimes they replaced were vulnerable to revolution from above. The lack of intermediate associations between state and society meant that there were few effective channels by which to meet grievances and institutionalise contestation.

This served to 'hollow out' state-society relations, making regimes vulnerable to surges of discontent. States in the region could subjugate their people, but they lacked the institutional depth to regulate society efficiently. It was just these weaknesses which enabled revolutionary pressures to emerge during 2011.

Egypt serves as a useful illustration of these dynamics. Before the 2011 revolution, the legitimacy of the Egyptian state rested on three main pillars: the 1952 revolution; the role of the military in freeing Egypt from Western hegemony (the nationalisation and subsequent conflict over Suez being the most pertinent example); and the 'socialist development' policies pursued by Nasser, during which the state took over the planning, coordination, investment, and management of production.

As Toby Dodge points out in his Introduction to this report, these policies had the effect of demobilising social forces, including private landholders and the bourgeoisie, by using land reform and industrialisation as tools for exerting state authority over economic activities. They also led to reasonable levels of state-led growth, fortified by price subsidies which made basic commodities affordable to the majority of the population. State income was further generated through petrodollars and aid, particularly from the US, which paid handsomely in exchange for Egypt's recognition of Israel following the 1978 Camp David Accords, its opposition to Iran, the suppression of Islamists (including the execution of Sayyid Qutb – the 'Islamist Lenin'), and the regular passage of US warships through the Suez Canal.

The Egyptian state was, therefore, secured through an amalgam of state-led development and redistributive mechanisms. However, under Sadat and Mubarak, this legitimacy was eroded as the state came to be characterised more by repression than by popular mandate. Both Sadat (in 1977) and Mubarak (in 1986) deployed the army against domestic protestors. And after the assassination of Sadat by members of al-Jihad in 1981, emergency laws made the state an everyday presence in people's lives. A vast security establishment was constructed on the back of two million informants, who underpinned an extensive system of policing, state security, and state-sponsored gangs (*baltagiya*).

Even as Mubarak increased the despotic power of the state, he reduced its infrastructural reach through a range of neoliberal reforms. During the 1980s and 1990s, Egypt reduced tariffs, abandoned interest rate controls, and removed import quotas. This served to intensify state dependence on oil rents and foreign aid, making the Egyptian economy more susceptible to external dynamics. A dip in oil prices during the mid-1990s forced the state to further leverage its debt and reduce public expenditure. The subsequent austerity measures prompted a decline in living standards for many people, even as a 'network of privilege' (many of whom were associated with Gamal Mubarak, the President's son), used personal connections with state brokers in order to secure lucrative contracts. Increasingly, this elite came to be seen as a minority caste operating outside, or on top of, civil society.

Concurrent with these dynamics, demographic changes (particularly population growth) placed additional burdens on the state. By 2011, over one-third of the Egyptian population was aged 15-29. This exerted considerable pressures on job markets, just as the state was becoming more neoliberal, more personalistic, and more repressive. In 2009, unemployment in the region reached nearly 25 percent, twice the global average. It was much higher than this amongst young people and disproportionately felt within the middle class – college graduates in Egypt were ten times more likely to have no job as those with a primary school education.

Short-term triggers added to the sense of state failure. Between 2008 and 2010, food prices increased by over a third. The removal of food subsidies by the state (the bread subsidy alone cost \$3 billion per year to maintain) fuelled resentment against the regime. Despite the decline in its economic sovereignty after two decades or more of neoliberal reforms, the legitimacy of the Egyptian state was tightly bound with its capacity to deliver a basic standard of living. It was, therefore, particularly susceptible to such a crisis, particularly when it seemed to many Egyptians that the state had abandoned the poor for the sake of the rich.

Despite this vulnerability, the Egyptian regime was slow to respond to the threat posed by the December 2010

protests in Tunisia. Already under pressure following allegations of vote-rigging in the November 2010 parliamentary elections, Mubarak did not react to the escalation of protests in the early part of 2011, even after Tunisian President Ben Ali resigned in mid-January. As protests intensified, Mubarak's hold on power weakened. The President promised to resign at the end of his term of office, while simultaneously ordering an escalation of violence against protestors. This combination of carrot and stick backfired, sapping Mubarak's support within the police, his party, and the military. Large numbers of police failed to show up for work, took off their badges, or went over to the protestors. On February 5, the executive committee of the National Democratic Party resigned en masse. And as the protests escalated, the military, which had previously been cautiously neutral, first moved in to protect the protestors from state-sponsored violence and then, on February 10, publicly endorsed the people's 'legitimate demands'. Mubarak resigned the next day.

The events leading up to the formation of a revolutionary situation in Egypt sit well within existing understandings of revolution:

- First, state effectiveness was weakened both through long-term dynamics (the closeness of elite ties to the United States and Israel, deepening inequalities between rich and poor, and the everyday brutality of the security apparatus) and short-term pressures (the spike in food prices, the 2010 rigged elections, and the protests in Tunisia).
- Second, Mubarak's position was damaged by elite fracture, particularly within the coercive apparatus. The most important source of defection was the military – without their support, Mubarak's position was untenable.
- Third, the state was undermined by the resourcefulness of the opposition. The coalition that formed against Mubarak was made up of disparate forces: labour groups, urban youths, mosques, professionals, and the Muslim Brotherhood. At the same time, 'revolutionary entrepreneurs' connected opposition networks into a coherent coalition. These 'wired cosmopolitans', mostly young, well-travelled, technologically-savvy professionals, 'translated' local

events for foreign media, establishing media centres which spread the revolutionary message through cell phones, YouTube, and Twitter. They also used ICTs to establish safety committees and other such bodies. Did the use of such technologies denote a shift in how revolutions unfold?

## REVOLUTIONARY TRAJECTORIES

One of the central features of revolutions is the formation of a close-knit oppositional identity centred on shared 'stories' which unite disparate groups behind a common cause. Eric Selbin describes the function of these stories as 'tools of connection' between everyday life and collective protest. During the Arab Spring, it is argued, ICTs served as these 'tools of connection', providing a means by which protest was organised and resistance was mobilised. Because ICT networks are meritocratic, informal, horizontal, and transparent, they are, it is argued, necessarily anti-authoritarian. And by sharing information both immediately and without official sanction, ICTs are said to foster a new type of politics, one which was indispensable to the Arab uprisings.

When and how do ICTs influence revolutions? Once again, it is worth examining the case of Egypt. There is little doubt that Facebook played some role in organising protests in Egypt. The Facebook group ('We Are All Khaled Said'), established in commemoration of a blogger who was murdered by Egyptian police in 2010, gathered hundreds of thousands of members, many of whom took part in anti-regime demonstrations. This group also acted as a connecting node between domestic and transnational networks, helping to ratchet up pressure on elites around the world to 'do something'.

Such dynamics worried Arab states. At the end of January, the Egyptian government required the country's four main Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to disable their networks. All four ISPs, with the exception of Noor, the provider for the Egyptian Stock Exchange, complied. After five days, however, the government lifted its blockade, as it came to regard the ban as igniting rather than suppressing dissent.

In other words, more people came onto the streets once the Internet had been disabled. This is a puzzling outcome given claims about the necessity of ICTs in mobilising protest. Protestors are supposed to have required ICTs in order to connect disparate networks and coordinate activities. Yet protests in Egypt intensified during the period in which the Internet was disabled.

Perhaps, though, this is not such a puzzle. As even the most enthusiastic cyber-utopians accept, digital data leaves an audit trail, one which can be used for surveillance and censorship as well as for decentralisation and transparency. Social media is a tool which has been appropriated by authoritarian governments in order to trace protestors, spread propaganda, and monitor the activities of protest groups. Indeed, this is something which many activists themselves appear to recognise. For example, in January 2011, a pamphlet, entitled 'How to Protest Intelligently', was circulated widely amongst protest groups in Egypt. The pamphlet explicitly asked protestors not to use Twitter, Facebook, YouTube or other websites because, 'they are all monitored by the Ministry of the Interior'.

Examples elsewhere bolster this point. After the 2009 uprising, the Iranian government formed a cybercrime unit charged with countering the 'American led cyber-war' and arresting those guilty of spreading 'insults and lies' about the regime through the Internet. The Chinese government regularly interferes with the working of the Internet and email accounts, and has become adept at initiating 'online blockades', particularly around the unrest in Xinjiang. At the same time, the Internet has proved to be a valuable source of authoritarian propaganda. Vladimir Putin's United Russia party, for example, enjoys an extensive online presence, while Hugo Chavez is an accomplished user of Twitter, sending out regular missives to his two million plus followers. In short, authoritarian regimes are skilled practitioners when it comes to adopting 'networked' techniques of surveillance and control.

On the one hand, then, ICTs can help to coordinate revolutionary protests. On the other, they can equally well be used to disrupt these protests. In short, ICTs have no independent agency – they are

tools which operate within broader circuits of power. As Malcolm Gladwell has pointed out, ICTs are good at generating 'weak ties' – networks of acquaintances which 'like' or 'share' the same tastes. But they are poor at fostering 'strong ties' – the deep connections of solidarity and commitment which undergird collective protest. This latter form of connection, best rooted in personal ties of family and friendship, or in the midst of struggle, is not easily forged. To the contrary, it costs. And it is not something that ICTs do well.

## REVOLUTIONARY OUTCOMES

What, then, are the likely outcomes of the Arab uprisings? In many ways, it is too early to tell. If the minimum condition of revolutionary outcomes is the period in which a revolutionary regime takes control of the principal means of production, means of violence, and means of information in a society, only one state has reached this point. Tunisia has overthrown its former regime, held free and fair elections, and handed power over to a new civilian authority. However, as detailed elsewhere in this report, Tunisia's revolution is by no means complete.

Nonetheless, Tunisia is an island of relative tranquillity in an otherwise turbulent sea. In Egypt, the SCAF remains in charge, albeit in uneasy truce with Islamist forces. Bahrain's uprising was crushed by a combination of monarchical obduracy and Saudi force. The Saudi's themselves only mollified domestic unrest through a reform package worth over \$150 billion. This strategy, on a lesser scale, was also initiated in Kuwait, Morocco, and Jordan, with similar results: the decompression of protest. In other states, instability remains the main consequence of the uprisings – varying degrees of civil strife besets Syria, Libya, and Yemen.

Overall, therefore, none of the states in the region bar Tunisia meet even the minimum criteria of revolutionary success, let alone their 'maximum condition' – the institutionalisation of a new political, economic, and symbolic order. Although there is increasing talk of a 'Turkish' or 'Indonesian model' which combines 'a pious society within a democratic state', the region as a whole is stuck between fragile pacts, illiberal renewal, and unmet grievances.

## BACK TO THE FUTURE OF REVOLUTION

As noted above, the lack of systemic transformation wrought by the Arab uprisings is something common to many contemporary revolutions. This is because the meaning and character of revolution itself has changed, becoming increasingly oriented around political representation rather than the reordering of society. As such, revolutions have become deliberately self-limiting, seeking to restrain revolutionary excess within constitutional limits.

This shift away from revolutions as processes of social transformation is not wholly new. It speaks to a genealogy which runs through America in 1776, the Springtime of Nations in 1848, and the negotiated revolutions in 1989. These self-limiting revolutions centre on individual rather than collective emancipation, seeing the latter as a cloak for revolutionary despotism. The 2011 Arab uprisings sit within this alternative tradition of revolution.

Mike Davis makes an arresting comparison in this regard, examining parallels between the protagonists in 2011 and 1848: Egypt and France as the 'revolutionary vanguards'; Saudi Arabia and Russia as the 'counter-revolutionary powers'; Turkey and England as the 'models of success'; Palestine and Poland as the 'romantic lost causes'; and Serbia and Shia groups as the 'angry outsiders'. As Davis, following Marx, also notes, no revolution in Europe, whether liberal or socialist, could succeed until Russia was either defeated or revolutionised. The same may be true of Saudi Arabia in its region. It is also worth noting that, although the revolutions of 1848 were defeated in the short-term, their main rationale of political liberalisation was successful in the long run. That too may be the case with the 2011 Arab uprisings. ■

## ➤ The Uprisings

# ➤ The Tunisian Transition: The Evolving Face of the Second Republic

Fatima El-Issawi

**The swift victory of moderate Islamists at the first free elections in the historically secular Tunisia left a bitter taste for the losers. After three interim governments and amid a vast ongoing legal and institutional reform process, Tunisia can be considered as a positive example of a non-violent and functional transitional phase from dictatorship towards democracy. Although peaceful, the Tunisian transition is characterised by a fierce debate between the secular ('leftist' to its opponents) and the religious camps (satirically dubbed the Long Bearded by the secular discourse). This unfolding confrontation forms the backdrop to the process of drafting a new constitution, amid anxiety surrounding the place of Islam in the new political system. However, fears of the resurrection of a new theocratic dictatorship are mitigated by a dynamic civil society in which voices that were silenced or misused by the former regime of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali are becoming distinctly vocal. Yet despite the role of religion in society dominating discussion both in Tunisia and internationally, for all sides in the debate it will be the economic recovery that forms the major challenge of the post-Ben Ali era.**

## **THE JASMINE REVOLUTION ONE YEAR ON**

Three interim governments have held office since the departure of Ben Ali, with each facing angry demonstrations calling for a total departure from the old regime. The election of a National Constituent Assembly tasked with reforming Tunisia's constitution was delayed from July to October 2011, with the need for more time cited in order to prepare for a 'credible vote'. The implicit logic behind this delay was the fear of an overwhelming victory for Islamists in early elections, and indeed the Islamist Ennahda party secured 40 per cent of the vote, winning 90 seats in the 217-member parliament. This victory is continuously downplayed by secular parties, which describe it as not reflective of Tunisian society, on the basis of the relatively disappointing 50 percent turnout and the Ennahda's inability to secure an absolute majority.

Following the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime, Tunisia embarked upon a complex reform process led by consultative bodies formed of technocrats and well-known Tunisian figures. This process began with the constitution of the 'High Council for the Realisation of the Goals of the Revolution, Political Reforms, and Democratic Transition', tasked with reforming the Tunisian State through a process of legislative change. Under this remit, different committees were formed to tackle diverse reforms. An Electoral Commission with an independent statute set the practical framework for elections with great efficiency, implementing provisions such as the parity of men and women as candidates, a proportional voting system and the prohibition of certain candidates with ties to the old regime. The parity between men and women led to the election of 49 women in the Constituent Assembly, most of them from the Ennahda party.

The aftermath of the Ben Ali era witnessed the legalisation of more than 106 political parties, most of them unknown to the Tunisian voters, with the media and political spheres opened up to the previously outlawed opposition. The general amnesty law for political prisoners allowed the release of more than 500 political prisoners, most of whom were facing charges under counterterrorism laws. New decrees on associations and political parties eliminate important restrictions on political activity, including the crime of 'membership in' or 'providing services to' an unrecognised organisation, a provision that had been used to imprison thousands of opposition party activists. At the same time, an article was abrogated that had stated that a party may not base its principles, activities or programmes on a religion, language, race, sex or region; a provision that had been aimed at restricting the access of Islamists to the political sphere.

The media sector was one of the major objects of reform as Tunisia had previously operated one of the most repressive media systems in the Arab world in terms of both freedom of expression and political independence. A new press code eliminated prison terms for nearly all speech offences except incitement to robbery and racial or religious hatred. The draft code preserves defamation as a criminal offence, although it replaces prison terms with fines. It also retains the offence of distributing 'false information', a concept that the Ben Ali government used to prosecute numerous dissidents and human rights activists. Yet the most problematic element of the new code surrounds criminal restrictions on content which were frequently used under the former regime to oppress journalists. The arrest of Nasreddine Ben Saida, the publisher of the Arabic-language daily *Attounissia*, as well as the newspaper's editor and one of its journalists, for printing a photo of a German-Tunisian football player embracing a naked model on the front-page sparked an outrage in the media community.

## THE NEW POLITICAL ARENA

The results achieved by the moderate Islamist Ennahda party exceeded both expectations and fears. The party led by Rachid Ghannouchi, who returned to Tunisia in January 2011 following the interim government's announcement of a general amnesty, was granted legal status as a political party in March. Initially formed as the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI) in 1981, the party's relationship with the regime deteriorated dramatically, leading to the imprisonment of most of its senior figures. The surprising popular support the party secured in the 1989 parliamentary elections – despite its members running as independent candidates – precipitated a harsh crackdown by the regime that culminated in Ben Ali accusing Ennahda of orchestrating an attack on a ruling party office in 1991. Tunisian military courts subsequently convicted 265 of the party's members on charges of planning a coup.

The results of the first free elections in the post-Ben Ali era confirmed Ennahda's popularity. The party capitalised upon its long-running grassroots policies as well as its organisational ability to run a successful electoral campaign, in contrast to its inexperienced, divided and mostly unknown opponents. As the *Economist* noted, Ennahda's 'identification with working-class authenticity in contrast to Tunisia's traditional Francophone elite' was crucial to its success.

However, this is far from a comfortable victory. Ennahda's cohabitation with two political parties – the Congress for the Republic (30 seats) and Ettakatol party (21 seats) – of secular background is a challenge in itself. Moreover, the Islamist party is coming under tight scrutiny, with secular groups regaining their voice following their humiliating electoral defeat. A new secular coalition was recently announced that brings together two leftist parties (Attajdid and Renewal) with the Tunisian labour party and some independent candidates, yet without a clear program or popular base. The constituent assembly led by the tri-partite coalition is embarking on the difficult challenge of drafting Tunisia's new constitution. In terms of the model for the new political system, Ennahda, the largest single party, is advocating a parliamentary system along the lines of the UK, in which the Prime Minister would be appointed by the party securing the largest number of seats in Parliament.

For the fragmented secularists, united in support of a mixte system copying France, this would deprive minority parties of the opportunity to form a majority coalition and therefore lead the government.

Alongside these divisions over democratic models, the main debate is centred on how Islam law or values will be understood within the new political system. While the place of Islam was always recognised in the Tunisian constitution implemented by President Bourguiba in 1959, it was expressed in an ambiguous way, which served to facilitate its marginalisation. The first article of the old constitution stipulates that 'Tunisia is a free, independent and sovereign, its religion is Islam, its language Arabic and its regime a republic'. However, does this mean that Islam is the religion of the Tunisian society or that of the State itself? This confusion is best reflected by the divide between two Tunisias: the traditional Tunisia of conservative Islam and the Francophile Tunisia inspired by the secular colonial regime and from which the new Tunisian technocrats are drawn.

Views about the implementation of Sharia law range between direct calls for Sharia as the main source of legislation and proposals to discuss the constitution in the Arab-Islamic heritage of Tunisia. Ennahda finally stepped into the ongoing struggle between the two camps by declaring that it will not back calls by ultra-conservatives to impose Sharia as the main source of legislation in the new constitution, instead retaining the first article of the old constitution. The leader of the party Rached Ghannouchi explained the decision in terms of giving priority to preserving the unity of Tunisian society and an understanding of the Constitution as the fruit of broad consensus. This stance simultaneously angered Salafi, who considered it treason to Ennahda's religious commitments, and failed to allay the concerns of secularists, who remain sceptical of the nature of the long-term project of the Islamists.

Ennahda' decision to renounce Sharia came after the leader of the party for the first time admitted the difference between secularism and atheism, thereby legitimating the role of secular parties in Tunisian politics. The Ennahda leader had tried on several occasions to appease fears that a radical version of Sharia could be embedded in the new

constitution, giving assurances to Reuters that there will be no religion in Tunisia's planned changes to the constitution, and that the party will instead focus on democracy, human rights and a free-market economy.

Nevertheless, the support of the radical Islamist Salafi in the coming crucial parliamentary and presidential elections is highly precious for Ennahda. It is not clear how this small vocal group voted in the October 2011 elections, given the ambiguous relationship between the radical movement and Ennahda, considered by some Salafi as no less secular than the secular camp. Up to now, Ennahda leaders have adopted a conciliatory tone in addressing their violent actions, sometimes acting as an intermediary between the Salafi and their opponents to diffuse tensions. While avoiding tough action against the radical and mostly youth movement, Ennahda is not hiding its effort to provide them with a 'framework'. In statements to the press, Ourimi Ajmi, a member of the executive bureau of Ennahda, has confirmed the existence of a dialogue between the youth of Ennahda and that of Salafi, claiming that his party would represent 'a good school' for integrating young Salafi into the democratic norms of peaceful political engagement. In his latest statement, Rached Ghannouchi has remained conciliatory, characterising Salafi violence as 'a reaction to the oppression' they experienced under the former regime, and calling them 'our sons'. Talking to *Le Monde*, Ghannouchi confirmed his willingness to bring Salafi under the umbrella of moderate Islam, and raised the possibility of starting negotiations with their sheikhs.

## RELIGION VERSUS SECULARISM

The divide over the role of religion in the new state was reflected in the commemoration of the first anniversary of the revolution when two separate crowds clashed in the streets, with the secular camp claiming the revolution had been hijacked by Islamists. Social media is the platform for the contest between the two camps, which use Facebook to spread accusations, rumours and libel. However, this struggle has frequently escaped cyber-space, with continuous clashes between Salafi groups and secularist demonstrators led mainly by the Tunisian union of labour, which is becoming the most vocal critic of the government's policies.

The phobia of an Islamist state exhibited by the secular camp manifests itself in conspiratorial notions of secret plots aimed at the radicalisation of the country, and in which a hidden Qatari and Saudi role is overwhelmingly identified. The victory of Ennahda is not in itself a source of anxiety so much as what is perceived as a lax position towards the rise of radical Salafi groups. For Ennahda's opponents, there is an implicit alliance between the two Islamist parties, allowing the empowerment of radical voices while the moderate governing party is appeasing international fears by adopting a low-profile discourse. Unconfirmed reports suggest Salafi control more than 500 mosques and religious schools, spreading a radical interpretation of Islam that challenges the authority of formal religious institutions and of Ennahda itself. In one instance, the town of Sejane, north-west of Tunis, was briefly declared an 'Islamic emirate' when around 200 Salafists took control and enforced the Islamic Sharia in its most radical interpretations.

The continuous arm wrestling between Salafi and secularists over allowing veiled women into academic campuses is putting Ennahda in an embarrassing situation of having to avoid criticising both of the two opposing parties directly. The wearing of the niqab became a notable feature of Tunisian society after the Jasmine revolution. In 1981, President Bourguiba ratified a law banning women from wearing the hijab in state offices, and Ben Ali's government in the 1980s and 1990s issued more restrictive enactments, including the notorious 102 law, which considers the hijab a 'sign of extremism' and banned it. The increasingly heated debate over niqab-wearing in public institutions is seen by some as a deviation from the crucial issue of drafting the new constitution. Ennahda is attempting to maintain a low profile and avoid direct involvement, arguing that while the movement does not encourage women to wear the niqab, they support the principle of the freedom of the individual who chooses to wear it.

Preserving the rights gained under the secular state, particularly with regard to the personal status law, is another important struggle. Tunisia is considered the most advanced in the Arab world in terms of granting equal rights and status for women and men. Anxiety is mounting over the possibility of amendments to

Tunisia's code of secular protections should Sharia be adopted as a basis of the new constitution, but Ennahda continues to try to allay these fears, with senior officials being quoted as saying that 'Ennahda is attached to the gains of the modern state and the rules established by the (code)'. The party previously supported the Code of Personal Status introduced in 1956 that abolished polygamy and repudiation instead of formal divorce. It is important to note again that Ennahda confirmed its will not to impose Sharia as a main source for legislation in the new constitution.

### **OVERCOMING THE LEGACY OF THE BEN-ALI ERA**

The reconciliation between the two clearly divided Tunisian societies and its ramifications will require a consensus about the place of religion and the political representation of different groups. However, the Ennahda-led coalition will ultimately be judged upon its ability to lead the country towards its recovery amid a deteriorated socio-economic condition.

Tunisia has cut its economic growth forecast for this year to 3.5 percent, down from a previous forecast of 4.5 percent, primarily as a result of the decline in foreign investment and tourism following the revolution. According to figures of the National Institute of Statistics (INS), unemployment in the country reached 18.9 percent between the 2nd and 4th quarter in 2011, a period during which the number of unemployed rose to 738,400, of which 60 percent are women. The continuous popular protest organized by the secular camp and led by the unions is widely considered to be an obstacle to the resumption of economic activity. The government has warned that the unions risk aggravating the economic situation, and are keenly aware that the continuing protests may cut into Islamist electoral success. According to the government, Tunisia's Phosphate Mine and Chemical Group has lost up to 1.2 billion dinars (around \$790 million), with the prime minister Hamadi Jbali blaming strikes and protests which have blocked critical access roads leading in and out of Tunisia's marginalized interior regions. The tourism industry, Tunisia's biggest source of foreign currency, remains depressed. Foreign tourist numbers in 2011 were down by about 2 million to 4.4 million.

Earnings from tourism fell to 2.1 billion dinars (\$1.4 billion) last year from 3.2 billion dinars (\$2.1 billion) in 2010. 170 foreign enterprises have shut down their operations since 2010, although 3000 foreign firms continue to operate in the country.

Ennahda's economic strategy, focused on regenerating impoverished regions, is not achieving its targets, and as a result these areas are becoming the main reservoir of socio-economic dissent. For instance, in Gafsa, west central Tunisia, a large number of young unemployed people blocked the carriage of phosphate destined for export. Protests demanding jobs and dignity have disrupted also the towns of Ghar Dimaou, Beja, Jendouba, Kairouan, Nabeul, Tataouine and Gafsa. In Sidi Makhoulouf, 350km south of Tunis, protesters detained the provincial governor for several hours to press their demands for jobs.

The tendency of the new government to focus on financial aid has been severely criticized as an inefficient means of reviving the economy and correcting the legacy of decades of entrenched corruption. It is also viewed by the secular camp as a threat to Tunisia's integrity, with the close relationship between the new government and the emirate of Qatar fuelling accusations that Tunisia is becoming a puppet of the wealthy Gulf state.

Whilst the economic situation remains key, the heavy legacy of the old dictatorship leaves several other challenges that are still to be met by the provisional government. In June 2011, Ben Ali and his wife were convicted in absentia of theft and unlawful possession of cash and jewellery. They were sentenced to 35 years in prison and given a \$65 million fine. Although the former ruling party has been dismantled, there is a solid institutional structure that is still in control of administrative institutions. Not much has been done in implementing transitional justice, which remains a major challenge for the post-Ben Ali phase. The fact-finding commission that was formed directly after the revolution to investigate the corruption under the former regime reported more than 10,000 submissions, over half of which were investigated and some 320 files were transferred to the public prosecutor, although according to its final report many of the important files require more time and effort to be investigated.

However, the activity of the commission ended with the death of its president, and there remains a firm belief among secularists that the Ennahda party is not really working for the 'purification' of public institutions from Ben Ali technocrats. At the same time, it is in the best interests of the new administration to try and bring on board these experienced civil servants in order to assert its control over public administration.

Success in organising trustworthy elections is not sufficient to lay solid foundations for the democratic Tunisian Republic. Tunisia needs to bring about a radical change of practice that will prevent the development of new client networks serving new rulers but following the corrupt model of Ben Ali's regime. There are fears that new networks will be nurtured by the Ennahda party in its bid to assert control over the State. Tunisians are prone to repeat that the autocratic regime did not flee the country in the same plane that took Ben Ali and his wife away to Saudi Arabia. That system is deeply entrenched in Tunisian public administration, where a culture of privilege still flourishes. There are few signs that the new ruling elite is departing from these practices.

As for the secular camp, its failure to bring together efforts to counter the Islamists' rise during the elections of the Constituent Assembly has apparently not acted as a wake-up call. The political negativity of the secularists, who in the absence of a clear programme for the transition are united only by their criticism of Ennahda, is in itself an indicator of a possible failure in the coming general elections. The continuous focus on relatively trivial battles such as niqab wearing for women or Salafi violence is a distraction from the main issue of preserving the gains of the secular Republic while regaining the trust of the Tunisian public. The much-needed reconciliation between the two divided Tunisian societies, Islamist and secular, requires a recognition of each camp by the other. This cannot be achieved without a serious and exhaustive revision of the legacy of the Ben Ali regime. ■

# ➤ Revolutionary Egypt: Promises and Perils

Ewan Stein

**W**hen the Egyptian people forced their leader from power on February 11, 2011, hopes for an 'Arab Spring' ran high. The ouster of Ben Ali in Tunisia just 11 days earlier was earth-shattering in itself, but regime collapse in the Arab world's most populous country after just 18 days of protest was an event of far greater magnitude. Memories of the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, whose ripples would define regional politics for more than a decade, were fresh enough to give even the most 'stable' of Arab monarchies and republics pause for thought. The impact of this latest Egyptian 'revolution' is, however, conditioned by the extent to which genuine regime change and democratic transformation are achieved. More than a year later, neither prospect is assured.

## THE FORCES OF REVOLUTION

The revolution of January 25, 2011 was triggered by the uprising in Tunisia. But it was the fruit of more than a decade of a growing culture of protest in Egypt that encompassed the labour movement, pro-democracy activism, and newer internet campaigns against the brutality of Mubarak's police state.

The January Revolution brought these protest sectors together around the unifying symbol of Tahrir [Liberation] Square. In the heady days of January and February 2011, the movement appeared to turn Egypt on its head. In a country known for political stagnation, new forms of leadership and organisation evolved, both within Tahrir Square and around the country as citizens formed 'popular committees' to fill the security void left by the collapsing security forces. Instead of chaos, anarchy and sectarianism, the regime's abdication of responsibility produced cooperation and tolerance, unity between Muslims and Coptic Christians, and a reinvigorated sense of civic pride. The ouster of Mubarak on February 11 unleashed a palpable feeling of collective euphoria and unity.

Although the protests came to be identified with Facebook and Egypt's tech-savvy middle classes (epitomised by the figure of Google executive Wael Ghoneim), they transcended class barriers and involved significant participation by the urban poor. Meeting points and times announced on Facebook were often decoys to enable the real demonstrations organised via word-of-mouth, a reality underscored by the inefficacy of the regime's knee-jerk suspension of internet and mobile phone access.

Yet the utopian vision of Tahrir was soon tarnished. Female demonstrators were mocked and hounded out of the square during a march on International Women's Day. Sectarian violence re-emerged, blamed by many on agents provocateurs, 'remnants' of the old regime. And as the numbers in Tahrir Square dwindled, the police returned to clear the stalwarts by force. Nevertheless, although the optimism of these early experiments in revolutionary leadership inexorably faded, the memory and symbolism of Tahrir Square – code now for revolutionary activism around the country – remains a powerful force in Egyptian politics, and the breaking of the 'barrier of fear' stands as perhaps the revolution's most momentous achievement.

## ACTORS AND INTERESTS

Egypt's official opposition parties, as well as the most powerful 'unofficial' opposition movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, were initially absent from the revolution. Elements of the conservative Salafi trend went so far as to condemn the protests as haram. The Coptic Church declared its opposition to the demonstrations as did, initially at least, the Islamic institution of al-Azhar. In its early days, some saw the abstention of these actors as evidence of the revolution's secular character, but Copts and Islamists of all stripes had participated as individuals from the beginning. It was in large part a revolt against patriarchal authority, a category in which all established political and religious leaderships risked being included if they remained opposed or uncommitted to the revolution.

The Brotherhood and Salafi leaderships arguably felt they had the most to lose in supporting an uprising that may have been doomed to fail. But as middle class professionals deserted the regime in their droves, and masses of urban poor swarmed into the streets of Cairo, Alexandria, Suez and elsewhere, the cost-benefit calculations of these leaders changed. By the 'Day of Rage' on Friday, January 28, the Muslim Brotherhood had stepped off the fence and was mobilising its members.

If Islamist organisational involvement boosted the strength of the protests – and ultimately helped direct them – the most important part in the uprising's success in ousting Mubarak was played by the military. The protesters singled out Mubarak, his ministers and the clientelistic network surrounding his son Gamal – and not the military regime in toto – as the target. They invited the army to join them. Images of soldiers carried aloft in Tahrir Square, and tanks daubed with revolutionary slogans, cemented the view of the people and the army as 'one hand' against the Mubarak regime.

The military leadership, for its part, saw an opportunity to settle scores in a long-festering intra-regime feud. From the army's perspective, the revolution's most important dividend was to see off the potential threat to its economic and political prerogatives posed by the aggressive privatisation agenda of the Nazif government and Mubarak's would-be heir, Gamal.

Mubarak himself dismissed Nazif and his cabinet on January 29, a move that pleased the army but did little to placate the protesters. With Gamal's faction gone, the army's economic interests were safe from an increasingly confident new business elite who saw this 'new guard' as their main ally within the regime.

The army thus had an interest in exploiting popular protest, but also in containing and ultimately controlling the revolutionary movement. It played a double game. Having won a prized concession from Mubarak, the military allowed camel-riding thugs wielding swords into the square on February 2, producing one of the revolution's bloodiest confrontations. While apparently protecting protesters against interior minister Habib al-Adly's police, it was arresting and torturing activists itself.

But the fact that the military did not turn its full force against the protesters was crucial to the revolution's initial successes. More positively, the high degree of popular prestige that the army has long enjoyed as a bulwark of order in Egypt gave the revolution an unassailably patriotic and nationalistic flavour that broadened the movement's support among more risk-averse Egyptians.

## THE POLITICS OF TRANSITION

Mubarak's position as leader was filled by his former defence minister, Field Marshal Muhammad Hussein Tantawi. As head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) Tantawi assumed control during the transitional phase. SCAF moved rapidly to hold a referendum on amending the constitution on March 19, 2011. The referendum, which was approved with 77 percent of the vote, paved the way for parliamentary and presidential elections.

Soon after Mubarak's ouster, numerous new political parties were formed, both secular and Islamist. The Muslim Brotherhood established the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), a vehicle consciously modelled after the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP). The largest Salafi grouping, Alexandria-based al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya, established the Nur (Light) Party. Islamist groups campaigned intensively for a

'yes' vote in the referendum, believing – accurately as it turned out – that their name recognition and organisational experience would serve them well in early elections. In elections held from November 2011 until January 2012, these parties gained a substantial parliamentary majority.

That said, it is SCAF that commands the predominance of hard power in Egypt. It appointed and controls the government of Kamal Ganzouri, as it did that of his predecessor Essam Sharaf. The government cannot act in any substantive way without SCAF approval. SCAF continues to set foreign and economic policy during the transitional phase, and controls the domestic security forces.

At the same time, SCAF's power is limited by its 'despotic' as opposed to 'infrastructural' nature. Although the military as an institution is held in high esteem, as a governing authority SCAF has little popular legitimacy, and neither does it possess – nor is it likely to seek to develop – effective mechanisms of governance at the grassroots. It is for this reason that it has come to accept, if not depend upon, more socially embedded Islamists as a link between state and society.

The revolution has allowed Islamists to formalise their position within the structure of power. With the ear of the SCAF, an electoral mandate, and an established local presence throughout the country, Islamist parties occupy an intermediary space between SCAF and the revolutionary forces. This is a precarious role to play. If the Brotherhood and Salafis appear too close to SCAF they jeopardise their popular standing. But if they are over-eager to flex their 'revolutionary' muscles they may alarm SCAF and its international supporters, and precipitate repression. An intra-Islamist rivalry between the Salafis and the Brotherhood also plays out in the context of these tensions.

It is in disrupting this marriage of convenience that the revolutionary coalition becomes most significant. Unlike the major Islamist parties, the Tahrir forces lack significant parliamentary representation. They comprise a heterogeneous patchwork of movements with quite diverse political agendas. These forces are predominantly found within the January 25 Revolution Youth Coalition (I'tilaf Shabab al-Thawra).

The Tahrir forces include, significantly, new Islamist parties such as the Egyptian Current (al-Tiyar al-Misri), formed by young Brotherhood dissidents. Support for the revolution is not a uniformly, or even predominantly, 'secular' vocation, which makes it problematic to put 'Islamists' and 'revolutionaries' in opposing camps. The unifying commitment to January 25 and Tahrir as a symbol continues to provide alternative avenues of political expression for Islamist-inclined Egyptians, particularly as the 'official' Islamist vehicles appear too close to SCAF and trapped within the old ways of doing things. Even the conservative Salafi movement – persistently averse to extra-Islamist alliances – is losing adherents to parties and groups within the revolutionary current.

These extra-parliamentary Tahrir forces reserve the option of 'returning to the square,' and numerous demonstrations have taken place since the fall of Mubarak. Via the official media and with recurrent Islamist support, SCAF has been partially successful in discrediting protests and portraying protesters as agents of foreign powers. But the fact that people no longer fear taking their demands onto the streets means that the army and Islamist parties must work harder to ensure popular support for their policies.

Regardless of the sociological reality, the process set in train on January 25, 2011 is almost unanimously referred to as a 'revolution' in Egypt. The military rulers celebrate the achievements of the revolution of the army and the people. Yet for the Tahrir forces the revolution remains a work in progress. Though there is little agreement on what completing the revolution would entail, some consensus exists on the importance of prosecuting Mubarak and others accused of killing protesters, and on sending the military back to barracks to allow civilians to take charge. Collectively, they channel the grievances of labour, the poor and other 'losers' in Egypt's neoliberal experiment, and push for a more complete break with the past.

## THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IN EGYPT

Meaningful democracy in Egypt is still a way off. Whilst the elections were generally accepted as free and fair for the first time since 1952, many vestiges of the old Egypt remain in place under SCAF. The state of emergency that has prevailed since Sadat's assassination in 1981 is set to continue until at least June 2012. This enables SCAF to bypass legal safeguards in much the same way as did Mubarak. Censorship and manipulation of the media remain routine, and pro-democracy NGOs are vilified and persecuted with much the same caprice as they were during the Mubarak era.

SCAF remains wedded to the idea of a strong executive (with a compliant president) and will seek a new constitution that guarantees that. It is supported in this aim by ostensibly 'liberal' parties that fear Islamist domination in parliament. The FJP and Nur Party each favour a stronger parliament, understandably given their high representation in that body. It remains to be seen whether the committee charged with drafting the constitution (which is to be composed of 50 percent MPs) will deliver a constitution to the Islamists' liking, but the issue is sure to constitute an important axis of friction between SCAF and the Islamist parties.

A powerful parliament is not in itself, however, a guarantee that the military's influence on politics will be curbed. As in the past, procedural trappings of democracy mask a resilient system of patron-client relations that has long underwritten political power in the Egypt. The electoral system, for example, does not reflect informed popular support for particular parties or political programmes. A third of seats in parliament continue to be allocated according to single-member districts, thus favouring local strongmen dependent on regime patronage. The retention of a quota for workers and peasants (opposed by Islamist parties) similarly facilitates the ascent of regime-favoured candidates, including retired soldiers and police officials. Such 'safe' seats militate against parliament's independent role as part of a broader system of checks and balances in the Egyptian political system.

The current parliament certainly represents an improvement on Mubarak-era legislatures, which were toothless bodies dominated by the President's

National Democratic Party, but the FJP shares some of the NDP's features and functions. The current head of the parliamentary Defence and National Security Committee, for example, ran on the Freedom and Justice Party's list, but he is also a general and the former head of internal investigations within military intelligence. The dissolution of the NDP, in other words, does not necessarily mean the military regime cannot place its people in influential and sensitive parliamentary roles.

## THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF REVOLUTION AND COUNTER-REVOLUTION

Stability, and hence democracy, in Egypt depends largely on how the economy develops in the years to come. Tourism and investment are in decline and youth unemployment hovers at around 25 percent. The socioeconomic drivers of protest have not been alleviated. Some, but by no means all, of the January 25 protesters opposed neoliberal economics in Egypt and viewed themselves as part of the broader global movement against capitalism and globalisation. It was partially under pressure from the protest movement that SCAF refused a package of IMF loans in 2011, and although the protest movement has since been weakened, it is far from being broken.

In December 2011 SCAF felt able to accept a \$3.2 billion loan facility from the IMF. This reflected the political consolidation of the transitional phase. Although both the military and the Islamist movement gained from the removal of Gamal Mubarak and his neoliberal 'change team', neither actor promotes a qualitatively new economic path. The current finance minister, Hazem Beblawi, is known for his neoliberal proclivities. The FJP considers access to IMF loans to be an Egyptian 'right'. Islamists, like the military, fiercely protect continued private investment in the economy.

If SCAF and Islamists have come together to pursue their own interests and neutralise further protest, their relationship is not without its own challenges. Friction between SCAF and the Brotherhood reflects particularistic economic as well as political interests. The military has to date focussed economically on resource-intensive sectors such as transportation,

heavy industry, oil and gas, wastewater treatment, and food production. Egypt has seen a doubling of proven gas reserves, and the military now controls almost as much of this sector as does the Ministry of Petroleum. The army remains engaged in joint ventures with national and international firms in many enterprises.

The Muslim Brotherhood, for its part, includes wealthy businessmen with significant interests in consumer goods and services, as well as in the financial sector. It too is actively seeking foreign investment and partnership, and has recently set up the Egyptian Business and Investment Association to help facilitate such ventures.

Regional political and economic dynamics can satisfy the economic interests of both the Brotherhood and the military, but come with 'counterrevolutionary' strings attached. Saudi Arabia has a clear interest in the 'non-exportability' of the Egyptian revolution, and GCC states implicitly condition their financial support for both SCAF and the FJP on a commitment not to promote revolution elsewhere or to cave in to further revolutionary demands at home. The Saudis also retain ideological soulmates in the Egyptian Salafi movement. Salafism has long been nurtured as a counterweight to the Brotherhood, with widely asserted Saudi support, and remains as a second option if the Brotherhood disappoints – although the Salafi movement is also far from monolithic and may not remain as pliant an ally as Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies would like.

The political concerns of the Gulf monarchies are also related to ongoing economic interests in Egypt. Moves that appeal to the forces of Tahrir and Egyptian society more broadly, such as the invalidation of Mubarak-era privatisation deals, disadvantage not only the crony capitalists of the old regime, but also their international partners. Saudis, Kuwaitis, Qataris and others are naturally concerned that their existing investments in the Egyptian economy not be jeopardised by such populism. Some 700,000 Saudis live in Egypt and current investment in the country stands at around \$12 billion. If cancelled deals are snapped up by the military or Brotherhood investors, foreign partners will expect to keep their share of the pie.

## PROSPECTS FOR EGYPT'S POLITICAL FUTURE

Barring a major rupture, the nature of Egypt's political evolution following June's presidential elections may hinge on the complementarities of the military and Brotherhood economic portfolios, and the extent to which each side is willing to bargain economic for political privileges. For the military, this will not be a simple repeat of its rivalry with Gamal Mubarak's 'reformists' prior to January 2011. For one thing, the army will not be able to rely on another popular revolution to tip the balance in its favour. Gamal and his team had very little legitimacy within civil society and were reviled among the population at large. The Brotherhood, for its part, has an electoral mandate and considerably more strings to its social and political bow.

This may help protect the Brothers from the hard power of SCAF as well as enable it to secure its own spheres of economic and political influence. It will struggle to wrest control over foreign and defence policy from the military. But the opportunity to put foreign policy principles, particularly toward Israel, into practice is one that Islamists in power may gladly pass up.

The Brotherhood nevertheless has its popular standing to consider, and it is in this area that the revolution has changed the landscape. Whereas the crony capitalists of Mubarak's time could ride roughshod over popular sentiment, being able to call on an increasingly feral security apparatus when needed, the Brotherhood faces a newly mobilised public that expects change and is not afraid to take to the streets to demand it. Islamist failure to deliver on the political and economic fronts will open opportunities for newer political actors to exploit. Though a thoroughgoing revolutionary outcome remains out of reach in Egypt, with key elements of Mubarak's regime either still in place or staging comebacks, this pressure from below is a new and significant factor that will shape Egyptian politics in the years to come. ■

# ➤ Bahrain's Aborted Revolution

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen

**The uprising in Bahrain that began on February 14, 2011 has been contained but not resolved. While the immediate danger to the position of the ruling Al-Khalifa family has passed, the demands of the protestors have hardened with the failure of the regime to offer meaningful concessions to political reform. Caught in the crosshairs of regional and international geopolitics, the aborted Bahraini revolution and the crushing of the pro-democracy movement holds significant lessons for the prospects for peaceful political reform in any of the other Gulf monarchies predicated on a genuine sharing of power and control. Over the last decade, many scholars and analysts have tried to assess Bahrain's emergence as a major actor in the global arena by looking at such material indicators as economic growth, military expansion or demographic evolution.**

## REVOLUTION AT THE PEARL ROUNDABOUT

Bahrain has a long history of popular opposition to the Al-Khalifa dynasty rooted in policies of unequal and selective development. Periodic outbreaks of major social unrest have alternated with periods of détente in cycles dating back to the 1920s. The 2000s witnessed a continuation of this cyclical process as King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa unveiled constitutional reforms that promised much but ultimately delivered little of substance. In 2001, the draconian 1974 State Security Law that had provided cover for the suppression of political opposition and massive human rights violations was scrapped. Constitutional changes were laid out in a National Action Charter that was approved by an overwhelming 98 percent of Bahrainis in a referendum on February 14, 2001, paving the way for the return of an elected assembly in 2002, 27 years after its suspension in 1975.

However, the promise of a unicameral elected legislature was immediately diluted by the addition of an upper house of royal appointees. Low confidence in the sincerity of the political opening led to a range of political societies, spanning the ideological and religious spectrum, boycotting the 2002 election. Although most societies participated in the 2006 and 2010 elections, the former was marred by allegations of systematic fraud and gerrymandering, while the latter followed a heavy-handed clampdown on opposition and human rights activists. Widespread accounts of arbitrary detention and allegations of torture signified a return to the repressive ways of the regime's past. Meanwhile, socio-economic discontent was bubbling up, propelled by high levels of unemployment, the inability of economic diversification to generate sufficient jobs or economic opportunities for Bahraini youth, and popular anger at perceived corruption at the heart of government.

It was in this context of rising tension that Bahraini organisers planned a day of protest on February 14, 2011. The date was symbolic, as it marked the tenth anniversary of the referendum that approved the National Action Charter. It also followed in the wake of the popular uprisings that swept away the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. The inspirational sight of largely non-violent demonstrations defying political suppression and refusing to submit to the security regimes that had kept authoritarian leaders in power for decades was transformative. Emboldened protestors voiced demands ahead of the February 14 day of protest for greater political freedom and equality for all Bahrainis.

These targeted the regime's policies of fomenting sectarian division to inhibit the emergence of any popular cross-community opposition movement.

Although initially small in scale and predominantly confined to Shia villages outside Manama, the demonstrations gathered momentum after Bahraini police killed two protestors. They also migrated to the heart of the capital's Pearl Roundabout, close to the flagship Bahrain Financial Harbour. Ominously for the regime, the demonstrations quickly assumed popular overtones as Sunnis and Shias alike gathered in unprecedented numbers and chanted slogans such as 'No Shias, no Sunnis, only Bahrainis.' By the evening of February 16, tens of thousands of overwhelmingly young Bahrainis were camped in Pearl Roundabout and shouting 'Down, down Khalifa!' This dramatic escalation directly threatened the domestic legitimacy of the Al-Khalifa, and panicked the regime into a brutal response as forces stormed the roundabout in the middle of the night and opened fire on sleeping demonstrators.

As the protests moved into a new post-clampdown phase, the regime reacted by sponsoring counter-demonstrations to try to fracture the social movement confronting them. Thousands of pro-government supporters gathered at the Al-Fateh Mosque in Juffair on February 21 to declare their support for the regime. Notably, they included large numbers of non-Bahraini expatriate workers and naturalised citizens whose livelihoods depended upon regime goodwill. In response, an estimated 200,000 people (one in six of all Bahraini citizens) participated in a pro-democracy march to the Pearl Roundabout on February 25, as two massive columns of protestors converged on the roundabout to demand the resignation of the Prime Minister, Khalifa bin Salman Al-Khalifa.

With the position of the ruling family clearly jeopardised, negotiations between the regime's leading modernising force, Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, and the largest opposition political society, Al-Wefaq, commenced in March. Despite coming close to an agreement based around a set of agreed political reforms, the talks broke down, and on March 14 the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) sent in its Peninsula Shield Force to help restore stability

in Bahrain. In reality, this consisted of 1000 men of the Saudi Arabian National Guard and a contingent of military police from the United Arab Emirates. They provided the essential backbone while the Bahrain Defence Force pursued and arrested thousands of people across the country.

A state of national emergency was declared the following day, which lasted until June 1, and there followed a brutal crackdown as the Bahraini government mercilessly pursued all forms of dissent; detaining doctors and lawyers merely for treating or representing detainees, suspending opposition political societies and arresting their leaders, and detaining a founder of Bahrain's major independent newspaper Al-Wasat, who subsequently died in custody. Hundreds of mostly Shia workers were dismissed from public and private sector positions for 'absenteeism' during the demonstrations. Widespread tactics of intimidation also included the destruction of Shia shrines and posters showing prominent Shia leaders with nooses around their necks.

Simultaneously, the Bahrain National Guard embarked on a hasty recruitment drive in Pakistan to augment its limited manpower with non-Bahraini personnel who had fewer qualms about opening fire on civilian protestors. Meanwhile, the bulldozing of the Pearl Roundabout, with its iconic monument to Gulf unity, represented a crude attempt to destroy the symbolic heart of the protest movement. With this act, the authorities hoped to prevent it from becoming an anti-regime equivalent of Cairo's Tahrir Square, but it noticeably failed to quell the sense of defiance among marginalised communities.

## **THE POLITICAL INQUEST**

Following the lifting of martial law in June 2011, King Hamad convened a National Dialogue and created an ostensibly independent investigation into the springtime unrest. Through these initiatives, the government hoped to begin a process of reconciliation with the opposition. However, their flawed implementation widened the chasm between the Al-Khalifa and their opponents by casting serious doubt on the credibility of the regime's commitment to reform.

Bahrain's National Dialogue convened on July 2 and ran until July 30, 2011. It began under a cloud, following the June 22 decision of the National Safety Court to sentence 13 prominent opposition figures to varying terms of imprisonment. The majority were committed to non-violent protest and many had participated in the political opening that followed the ending of the previous bout of internal unrest in 1999. Their imprisonment illustrated the gloved-fist nature of the regime's approach, jailing some of its opponents while simultaneously reaching out to others.

The National Dialogue suffered a credibility gap from the beginning. Despite winning up to 45 percent of the vote in the October 2010 parliamentary election, the major opposition group Al-Wefaq was only granted five out of 300 delegates. This was consistent with the overall composition of the dialogue, in which delegates representing all Bahraini opposition societies only constituted 11.67 percent of the total. The remaining participants overwhelmingly favoured keeping the regime in its current shape. Core opposition demands including redrawing electoral boundaries for greater proportional representation and creating an elected government were not on the agenda; nor was any discussion permitted of the nature or extent of the ruling family's power.

Al-Wefaq withdrew from the National Dialogue halfway through, with its own judgement to participate being called into question by critics. The Dialogue continued, and concluded with a series of recommendations, including one that the Prime Minister (rather than the King) would appoint the government. As the long-serving Prime Minister (in office since 1971) represented one of the key obstacles to reform, this hardly constituted a political concession. Nor did the Dialogue come to an agreement over the electoral boundaries, another major opposition grievance. Far from drawing a line under the unrest, the flawed process reinforced existing divisions and demonstrated very clearly that critical issues of political contention were simply not up for debate.

The National Dialogue partially overlapped with the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI). This was established by King Hamad on June 29 to 'inquire into the incidents' in February and March and their consequences. Its chair was Egyptian Professor Cherif

Bassiouni, who led the UN Security Council commission that investigated war crimes in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Similar to the National Dialogue, the Commission quickly ran into difficulty, as a series of interviews given by Bassiouni appeared to prejudge its outcome and exonerate officials of any responsibility for human rights violations. His comments drew a furious reaction from Bahraini human rights groups and opposition figures, who pointed to statements made by members of the Al-Khalifa praising and (in some cases) inciting the security forces.

Doubtless chastened by the hostility to his remarks, Bassiouni surprised almost everyone with the hard-hitting content of his report when it was published on November 23. In a televised speech in front of the King, Bassiouni stated that the authorities had used torture and excessive force during its crackdown on protestors. He pinpointed a culture of unaccountability among the security services operating during the state of emergency, and accused unnamed officials of disobeying laws designed to safeguard human rights. Most notably of all, he argued that many of the protests did not fall outside of the participatory rights of citizens, and that he had not found evidence of any link to Iranian involvement, contradicting regime narratives that ascribed the protests to external intervention rather than domestic grievances.

## **BETWEEN REFORM AND REPRESSION**

In response, the King pledged to initiate reforms, and established a National Commission to oversee their implementation. Yet the measures taken to date have left many of the roots of Bahrain's political and economic inequalities unaddressed, and ongoing clashes between protestors and security forces have continued unabated, with more than ten protestors' deaths since November. The result has been the empowerment of radical voices across the political spectrum and the marginalisation of Bahrain's political middle ground. The emergence of radicalised splinter groups means that it is no longer possible to speak of a 'regime-opposition' dichotomy. Elements of the opposition are growing more violent, and calls have intensified from extremist groups urging the regime to crush the opposition once and for all.

Measures that have been taken since November include revoking the arrest powers of the National Security Apparatus after the Bassiouni report detailed its 'systematic practice of physical and psychological mistreatment, which in many cases amounted to torture'; legislative amendments that expand the definition of torture and lift time-limits for the prosecution of cases, pledges to rebuild Shia houses of worship destroyed by the regime during the crackdown; and the announcement of the construction of more than 3000 social housing units. Workers dismissed on grounds of political expression have been reinstated and charges against 343 individuals similarly accused have been dismissed.

While these gestures have opened up new pathways of redress for individual victims of abuse, they also highlight one of the major shortcomings dampening expectations of (and prospects for) deeper reform. This is that the changes rectify specific (or high-profile) instances of abuse, rather than making deep reforms to the structures of political and economic power. Recruiting foreign police leaders (ex-assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan Police John Yates and former chief of the Miami police John Timoney) to re-train Bahrain's security services may play well in London and Washington, but it leaves unresolved the structural exclusion of large numbers of Bahraini citizens from an organisation many perceive as exclusionary and deeply-partial.

These measures also do little in the way of empowering moderates among the opposition or in government, whose leadership is vital to building support for any future political reforms. Tentative moves to re-engage the political opposition lack real meaning while many of its leaders remain imprisoned. Perhaps most damagingly, the culture of impunity within the security services means there is yet to be evidence of any high-level accountability. A trial recently began of five police officers – none of them Bahrainis – charged with involvement in the death in custody of a blogger on April 9, 2011, which was attributed (implausibly) at the time to 'complications from sickle cell anaemia.' It stretches credibility to suggest that the scale and ferocity of the crackdown may solely be ascribed to the actions of (ostensibly renegade) junior personnel.

Accountability cannot be narrowly limited to those who actively carried out abuses. It must include those who ordered and orchestrated the crackdown, and follow the chain of command upward.

## WHAT NEXT FOR BAHRAIN?

Prospects for building a national consensus around reform are further dampened by evidence of growing radicalisation of extremist pro-government groups. A radical offshoot called the Al-Fateh movement has formed out of the pro-government National Unity Gathering, which they accused of being too lenient toward the protesting opposition. Angry supporters of the regime increasingly question why it does not crush the revolt, and instead 'allows' unrest to simmer and damage the Bahraini economy and national image.

As regime support radicalises, the opposition appears to be fragmenting, although there always has been a divide between the 'official opposition' societies and the shadowy 'February 14' youth movement. Little is known about 'February 14'; a recent article by Ala'a Shehabi and Toby Jones for *Foreign Policy* described them as 'a confederation of loosely organised networks...faceless, secretive, and anonymous,' consisting of 'thousands of supporters [who] have abandoned the failed leadership of the country's better established, but listless, political opposition.' It appears they are the vanguard of the protestors who confront the regime security services on a daily basis. It is unclear if those who subscribe to its ideology are necessarily organised through coordinated networks, indeed a great deal of their effectiveness derives from the sporadic, uncoordinated and unpredictable nature of their tactics against security forces. They retain a capacity to mobilise and coordinate larger demonstrations, as they organised a march of over 100,000 people on March 9, 2012 in response to a remark by the King that the protestors only represented a tiny minority of Bahraini citizens.

Given that Saudi Arabia's ruling Al-Saud will simply not allow a fellow ruling family in the Gulf to fall, realpolitik suggests that a political solution will have to emerge from within the existing system. American

and British support for the Al-Khalifa as a longstanding regional ally is a powerful factor insulating the ruling family from the participatory pressures of the Arab uprisings. Put bluntly, pressures for revolutionary change in Bahrain will not be allowed to succeed, short of an (unlikely) game-changing development either in Saudi Arabia or in the current US posture in the Gulf. For the Al-Saud, the Al-Khalifa represent the weakest link in the chain of authoritarian monarchies in the Gulf, while its own Shia communities in its oil-rich Eastern Province are similarly subjected to political marginalisation and sectarian discrimination. Saudi policy is therefore predicated on propping up the Bahraini regime and ascribing its troubles to external (Iranian) manipulation, as this plays well in Washington D.C. Thus, escalating tensions with Iran could not have come at a better time for opponents of reform, as the Americans are not going to abandon an ally (and host of the US Fifth Fleet) at this moment in time.

Yet Bahrain finds itself poised at a profound juncture. It can either move toward deep and lasting changes to the balance of power between state and society, or the regime will have to rely on the use of force against an increasingly determined opposition. The challenge for the government is overcoming memories of the previous cycle of repression (during the 1994-99 uprising) and the subsequent partial promises of reform (2001-10). The longer the old elite remains unaccountable at high levels for the abuses of power over the past year, the harder it will be to convince sceptics of the government's good faith. Calls to violence by opposition and regime hardliners alike make any solution more difficult without a decisive power-shift towards moderate elements.

These depressing developments portend a bleak future for Bahrain. American pressure to halt the banning of Al-Wefaq last spring demonstrates that Western partners can use their leverage to mitigate the worst of the abuses of power. However, the prevailing reaction among US and UK policy makers was epitomised by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's blunt assertion in November 2011 that 'there will be times when not all of our interests align. We work to align them, but that is just reality.' Regime change in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya will not be repeated on the placid shores of the Gulf.

This has implications for the other Gulf States should they experience an upsurge in protest in the future. Their commercial and geo-strategic importance means the West will neither abandon any of its Gulf partners nor make a stand on humanitarian grounds. And while this places Western commercial and institutional partners in a difficult position, caught between their core regional allies and mounting concern at the erosion of human rights and political space, the consequences for Gulf polities are momentous. Officials throughout the region will be observing how cracking down so hard has saved the Al-Khalifa, at least for now. But their survival has come at a very high price economically and politically, and has shattered social cohesion in a country polarised as never before. With a ruling family determined to swim against the tide of the Arab Spring, uninterested in meaningful political compromise and reliant on foreign protection as the guarantor of regime security, ruling elites will be absorbing lessons from the Al-Khalifa's crushing of opposition at the expense of their domestic and international credibility. ■

# ➤ Libya: Defining its Future

Ranj Alaaldin

**The international community is approaching the anniversary of its intervention in Libya last year. What started as a protest for greater rights and democracy quickly transformed into a military uprising against a vicious dictator intent on suppressing a revolution with every brutal means at his disposal. The conflict was distinct from other uprisings elsewhere in the region for three principal reasons: first, the brutality with which Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's regime responded; second, the audacity, tenacity and speed with which the Libyan people became militarily organised and capable of exploiting Gaddafi's disintegrating military; and third, the involvement of the international community, in the form of the NATO alliance that was backed up by Arab support, particularly from the Gulf state of Qatar.**

This set of multi-faceted dynamics makes the Libyan case particularly special since they also reflect the existing political and security environment in the country; in other words, the host of different external actors, political and ideological factions at play in the overthrow of the former regime could reflect the post-conflict power-structures that will determine the shape of the new Libya.

## THE UPRISING

The Libyan revolution erupted after protestors took to the streets following the arrest on February 14 of human rights lawyer Fathi Terbil, who represented relatives of more than 1,000 prisoners allegedly massacred by security forces in Tripoli's infamous Abu Salim jail in 1996. According to reports, close to 2,000 people gathered outside regime offices to demand his release. A 'day of rage' was then announced for February 17, at which point protests erupted across the country, but especially in the eastern towns and cities, which had a history of rebelling against Gaddafi's regime.

In Benghazi, Libya's second largest city after Tripoli, tens of thousands took to the streets, torching police stations and besieging army barracks and the city's airport. Regime loyalists were forced out of eastern towns including Bayda and the port town of Tobruk. In Zintan, south of Tripoli, hundreds of people marched through the streets; a police station and security forces premises were set on fire.

By early March, the Libyan protest movement transformed into a full-fledged armed conflict with the regime, which escalated as significant military and political defections took place and when it became clear that Gaddafi had no intention of accepting the protestors' earlier demands or enter into negotiations with them. This led to the gradual creation of an enclave in Benghazi, with several other cities and towns in both the east and the west cleared of regime loyalists, though reports of regime snipers operating still persisted.

In the run up to the passage of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 on March 14, which sought to protect the population of Benghazi from being massacred after Gaddafi declared his intention to chase down the dissenters house to house, regime and revolutionary forces engaged in a tit-for-tat battle; both sides gained and lost territory as the battle continued.

This was in fact a process that favoured the regime. The rebels, poorly armed and unorganised, were unable to keep hold of territory, consolidate and build on their gains. The regime, on the other hand, had the benefit of superior weaponry, organised forces and training, thus having the advantage over the rag-tag army it was facing.

The March 14 intervention started a process of military engagement that began to shift the balance of power and the conflict in the opposition's favour. Slow at first, and wary of becoming engaged in yet another foreign conflict after Afghanistan and Iraq, the international community gradually increased and intensified its military support for the opposition, which entered Tripoli in September 2011 after nine months of conflict and forced the end of the regime.

## **THE OPPOSITION**

Self-defined, and established a week after the initial uprising began, the official opposition movement in Libya was the National Transitional Council (NTC), which now constitutes the country's interim government until elections are held. The NTC is headed by Mustafa Abdul Jalil, the former regime's justice minister, and its underlying purpose was to give the armed uprising an organisational structure that allowed it to effectively defeat the former regime – thus rendering the establishment of the entity a necessity.

Initially comprised of a 30-member leadership council and an executive committee that took charge of daily responsibilities, the NTC was and still is composed of individuals that come from different ideological, political and professional backgrounds: secularist, Islamist and technocratic. According to the NTC, they were co-opted on the basis of their expertise and the extent to which they were linked with the former regime, in that any individuals with "blood on their hands" were prevented from joining. Since the downfall of Gaddafi, the NTC has grown into a 50-member council with a cabinet of ministers that take charge of the country's affairs, including the provisioning of basic services, public expenditure and preparing the country for elections.

Despite this apparently smooth transition from opposition to interim administration, the NTC has been plagued by a series of deficiencies. Divisions have been rife along Islamist-secularist lines. The NTC was also thrown into disarray after the murder last year by an opposition Islamist brigade of former regime interior minister Abdul Fatah Younes, who had become the NTC's defence minister.

More pressing during and after the conflict has been a failure to remedy the NTC's democratic deficit to the satisfaction of the Libyan people, who in recent months have voiced their discontent by protesting against their interim government's lack of transparency and slow progress. The January 2012 NTC appointed cabinet, for example, failed to release the names of all its members. Currently, the discontent centres around a lack of transparency – especially vis-à-vis NTC meetings and decision-making processes – NTC members and aspects of public expenditure.

## **WHY AUTHORITY MATTERS**

As it stands, the NTC has made slow progress since Gaddafi was toppled, as indicated by recent events including the desecration of British war graves, the declaration of autonomy by the Eastern regions, and clashes between armed groups, as well as the abuse of prisoners.

The importance of authority ultimately comes from a need to stabilise Libya, steer it towards democratic elections and, ultimately, exploit the country's enormous potential. It has a \$65 billion sovereign wealth fund, whilst oil production will soon reach pre-conflict levels of 1.6 million barrels a day. The hydrocarbons sector can therefore drive economic growth in the short term while the private sector is developed and a legal framework is constructed. Libya should attract foreign investment: it has a young and well-educated population that boasts the highest literacy rate in Africa.

But the NTC has little authority and was, in truth, little more than a mouthpiece for the loose and decentralised structure of the uprising throughout the conflict. Since the downfall of the former regime,

it is still to centralise authority and has faced difficulties managing the logistical and organisational demands that come with paying salaries and providing basic services and humanitarian assistance.

Within Libya, power is currently concentrated in disparate military circles that dominate their respective areas of influence in the east and the west. These fighters were the 'Free Libya' fighting groups that developed from the bottom up, independently of one another. The most prominent revolutionary brigades come from the previously besieged city of Misrata in the east and Zintan in the west, which in the weeks leading up to Gaddafi's downfall made a decisive contribution to the uprising by tightening the noose around Tripoli.

The NTC has almost no control over these forces, comprised of fighters who, rather than operating as some homogenous combat entity, actually operate as per a social contract between an array of individuals, technocrats, prominent tribes and families and businesses, within any given major city that they control and derive their authority from (like Misrata for example which, in addition to its famous revolutionaries, boasts a series of prominent technocrats and businesspeople). The Misrata and Zintan brigades have both refused to recognise the authority of the NTC.

There has been some co-ordination between militias and the NTC but a unified command structure integrating them both does not exist. Herein lies the problem. Independent or semi-independent fighting forces could be acceptable but only if integrated into a proper power-sharing mechanism. As of now, the NTC's lack of authority combined with the absence of a respected national army and police force is likely to be conducive to an environment in which violent clashes take place between militias and NTC forces (and between rival militia groups themselves); as well as further compound problems of transparency, accountability and human rights abuses.

More broadly, these deficiencies have profound consequences for the future of the region as well as the interests of the international community, largely because of the proliferation of arms and the open borders that cannot be properly policed without organised security forces.

The militias' power reflects that of the Islamists advantage, since the most powerful of militia brigades are comprised of and have close links to Islamist groups and individuals. The Islamists were described as being the most organised, effective, heavily armed and audacious of the 'Free Libya' revolutionaries. Militias in the east for example boast the Sallabi brothers, including leading cleric Ali al-Sallabi and his brother Ismael al-Sallabi, whose role during the uprising was to lead an umbrella group of fighters in the east.

The Sallabi brothers' prominence is further amplified because of their existing networks and formidable resources that stem from the Gulf, especially from Qatar, which provided Islamist brigades with aid and arms. Significantly, this was done independently of the NTC and despite NTC objections.

In post-Gaddafi Libya, Islamists have gained further recognition in the country's interim constitution, which regards Islamic jurisprudence (sharia) as 'the principal source of legislation' – clearly a measure of appeasement since there were no widespread demands for this among the population. Senior NTC sources themselves acknowledge that the Islamists are recognised as the 'do'ers'; that is, they have the capacity and ability to deliver, whilst the NTC has been derided for its inability to take command and take decisions. The forthcoming elections in June, which will elect a 200-member national assembly to draft Libya's new constitution, may remedy the NTC's democratic deficit. In truth, however, elections could essentially transplant the existing circles of power and influence, in particular those of the Islamists.

## THE FUTURE

The new Libya is still in a transitional phase and it has been little over six months since Gaddafi was toppled and the country liberated in its entirety. It is, therefore, important to maintain perspective; whilst there are many problems, there is little to suggest that they will take the country to the brink.

Much will depend on the extent to which the country is stabilised before the elections take place in June, for the fear is that failure to remedy the problems of authority and accountability will compromise the prospects for stability, representative governance and, as things stand, enable militia leaders to translate their military clout and revolutionary status into political status, to the detriment of any genuine democratic process.

The possibility of civil war is often raised among a minority of skeptics, most of whom were opposed to the international community's intervention last year. Clashes have indeed already taken place between rival militias, as well as between NTC forces and militia brigades. They are also likely to continue, especially given the prevalence of weapons in the country. However, they will be localised, unorganised and not between entire regions or organised groups with large armies and sophisticated weaponry, variables which are necessary if a devastating civil war is to take place.

Similarly, Libya has the benefit of being a largely homogenous and small country, with a population of Sunni Muslims, most of whom live in the cities of the Mediterranean seaboard. As a result of its homogenous characteristics, post-conflict Libya also has an advantage over post-conflict Iraq since no major segment of its population is agitated at its loss of power to the extent that it resorts to mounting an insurgency or engaging in terrorist atrocities. Iraq's Sunni population, on the other hand, bemoaned their loss of power and feared a future in which its rights would not be protected – despite a written constitution guaranteeing these rights – creating resentment and inflaming sectarian tensions with the country's majority Shia population.

It is, however, important to have a capable and somewhat centralised security apparatus, so that any gains in the new Libya are not reversed. Regardless of whether decentralisation is embraced, Libya still needs a respected and organised security apparatus that can enforce law and order. The existing gaps in security provide for lawlessness, disorder, and clashes between armed groups and militias; as well as weakening Libya's ability to defend itself against outside forces.

If, on the other hand, the existing model of decentralised authority with a weak government in Tripoli is the preferred model, then Libyans must find a way to turn this into a proper power-sharing mechanism. Whilst embracing federalism or any decentralised system of governance will, for some Libyans, be tantamount to partition, it will also be seen by many as a means of preventing power from becoming too centralised in Tripoli (that is, centralised to such an extent that it produces another dictatorial regime) and as a means of reversing the neglect that the periphery suffered under the former regime's rule. Partition itself is unlikely if not impossible, given that there exists no support for it among the broader Libyan population. The threat of partition, however, could be used to garner concessions in future political negotiations.

What will be key before any elections take place, or indeed before any constitutional process is started, is the reconciling of differences between different political and ideological factions, between new and old power bases, tribes and regions; these are elements which have either experienced neglect under the Gaddafi regime or who now fear for their future under Libya's new rulers. In other words, Libya needs stabilisation, which can be achieved provided Libyans are given a stake in the future of their country. Interests must, therefore, be merged and differences must be remedied to create a post-conflict environment of stability, and create an inclusive and representative government that defines the country through genuine democratic elections. ■

# ➤ Syria's Bloody Arab Spring

Christopher Phillips

**When the dictatorial regimes of Tunisia and Egypt were toppled by popular unrest few expected Syria to follow. Despite suffering under dictatorship for over 40 years and facing similar economic and social challenges that had prompted rebellion elsewhere, Syrians appeared to support their young president, Bashar al-Assad, who had cultivated an image as a populist anti-western moderniser. When protests did eventually reach Syria in March 2011, in the southern town of Deraa, they called on Assad to reform not resign. Yet any faith in Assad as a reformer soon evaporated. His security forces responded with live fire, killing hundreds in Deraa and elsewhere, while the president offered only piecemeal reforms. The regime fashioned a narrative that protests were led by criminal armed gangs, intent on stirring up sectarian divisions within Syria's heterogeneous population. Yet in these early stages it was mostly regime-backed Shabiha militia from Assad's own Alawi sect that were responsible for any violence, while most protestors remained peaceful and inclusive. Tragically, as regime violence continued and protests spread, with over 9,000 deaths in the first year, that narrative became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Not only have some taken up arms against Assad, but sectarianism is increasing, with the Alawi community as a whole blamed for Assad's excesses.**

Yet the regime still appears far from collapse. The opposition, both within Syria and exiles abroad, has proved unable to win over key segments of Syrian society. The international community remains divided on what action to take, with western and Arab economic sanctions only frustrating rather than disabling the regime, while Russia, China and Iran continue to explicitly or implicitly back Assad. After a year of violence Syria looks headed for a civil war between the regime and the poorly armed but determined opposition, with the potential to transform one of the Middle East's most stable states into a sectarian bloodbath.

## THE CAUSES OF THE UPRISING

The uprising can be partly explained by examining who has and hasn't been willing to rebel against Assad. Opposition activity has been concentrated in certain areas, suggesting that certain ethnic, economic, demographic and geographical groups harbour more anti-regime feeling than others. For decades, the security state established by Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father, encouraged certain social and economic inequalities as a means of divide and rule. Hafez won the support of Syria's working class and peasantry, largely from Syria's Sunni Arabs who make up 60 percent of the population, by building a large socialist state that provided employment and subsidies. He won the backing of Syria's non Sunni Arab minorities – the Christians (10 percent of the population), Druze (3 percent) and his own Alawi sect (10 percent). These groups welcomed Hafez's secular Arab nationalist identity discourse as a means to integration, an identity that he promoted through expanded state institutions, notably the army and the ruling Ba'ath party. While this coalition of support was sufficient to build a popular base, Hafez deliberately excluded some groups: Syria's Kurds (15 percent of the population) and the former Sunni Arab ruling elite, as well as landowners and larger merchants that opposed his socialist policies.

When Bashar inherited power on his father's death in 2000, he inherited a system that was stable but had fostered divisions. Although he enjoyed personal popularity, his reforms exacerbated and increased resentment towards the regime as a whole. Economic reforms alienated the Sunni Arab workers and peasantry, as Bashar moved to open up the economy more rapidly. Syria's GDP grew, but subsidies to Syria's poorest were cut and public sector employment decreased. Rather than genuine liberalisation, those close to power amassed huge fortunes through government contracts and monopolies. This new generation of crony capitalists were visibly excessive, and a disproportionately high number of this elite were Alawis, with Bashar making far less effort than Hafez had to balance the sect's privileged position by promoting prominent Sunni Arab families, fuelling resentment among the formerly supportive Sunni Arab poor.

Some trends, of course, were beyond the regime's control. Rural Syria was hit by a major drought from 2007-10, hitting the peasantry hard, with Assad's inept government exacerbating matters through mismanagement of agricultural resources and corruption. This prompted a wave of migration from the countryside to the over-crowded cities. Syria, like many Arab states, had witnessed a demographic boom in the 1980s that brought a glut of youth to the labour market that the economy could not accommodate. Just when more jobs were needed, Assad's reforms actually shrank the labour market further. Alongside the shrinking of the state in the economy, its role in society decreased, with the influence and funding of the army and Ba'ath party heavily cut, meaning young Syrians received less government indoctrination. On top of this, Bashar encouraged a more conservative form of Islam to be preached among Sunni communities, hoping to restrict the growing regional trend of Islamic conservatism to society rather than politics. However, while he successfully co-opted some, notably Aleppo's *ulema* (clergy) from whom he appointed Syria's new Grand Mufti in 2004, in other areas this revived a sense of Sunni superiority and activism. It is not surprising that mosques and Friday prayers became the focal point for demonstrations, while the quiet of Aleppo's mosques helps explain

that city's relative disengagement from the uprising. In general, the most persistent sources of opposition activity since 2011 have been in poorer religious Sunni Arab areas such as Deraa, Jisr al-Shughour, Homs, Idleb, Douma and Hama, and frustrated youth have taken the lead. In contrast, the areas that have remained relatively quiet are those benefitting from economic changes or co-opted, such as central Damascus and Aleppo, or areas dominated by traditionally supportive ethnic groups, notably the Alawi-dominated cities of Tartous and Latakia.

Despite these long-term structural resentments, the outbreak of the uprising was not inevitable, and several short-term factors played a key role. The most obvious trigger was the toppling of dictatorial regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. Prior to 2011, unauthorised public demonstrations of any sort in Syria were extremely rare. With the exception of the short-lived Kurdish *Serhildan* (uprising) in eastern Syria in 2004, opponents of Assad's rule had largely restricted themselves to timid declarations. The empowering effect of the Arab Spring on Syria's protestors was seen in their mimicking of techniques and slogans from elsewhere. The use of Facebook (only formally legalised by Assad in January 2011), YouTube and Twitter to organise demonstrations, as well as slogans such as 'the people demand the end of the regime' and preparing a different name for each Friday of protest were all borrowed from other Arab revolts. The success of Libya's rebels in defeating Colonel Gaddafi militarily further inspired some of Syria's protestors, this time to take up arms and to revert to a pre-Ba'athist national flag, mimicking Libya's reversion to a pre-Gaddafi banner. Having spent decades telling Syrians to be proud Arabs, the regime was taken aback when its people suddenly demanded the same *karama* (dignity) won by their 'cousins' elsewhere.

The other key trigger was the regime's violent reaction. Arguably, even after the first protests, Bashar enjoyed enough personal support that he could have rescued the situation. Soon after the Deraa killings, Bashar gave a much anticipated speech before Parliament on March 30, 2011, yet he neither apologised nor offered any reforms. Subsequent speeches on April 16 and June 20 were equally uninspiring.

In the meantime, the regime's forces, supported by the mysterious *Shabiha* militia, cracked down violently on the growing number protests across the country. The funerals of murdered demonstrators became a focal point for further protests and, when people were killed on those demonstrations, a snowball effect took place. While the inner workings of the regime remain opaque, Bashar's inner circle apparently clashed over the best response to the crisis. Hardliners led by Bashar's younger brother Maher, commander of the elite 4th Armoured Division that has been at the vanguard of the suppression, reportedly triumphed over those in favour of a negotiated solution. The violent response that was settled upon clearly sought to repeat the 'success' that Hafez had in brutally crushing a rebellion by the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1970s and 80s, that eventually led to the massacre of over 10,000 fighters and civilians in Hama in 1982. Although regime hardliners viewed the challenge as a repeat of the 1980s - fighting 'terrorists' - this approach finally shattered any hopes from the opposition that Bashar would be different from his father. While past resentments placed some distance between the president as an individual and his corrupt, tortuous security officials and cronies, his willingness to repeatedly use violence prompted the radicalisation of the opposition, from peacefully wanting reform to demanding regime change.

## **WHY THE REGIME HAS SURVIVED SO FAR**

Parts of Syria have been in open rebellion for over a year and yet, unlike the dictators of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya, Assad remains in place. The reasons for his survival thus far are multi-fold. Firstly, key pillars of the regime remain in place. Multiple coups following independence in 1946 led Hafez to design his regime to be 'coup-proof', with four over-lapping intelligence agencies to spy on the population, the army and one another. This has thus far prevented the kind of internal moves by the military that toppled the Egyptian and Tunisian presidents. On the contrary, Syria's military and security forces, packed at the higher echelons with arch loyalists, many from the Alawi sect, have proven fiercely loyal to the regime: willing to slaughter their countrymen in a manner that Egypt's army refused.

Another key pillar has been the continued support the regime enjoys from parts of society. While Assad's economic reforms shrank his social base he retained the support of some groups: minorities that were sceptical of majoritarian Sunni Arab rule - the Alawis, Christians and Druze - and some members of the Sunni Middle classes, particularly in commercially-successful Aleppo. In the early days of the uprising huge regime-orchestrated pro-Assad displays attracted hundreds of thousands. Some loyalists genuinely support the regime, buying the narrative of 'armed groups' backed by foreign powers, or believing in Assad's hollow reforms. More likely is that many fear for their fate if the regime collapses. Christians are wary of the experiences of their Iraqi brethren after Saddam Hussein's demise, with over a quarter fleeing targeted sectarian killings. The Alawis, many of whom contrary to popular belief did not benefit greatly from the Assad regime, also fear for their future, concerned that they will be blamed for Assad's violence. Fear of the security forces may still cow people, with middle class Sunni Arabs aware that they have much more to lose by opposing the regime than the poor of Deraa and Homs. Some businessmen are reportedly playing a double game, declaring their support for Assad, while secretly funding the opposition to avoid any post-regime recrimination. Though this may help individuals in the future, it does little to persuade the 'undecided middle' or the arch-loyalists to switch sides, and the relative neutrality of these key groups has kept protests out of the two major city centres and denied the opposition the visible support of the majority of the population.

The opposition's weakness has also aided the regime. Assad's opponents initially organised Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) to arrange demonstrations in centres of rebellion. These proved effective as they were largely leaderless, meaning that the regime had no ringleaders to arrest or kill. Despite thousands of arrests, these committees continue to be the leading organisers of peaceful protest on the ground even after a year. However, the desire for international backing prompted the formation of an opposition in exile, the Syrian National Council (SNC), in Istanbul in August 2011. Yet the SNC has not won enough internal support. Syria's leading Kurdish

grouping for example, the newly formed Kurdish National Council (KNC), has declined to join the SNC because of the dominant position given to the exiled Muslim Brotherhood, largely opposed by secular Kurds, and the council's base in Turkey, a long-time opponent of Kurdish rights. The SNC is seen as out of touch with events on the ground compared to the LCCs, while older opponents of the regime that have remained in Syria rather than spent decades in exile, such as Louay Hussein or Michel Kilo, have complained of the bullish stance taken by the SNC abroad. Even within the SNC there have been clear divisions, with key activists such as former judge, Haitham al-Maleh, walking out of the council complaining of poor leadership. The issue of whether to seek western military intervention has been particularly divisive. Given the decades of systematic repression meted out by the Baath regime on all opposition, this inability to organise and unite is perhaps not surprising, but it has meant that, despite much goodwill and support from the western powers and several Arab states, the SNC has been unable to secure the kind of armed backing afforded the National Transitional Council (NTC) in Libya.

Also seemingly inspired by events in Libya was the formation of the Free Syria Army (FSA), in July 2011 by defecting Syrian army officers that had fled to Turkey. Its leader, Colonel Riad al-Asaad, stated that the security forces willingness to kill civilians made them a legitimate target and called on soldiers to defect, eventually swelling their ranks to approximately 20-25,000 largely low-ranking officers and soldiers, mostly Sunni Arabs. The bulk of the 400,000-strong regime military has remained intact however, and no whole units or heavy weaponry has switched sides. The West steadfastly refuses to arm the rebels and, despite Saudi Arabia and Qatar's enthusiasm, their supplies are limited. Attempts to take and hold territory that could form the base for opposition military operations have failed, leading the regime to brutally crush rebel strongholds such as the Baba Amr district of Homs. It remains unclear how much control Colonel al-Asaad actually has over the various militia nominally under his banner. US fears that Al-Qaeda may be operating within the FSA are probably embellished, but some fighters are certainly inspired by political Islam, as seen by the naming of some militias after Sunni historical figures. While journalists such as Al-Jazeera's Nir Rosen that have been embedded with the FSA highlight that

most fighters are pious rather than overtly Islamist, there remains the possibility of increased radicalisation as the conflict becomes more violent.

The potential for sectarian conflict has been another tool used by the regime to cling onto power. For decades the regime promoted itself as a bastion of stability for Syria's heterogeneous population compared to the sectarian chaos in neighbouring Iraq and Lebanon. At the same time it subtly ensured that sectarian differences between Syria's different communities were not forgotten. It privileged the Alawis, discriminated against the Kurds, and maintained legal barriers between Muslims and Christians. Although Baathist rhetoric spoke of a united Arab Syrian identity, the reality was a more complex manipulation of different identities at different times. The regime tapped into these identities by raising the spectre of a sectarian civil war as soon as the uprising began, accusing the opposition of fostering sectarianism. Yet it was the regime's Shabiha that were deliberately stirring up ethnic violence to scare the minorities and those that feared civil war into backing the regime, for example by delivering sandbags to Alawi areas and warning of Sunni attacks. The protestors emphasised their inclusiveness early on, shouting slogans such as 'all the Syrians are one', but as regime violence continued and non-Sunnis largely backed the regime, sectarian attacks increased, especially in war-torn Homs, and sectarian chants emerged such as, 'we didn't used to hate the Alawis, now we do', or 'Sunni blood is one'. While the majority of the opposition still insist that they are not motivated by sectarianism, the potential for an ethnic civil war increases as violence continues, apparently the regime's cynical survival strategy in the first place.

Further aiding the regime have been the divisions within the international community. Unlike in Libya, military options don't appeal to western powers, Turkey and Saudi Arabia and Qatar, who have rallied most of the Arab League against Assad. Airstrikes and a no-fly zone, or even just establishing protective 'humanitarian corridors' around border areas, could be launched from Turkey or Cyprus, but Assad has far better air defences than Gaddafi making foreign casualties likely. Moreover, the FSA are not in a position to make significant gains on the ground as did the

rebels in Libya, and any military strikes could increase instability and catalyse the descent into chaos. Arming the FSA directly, without the major military defections thus far not seen, is unlikely to allow them to pose a genuine threat anytime soon. Moreover, after Libya most of the anti-Assad camp, especially Turkey, which would likely take a leading role in any military action, recognise the need for UN approval of any moves, and that is unlikely to happen.

Russia and China have blocked far more modest moves against Syria in the UN Security Council. Both generally oppose international interference in states' internal matters, and Russia in particular has a long-standing strategic relationship with Syria, which hosts Moscow's only Mediterranean naval base. Additionally, Russia felt that NATO overstepped its UN-mandated remit in Libya and is determined that the same will not happen in Syria. Putin also may also have a personal loyalty to Bashar, who was one of the few heads of state to publically support the Russian leader's invasion of Georgia in 2008. Although Russia and China both endorsed the ceasefire plan of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in Spring 2012, which importantly dropped the demand that Assad step down, few expect the regime to permanently halt its violence and it is questionable whether Russia would abandon the regime even if it did not. Despite opposition from the west and the Arab League, who have initiated economic sanctions on Syria, Assad retains important friends that allow him to avoid total isolation. As well as Chinese and Russian diplomatic cover at the UN, with Moscow still supplying Damascus weaponry, long-term ally Iran is offering advice on sanctions-busting and defeating the opposition, as well as purchasing Syrian oil to replace European demand and ensuring its other Arab allies, Iraq and Lebanon, defy the Arab League's trade embargo on Syria. Syria's importance on the fault lines of so many conflicts in the region – the Arab-Israeli conflict, Lebanon, Iraq, Kurdish issues and Saudi Arabia and the West's battle with Iran – has ensured interest and interference from many regional and international powers, but also a degree of caution to avoid pushing the country into chaos.

## SCENARIOS FOR SYRIA'S FUTURE

Syria is therefore in stalemate. The regime is far from finished but the opposition seems unlikely to give up. The violence looks set only to increase as each side radicalises: the regime believing that the international community's punishments can be withstood, while parts of the opposition slide towards Islamism and sectarianism. With direct external intervention seemingly ruled out, all scenarios for the future appear grim. Most unlikely is that the opposition will break through and topple the regime through popular protest or military success. The FSA is too weak and, even with Western or Gulf arms, will take years to reach parity with the military. Similarly, the opposition seems unable to win enough support to prompt the mass demonstrations in Damascus and Aleppo that worked in Tunisia. The decline of the economy under sanctions might prompt a coalition of merchants and the military to mount a coup against Assad to preserve their status, but the military is constructed to be loyal and have remained so, and they now have blood on their own hands after the crackdown. Similarly, the merchant class have stayed quiet and sanctions elsewhere suggest that the middle classes are more likely to emigrate than turn on the regime – a trend that has already begun in Syria.

What looks more likely is that, to the chagrin of Western and Gulf leaders, Assad holds on, as did Saddam Hussein after 1991. Assad clearly believes he can contain the threat of the FSA and cow his population back into submission. However, it is doubtful that the FSA would ever surrender, and so the conflict could evolve into a long-running guerrilla insurgency. Moreover, Assad's ability to rule as an army of occupation indefinitely is unsustainable both militarily and economically. Thus the final scenario is some form of civil war, which already appears to be breaking out. The regime would probably prefer a repetition of the Algerian civil war when the radicalisation and violence of the opposition eventually won the military government more support than it initially had, enabling it to re-impose control.

Alternatively, incremental opposition gains might erode the authority of the state, leading to a weak central state in Damascus and Aleppo, but militia rule in the countryside, as happened in parts of Lebanon during its civil war. Moreover, with the FSA already looking like it could fragment into different militia, there is a prospect of Syria becoming a failed state. While there remains a slither of hope that an internationally brokered negotiated solution could be found, nothing the regime has done so far suggests it is willing to compromise. With the Assad regime seemingly willing to destroy Syria rather than give up power, the future looks bleak. ■

# ➤ Yemen's Arab Spring: From Youth Revolution to Fragile Political Transition

Tobias Thiel

**In February 2012, Yemen's revolutionary movement achieved its first victory: the removal of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. However, the co-option of the movement by Yemen's key powerbrokers, regional insurgencies and daunting economic challenges threaten to squander the opportunity to repair Yemen's failing social contract. Stabilisation efforts, though indispensable, must not come at the expense of a democratic and civic state.**

2011 became a year of revolt for the Arab Middle East and North Africa. Driven by the desire for freedom, dignity and social justice, millions of Arabs took to the streets to expel veteran strongmen and their sycophantic advisors from their palaces and remove the quasi-feudal structures constituting the backbone of their regimes. Struck by the resemblance of the uprisings, commentators quickly hailed this transnational wave of protest as an 'Arab 1989', spearheaded by Facebook-wielding youth. The spontaneous mobilisation seemingly repudiated political scientists' explanations for the resilience of Arab autocracy: rentierism, overblown security apparatuses, sophisticated regime strategies of division and co-option, and political culture.

## **REGIME RESPONSES AND ELITE FRAGMENTATION**

Having survived in Yemen's notoriously ungovernable political landscape for over 33 years, Mr Saleh recalcitrantly clung on to power in the face of the burgeoning protest movement. His power has been founded on two pillars: the rentier state and the military. Unable to govern the country single-handedly, Saleh has distributed political rents from Yemen's largely oil-driven economy through an inclusive patronage network of tribal, religious, military and party elites to secure their allegiance. Through his family, he dominates the state's security apparatus. Saleh's son Ahmad Ali heads the Republican Guards, his nephews Yahya and Ammar command the Central Security Forces and the National Security Organisation, while – until recently – his half-brother Mohammed was in charge of the Air Force and his nephew Tariq of the Presidential Guard.

As the protests gained momentum, Mr Saleh responded with a mix of political manoeuvring: patronage and bribery, co-option, repression and propaganda. He mobilised a large countermovement at Tahrir Square, bought the loyalty of tribal sheikhs, lowered the income tax, and raised the wages of civil servants and security forces. In an attempt to co-opt reformists, Mr Saleh pledged to discard a constitutional amendment to prolong the presidential term and reform the electoral system. Simultaneously, many activists came under attack by plain-clothed thugs or were arrested by security forces. Saleh framed the uprising as an affront against unity, freedom and democracy and claimed that the demonstrations were orchestrated from 'a control room in Tel Aviv for destabilising the Arab world [... that is] managed by the White House.'

When traditional strategies proved unable to contain the spread of the movement, the regime response became heavy-handed. March 18 – the ‘Friday of Dignity’ – became a watershed moment as pro-government rooftop snipers massacred around 50 peaceful demonstrators and wounded more than 200. Whether authorised by Mr Saleh or not, the killings exposed the moral bankruptcy of the regime and its support haemorrhaged virtually overnight. A similar event occurred in Ta‘izz on May 29: pro-Saleh forces killed several dozen protesters when they raided the protest square with tanks and bulldozers, storming a makeshift hospital and burning people alive in their tents. Faced with increasingly brutal repression, the youth movement expanded into a mass uprising.

The March 18 massacre accelerated the fragmentation of Mr Saleh’s traditional support base. Earlier, Sheikh Abdulmajid al-Zindani, an influential, incendiary cleric with a flaring red beard, had sided with the youth movement. Sadiq al-Ahmar, head of the powerful Hashid Tribal Confederation, and his brothers Hamid, Hussein and Himyar, publicly turned against the president. Now, long-time ally Major General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, the powerful commander of the First Armoured Division, moved troops into Sana’a vowing to protect the protestors. His move precipitated dozens of resignations by prominent diplomats, ruling party members, government officials and military officers.

Ironically, the most powerful supporters of the democracy movement are veteran regime insiders. The defections did not result from a democratic enlightenment within the elite, but are emblematic of Saleh’s failed alliance policy. The increasing concentration of power around his immediate family breached unwritten power-sharing agreements within the regime’s inner circle. Especially Ali Muhsin had many reasons to settle old scores: Saleh had entangled him in an unwinnable war against the Houthis and launched a failed plot to have the Saudi Air Force ‘accidentally’ bombard his headquarters.

## **THE MILITARY, THE TRIBE AND ISLAMISM STRIKE BACK**

Mr Saleh skilfully stalled and sabotaged various mediation efforts by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), hoping to outlast the revolutionary fervour. After the third failed attempt to sign a GCC-brokered initiative, hostilities erupted in Sana’a on May 23. Ahmed Ali’s Republican Guards faced Sadiq al-Ahmar’s Hashid tribal fighters and 25,000-30,000 troops of the First Armoured Division. On June 3, Ali Abdullah Saleh was severely injured in an attack on the president’s compound and was flown out to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment. Saleh blames Ali Muhsin and the Al-Ahmars for the assassination attempt, which is plausible but unconfirmed.

Although a ceasefire temporarily ended the hostilities in Sana’a on June 7, fighting continued along other conflict lines across Yemen. Tribes in Arhab and Nihm became entangled in a protracted war with the Republican Guards. Tribal fighters damaged several tanks, shot down a Yemeni warplane and captured military equipment from a Republican Guards base. Driven by the fear of an Ali Muhsin or al-Ahmar-dominated post-Saleh regime, the Houthi rebels expanded their sphere of influence to Amran, Hajjah and Mahwit. The radical Shi’a movement clashed with Sunni tribesmen and Salafist fighters, leading to a calamitous humanitarian situation in the north.

Meanwhile, several hundred Islamist militants took control of the provincial capital of Zinjibar in May 2011. Although some Yemeni military units engaged in heavy fighting with the militants, the opposition alleges that Saleh’s regime secretly colluded with Al-Qaeda. During the clashes, the Yemeni Air Force ‘mistakenly’ bombed soldiers from the renegade 119th brigade, which had defected to Ali Muhsin. The US intensified drone attacks against Al-Qaeda, killing the radical cleric Anwar Al-Awlaki and other high-profile leaders. In Al-Baydha’, Tariq al-Dhahab took over the town of Rada’a to extort the release of his brother and 14 other Islamists from government prison.

The economic impact of the crisis has been devastating. With already 45 percent of Yemen's population living below the poverty line in 2010, the deteriorating security situation across the country crippled the Yemeni economy. Many Yemenis face shortages of fuel, water, electricity and basic foodstuffs. Real GDP contracted by 7.8 percent in 2011 and oil output stagnated at 180,000 barrels/day, compared with 260,000 b/d before the crisis. Conservative inflation estimates for 2011 range from 20 to 30 percent. Despite some black market variation, the foreign exchange rate of the Yemeni rial remained largely constant thanks to fund streams from Saudi Arabia and at the cost of the depletion of a fourth of the Central Bank's foreign exchange reserves.

The violence between heavily armed factions transformed what started as a peaceful youth movement into an elite power struggle. Fully aware that a new regime dominated by old elites would be all too similar to the one they seek to oust, the youth movement struck a Faustian bargain with Yemen's key powerbrokers for Saleh's removal: the military (Ali Muhsin), the tribe (the al-Ahmars) and Islamism (Abdulmajid al-Zindani). These powerbrokers began using the protestors to further their own political ends. Political parties, particularly Islah, increasingly gained control over the change squares. Well-funded and organised, they outdid independent youth, who lack organisational capacity, funding and political experience. Intimidation, threats, beating and a takfirism campaign (denouncing fellow Muslims as infidels) moreover led many centrists and independents to retire from the squares in June.

## **A FRAGILE POLITICAL TRANSITION**

After months of deadlock, Ali Saleh unexpectedly returned from Saudi Arabia in late September. The Security Council issued resolution 2014 urging Saleh to sign the GCC initiative and, on November 23, he finally bowed to international pressure. The GCC initiative, monitored by UN special envoy Jamal Benomar, transferred presidential authority to vice-president Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi. In the initial 90-day phase of the initiative's implementation mechanism, Mohammed Basindwa was appointed prime minister

and a bipartisan government, dividing ministerial posts equally between the ruling and opposition parties, was sworn in. The Committee on Military Affairs for Achieving Security and Stability was founded and elections were scheduled for February 21, 2012. The parliament passed a controversial immunity law for Mr Saleh and 500 of his aides in January, but UN human rights chief Navanethem Pillay rejected the law as inconsistent with international law.

Conceived with stabilisation rather than retribution in mind, independent youth, the Houthis and Hiram remained unconvinced that the GCC deal marked the beginning of a democratic transition. The revolution continued unabated, but with crucial tactical changes. Protestors went on a more than 250km long 'life march' from Ta'izz to Sana'a in December to protest the GCC agreement's immunity clause. The march sought to address the failure of the largely urban middle-class-based movement to appeal to the 70 percent of Yemenis living in rural areas. Simultaneously, disgruntled public employees initiated the 'revolution of institutions'; they purged corrupt officials from more than 19 public institutions, such as the national airline, state television, the Sana'a police headquarters, the Coast Guard and some military units.

On February 21, Yemen held a referendum that confirmed acting president Hadi as Yemen's new president with a considerable majority. JMP loyalists went to the polls to vote out Mr Saleh, while most independents, the Houthis and Hiram boycotted the referendum. Many activists perceived a power-sharing agreement with Saleh's General People's Congress Party as a betrayal to 'the blood spilled by the martyrs of the revolution'. Hiram launched a few attacks against polling stations in southern governorates. Mr Hadi's inauguration initiated the second phase of the GCC initiative; the ambitious project envisages a comprehensive national dialogue, the amendment of the constitution, and new elections within two years.

Backed by foreign powers, President Hadi initiated some bold moves. The new Sana'a Protective Security Force, which consists of units from rivaling factions under the command of the Committee on Military Affairs, has removed several military installations in Sana'a.

Amid growing concerns that Saleh's cronies were further destabilising the country, Hadi dismissed four governors and 19 high-ranking military commanders, including Mohammed and Tariq Saleh. The Air Force commander Mohammed Saleh refused to step down and threatened to shoot down commercial airplanes at Sana'a International Airport, but Hadi remained determined.

The fragile achievements in the north are matched by chaos in the South. Aden is witnessing an unprecedented security vacuum, as the absence of the state allows Ansar al-Sharia, the Southern Movement, former regime loyalists, armed gangs and Salafists to wreak havoc. The recent upsurge in Islamist violence by Al-Qaeda and Ansar al-Sharia in Abyan, Shabwah, Al-Baydha' and Lahj has developed into a full-blown insurgency, which suggests at least some links with Saleh's associates.

The US counter-terrorism strategy – a combination of empowering boutique military units under Saleh's family command and drone warfare – exacerbates the very security challenges it seeks to resolve. The regime is known to divert counter-terrorism capacities for other purposes: when Islamists gained ground in the south during 2011, Yahya Saleh's counter-terrorism unit remained in Sana'a as a de facto regime protection force. The Pentagon's plan to spend \$75 million in military aid in 2012 will ensure that Al-Qaeda remains a cash cow for the government. While disgruntled tribesmen often steal American weapons from the Yemeni military, militants often draw their *raison d'être* from American drone attacks, which have led to a high number of civilian deaths. Any security strategy in Yemen should therefore centre on providing incentives for the disarmament of non-state actors, rather than promoting the further militarisation of the state.

## THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

Yemen's new government faces daunting challenges from all sides: the old regime, the protestors and regional insurgencies. Unless the new president fills the power vacuum, Saleh will continue to interfere in the transition process. In a Medvedev/Putin-style scenario, his re-election in 2014, or that of his son Ahmed, cannot be discounted. Protestors are frustrated that their movement has been co-opted by elites who play according to the same old highly personalised 'rules of the game' outside of Yemen's weak formal institutions. As the wounds inflicted by the 1994 civil war and other regional divisions run deep, the spectre of state fragmentation hovers over the transition process. The secession of the south – and, perhaps, that of the Houthis – is a distinct possibility if the Sana'a-based government fails to put an inclusive power-sharing agreement on the table. Although a southerner himself, Mr Hadi has no political capital in the south because he helped crush the southern rebellion during the 1994 civil war.

The new government must focus on quick-wins for the transition period, while keeping an eye to long-term strategy. The national dialogue, transitional justice and a new constitution are key priorities. There has to be a trade-off between inclusiveness and efficiency, but youth, civil society and women, Hiraq, the Houthis and reform-oriented members of the ancien régime must all be part of the process. Much rests on whether he can effectively bring the armed forces under a unified, technocratic leadership, but Hadi must not repeat the mistakes of the Iraqi de-ba'athification, as short-term stability depends on maintaining a precarious balance of power between the old and new regimes. The transition period must provide tangible (economic) improvements for the Yemeni population, such as improved access to water and electricity, reconstructing Sa'dah or revitalising the Aden port.

Long-term stability, on the other hand, requires that the failing social contract gives way to a more democratic and inclusive power-sharing arrangement, which provides enough space for Yemen's extensive pluralism. Given the regional dispersion of power, effective state management necessitates core-periphery cooperation, not coercion. HIRAK and the Houthis must be persuaded that a united Yemen is not based on occupation, but an equal partnership. Only a federal, decentralised system with a large degree of local self-rule can provide effective mechanisms to defuse these internal conflicts.

The litmus test for the new government will be Yemen's transformation from a rentier state to a productive, post-hydrocarbon economy. Civil service reform, and particularly the elimination of 'ghost workers', is essential to create responsive and transparent public institutions that can address widespread poverty and unemployment. Developing the ability to tax as well as ending the squandering of public money and endemic corruption are necessary to fund state expenditures. Development aid is much needed, but donor funds can be a double-edged sword. Their massive influx into a resource-poor environment can reinforce rent-seeking behaviour; competition over Yemen's scarce resources has exacerbated conflicts for decades. The donor community should therefore provide technical assistance for the transition process with conditional aid, while persuading the government through political dialogue to enact reforms in key sectors.

Diagnosed as being 'on the brink' of a failed state for almost a decade, Yemen has continued to function – albeit poorly – and its history reveals that political pragmatism trumps ideology. The protest movement has opened a window of opportunity to foster structural change: it has challenged the hegemony of identity politics and engrained democratic ideas into mainstream political culture. Power shifts inevitably generate resistance among those who lose their privileges. This is why Yemen will continue to experience violence and remain an unconsolidated democracy in the foreseeable future. Although the transition will not be orderly, it has afforded Yemenis a chance to rebuild their flawed national union – an opportunity that must not be squandered. ■

➤ Power Shift?

# ➤ Iran and the Arab Spring

Naysan Rafati

**The events of the Arab Spring, it has been argued, have their precursors in Iran. Yet the proponents of such a view are split over which Iran it is that serves as the inspiration for events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere: is it, as some officials from the Islamic Republic claim, their own 1979 revolution, which unseated Mohammad Reza Pahlavi from the Peacock Throne, or the Twittering, YouTubing mass protests against that vision of a Republic which spilled into the streets of Tehran and other cities around the country three decades later?**

The first point, which relates to Iran's domestic situation, is that despite the precedent for public protest in Iran, most notably in the form of the Green Movement which emerged after the contested reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009, a resurgence of anti-government activism galvanised by the Arab Spring does not seem forthcoming, at least in the short-term. Secondly, while analyses of Iran's role in the Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East may diverge in their conclusions, they acknowledge, implicitly or outright, that Iran matters. This would inevitably have been the case given the country's position as a regional power based on indicators such as population and geography, economic strength, and military capability, but the religious ideology which underpins the regime, coupled with the policy stances it maintains on issues such as nuclear proliferation and the Arab-Israeli conflict, have failed to endear it to the West and some other influential Middle Eastern powers. Indeed, the argument could be made that, from Washington to Brussels to Riyadh, ongoing concern particularly over Iranian enrichment and a potential weapons capability contribute to the fact that Iranian engagement with countries in the Arab world is rarely viewed in isolation, and that this apprehension predates the transformative events of recent months. Thus in terms of shifting regional politics and Iran's role within the context of these changes, the Arab Spring has served to highlight the extent to which relations between actors can not be confined to a bilateral context. Finally, the still-uncertain fate of the protests in Syria, Iran's closest ally in the Middle East, underscores both the tension between rhetoric and interest facing Tehran, as well as representing perhaps the single most important strategic challenge that Iran will need to deal with as a result of the ongoing turmoil, with potentially far-reaching implications for its regional influence.

## **INTERNAL POLITICS AND IRAN'S VIEWS OF THE ARAB SPRING**

If the Arab Spring has shown that regimes which appear stable can prove surprisingly weak, Iran might be considered weak yet surprisingly stable thus far when it comes to its domestic politics. Whatever the nature of the link between Iran's 2009 protests and the eruption of demonstrations throughout the Arab world over the course of 2011 and 2012, the primary areas of contestation within the Iranian political scene, as witnessed during the parliamentary elections held in March of this year, are no longer taking place between reformists and conservatives. Rather, they are increasingly taking place within and between conservative factions who pledge fidelity to the existing system even while promoting different visions for it. Iran's protesters, with their use of mass demonstrations and social media, may have foreshadowed what would take place in Tahrir Square and elsewhere, but a combination of internal weaknesses within the movement compounded by a robust and uncompromising response from the government against the opposition and its leadership has seemingly quieted the voices of dissent.

Nevertheless, as the rapidity and unpredictability of the protests elsewhere have shown, the potential for a rekindling of Iran's internal divisions can certainly not be ruled out, particularly as sanctions against the country chip away at the already fractured economic and commercial foundations of the Iranian state.

If the domestic political situation within Iran is one of relative stability though not assured strength, for the time being, the question then becomes how the Iranian regime views developments across the region: where it may sense opportunity, and where it may perceive threat. In other words, how will changes taking place within countries impact relations between countries, not only within a particular bilateral context but in a broader regional framework? The narrative expounded by Tehran has been broadly welcoming and supportive, but coloured by a specific interpretation of what has given cause to the uprisings; Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has described developments as a 'widespread awakening of nations, which is directed towards Islamic goals.' Using the language of 'Islamic Awakening' (Bidari-ye Eslami) seeks to find and develop commonalities between the *raison d'être* of the Iranian state and the protests, not only as a correlation to be drawn upon and exploited but as causation as well: 'the wave of the Islamic awakening resonated through the Islamic world as an export of the Islamic Republic of Iran,' one senior Iranian official has maintained. This interpretation, however, is at best little more than a partial explanation. While the increasing visibility of Salafist groups and organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt would seem to proffer fertile grounds for growing influence, the reality of developments is not so straightforward.

Religion and religiously-oriented groups have clearly played a part throughout the course of the Arab Spring, but how that will translate over the course of political transitions remains unclear. Moreover, even if Islamist parties consolidate themselves in positions of power, there are certainly no assurances that the model of the Islamic Republic offers any blueprint or idealised form for their mode of governance, or that a shared commitment to religion in political life will necessarily entail a closer strategic relationship to Tehran. Indeed, the politics of the Middle East have demonstrated that the compatibility of ideologies or

sectarian beliefs are no guarantor of harmonious relations, any more than a seeming incompatibility precludes them. Syrian-Iranian ties, bringing together a Persian, Shia theocracy with an Arab nationalist state, offer a case in point.

## **THE REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT**

One of the striking features of the Arab Spring in relation to Iran has been the difficulty of isolating any single bilateral relationship from a broader matrix of regional and international dynamics within which the events of 2011-2012 must be examined. Regional divisions and competition for influence and power are, of course, a longstanding feature of Middle Eastern politics, but of greatest relevance to present developments may be the emerging 'Cold War' between the two Gulf powers, Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which has become increasingly chilly since the fall of the Ba'ath in Iraq in 2003 and the consequently weakened geopolitical role of Baghdad. F. Gregory Gause III notes that in recent years 'the Saudis have pursued a policy of balancing against, rolling back where possible, Iranian influence in the Arab world.' If the Cold War analogy can be pushed, Bahrain may increasingly be seen as one of several potential Berlins – places where the two camps play out their rivalries, and whereby an integral aspect of Tehran-Manama relations cannot fail to take into consideration the position and interests of Riyadh. On the one hand, the grievances of the Kingdom's majority Shia population give a sectarian basis around which Iran can frame its concerns; 'the Bahraini nation is an oppressed nation,' Khamenei has opined. On the other hand the specter of Iranian interference unquestionably helped provoke the Saudi show of force that has buttressed the rule of the Al-Khalifa family.

This competition for influence between regional actors is compounded by the international, or perhaps more specifically Western, view of Iran as a destabilising force in a volatile region. This outlook has been held by Washington since the hostage crisis that accompanied the birth of the Islamic Republic, and has been solidified over subsequent years as a result of Iranian support for terrorism and the country's human

rights record. Over the last decade, however, and in the past few years in particular, it is the controversy over Iran's nuclear programme which has galvanised international cooperation against Iran. Sanctions are being regularly deepened and broadened by international, regional, and national actors, and represent one of several means through which Iran is being penalised for the irreconcilability of its nuclear project with foreign concerns. Iran has, of course, consistently argued that its enrichment activities are aimed to serve the exclusively peaceful ends of medical research and power generation rather than a weapons capability. And while the argument could be made that it is the legalistic nuances of proliferation and the agreements that govern it which motivate the sanctioning of Iran, the case could also be that it is the particular characteristics of Iranian policy which exacerbate the perception of threat. In other words, Iran's proliferation is a danger because of Iran's policies in other areas, while its proliferation in turn makes it more of a threat. The resumption of negotiations between the P5+1 (the US, UK, France, Russia, China, and Germany) and Iran in mid-April after more than a year, with a pledge to follow up with further talks, gives some cause to be optimistic about the prospects for an eventual diplomatic settlement, though the road to a major breakthrough remains long and potholed.

The promises and pitfalls of the Arab Spring can therefore be seen as part of a larger picture in which Iran's advances and setbacks are linked to efforts to curtail its influence and ambitions. This is the fundamental issue preoccupying Western policy makers: how to stymie Iranian advances into the vacuums that have emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring at a time when the perceived need to limit its influence, limit its trade, and limit its ambitions has been greatly heightened.

## THE UNCERTAINTIES OF UPHEAVAL

The preceding paragraphs have highlighted two points, namely that Iran's interpretive framework of the Arab Spring explains what is taking place as favourable to its values and compatible with its interests, and that the regional and international context is broadly unsympathetic to seeing Tehran reap dividends from the changes taking place. Developments in the Levant give reason to question the first and underscore the second. While the uprising in Syria can be seen as a continuation of changes taking place elsewhere, bringing various forces together in opposition to a repressive and unrepresentative government, the narrative of religiously-inspired regional awakening proffered by the Islamic Republic can only be maintained by distinguishing the opposition to the rule of Bashar Al-Assad and his coterie from protests elsewhere. Thus, while Egypt, Libya, Tunisia et. al. reflect a nation's resistance to oppression and a growing popular religious consciousness, the repression of demonstrators in Hama, Homs, and elsewhere in Syria is, in Tehran's telling, a byproduct of foreign schemes rather than any reflection of legitimate indigenous grievances. Accounts in the Iranian press accordingly reel off a long list of countries in their reports on the Arab Spring – Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen will inevitably make their appearances – whilst Syria's unrest is conspicuous by its absence. 'The Americans and certain Western countries want to take revenge on Syria for their recent defeats in the region,' Khamenei has explained. 'The main purpose of the United States' plot in Syria is to deal a blow to the resistance front in the region because Syria is supporting the resistance of Palestine and the Islamic Resistance of Lebanon.' Shortly after the Friends of Syria announced that it would bankroll the Free Syrian Army, Iran's Defence Minister asked 'why do some countries promote civil war in Syria and support terrorist groups? If they want to help Syria why do not they support the trend of reforms and referendum which has begun in the country?' In Tehran's telling, then, while other regimes crumbled because they did not adhere to its own worldview and values, Damascus's burden has been shouldered because it has. The Iranian opposition, by contrast, has come out in favour of the uprising, deeming it

'an anti-dictatorial movement seeking freedom,' and viewing their own country's role with 'deep regret.' The image of two hands, one in Iranian colours bearing the slogan 'where is my vote?' and the other painted in the green, white, black and red standard of the Syrian opposition, form the image of a dove to illustrate their sympathies.

To be sure, the fall of the House of Assad is without question be the single most significant geostrategic setback Iran could end up facing as a result of the Arab Spring, depriving Iran of a stalwart regional partner as well as its collaborator in the support of groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas. And while the dissolution of a three decade-long Syrian-Iranian relationship would certainly be a blow in and of itself, the growing internationalisation of the conflict raises the stakes further, given that the increasingly assertive role of the Gulf States as well as Turkey in supporting and bankrolling the opposition undoubtedly adds to Iran's concerns. Reports are legion about active Iranian assistance to the Syrian regime to counter this possibility, and Western officials believe that training, weapons, and means to observe and disrupt the technological tools utilised by protesters have all been making their way to Damascus courtesy of the Iranian government. Iran is likely to continue standing shoulder to shoulder with Assad, supporting reforms by the regime instead of changes in regime, for as long as it can.

## CONCLUSION

The opportunities and challenges that the Arab Spring has brought for Iran's leadership are complex and multifaceted. While the Islamic Republic seeks to stamp its imprimatur on regional events and situate them within a narrative resonant of its own, as successor regimes eventually emerge in Arab states such as Egypt and Libya, and the uprisings in Syria and Bahrain reach some sort of resolution, their specific dyadic relationships with Iran will undoubtedly witness varying degrees of reassessment based on perceptions of interests and ideological compatibility. Will Cairo-Tehran relations flourish in the wake of Mubarak, abetted by the Islamists, or will other factors rule out such reconciliation? To what extent will the Al-Khalifa family be able to satisfy the demands of the Bahraini opposition, and, having already received the assistance of their neighbours to the west, address relations with the neighbour to the north? Speculating on the exact contours that will emerge remains, of course, impossible – the region's capacity to upend expectations and confound conventional thinking has already been amply demonstrated. Taking a broader view suggests that developments at the bilateral, regional, and international levels give more reasons to question Iran's ability to project its influence and power across the changing face of the region than there are to anticipate it. ■

# ➤ The Contradictions of Hegemony: The United States and the Arab Spring

Nicholas Kitchen

**I**n the United States' response to the events of the Arab Spring, the Obama administration has been consistently careful not to get ahead of fast-moving developments. Critics have decried the administration's apparent lack of a coherent approach, and its willingness to talk the language of democratic ideals whilst acting to protect national interests. Supporters, on the other hand, have praised the blending of pragmatism and principle as evidence of a smarter approach to international affairs than that of Obama's predecessor. The United States' cautious and contradictory approach, which has at times amounted to the endorsement of the inevitable, reflects wider strategic tensions in the United States' approach to the Middle East, and the reality that whilst the US may be the most important external power in the region, its ability to dictate outcomes is limited. Yet by 'muddling through' and insisting on keeping the United States on the right side of history throughout the course of the Arab revolutions, the Obama administration has ensured that the new regimes in the region will have to continue to work with the United States, and ensured that the US is not diverted from its overriding strategic reorientation towards the Asia-Pacific.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The United States' strategic involvement in the Middle East is rooted in two sources: a hegemonic interest in secure and stable oil markets, and an overarching ideological commitment to the state of Israel that is reinforced by significant domestic pressures. The consequence of these core interests has been that since the early part of Cold War the United States has maintained a strategy of preventing any one regional or extra-regional power from gaining regional hegemony, largely by maintaining a deterrent force 'over the horizon', and on occasion intervening to uphold a regional balance. Thus in 1990, the United States went to war in the Persian Gulf to prevent Iraq using its occupation of Kuwait as a launching pad to control Saudi Arabia's oil reserves and threaten Israel's security. Throughout the Cold War, whilst becoming increasingly committed to Israel as the sole democracy in the region, the United States had built alliance relationships with autocracies as part of the wider cause of anti-communist containment, to ensure that oil supplies would not be disrupted for political ends, threatening not only the American economy but the system of industrial capitalism itself. Those relationships were maintained throughout the 1990s both to derive support for the continuing isolation of Iran and Iraq under the policy of 'dual containment', and as the price for the maintenance of peace agreements with Israel.

Yet if following the Cold War most of the regimes in the region were pro-American, their publics certainly were not. The United States' commitment to stability and the status quo in part sustained the stagnant economic, political and social systems of the region and drove the rise of Islamism and Salafism. Having failed to successfully overthrow the authoritarian regimes of the region, from the 1990s, terrorism came to focus on the 'far enemy' that sustained them, the United States. Of particular concern for Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda was the presence of 'infidel' American troops in Saudi Arabia, which hosts two of Islam's holiest sites in Mecca and Medina, the United States having abandoned 'over the horizon' hegemony following the Gulf War in order to actively contain Iraq. Supporting the Saudi monarchy had become central to American strategy in the region, since as the world's largest oil producer any disruption in Saudi supply would prove difficult for other producers to replace, yet this hegemonic interest increasingly came into conflict with American national security priorities, particularly after it emerged that fifteen of the nineteen hijackers that were responsible for the attacks of September 11, 2001 were citizens of Saudi Arabia.

Indeed, following 9-11, some argued that the major benefit of regime change in Iraq would be that it would allow the United States to withdraw its troops from Saudi Arabia. In reality of course the invasion and occupation of Iraq did more to catalyse anti-Americanism across the region than America's enforcement of Iraqi no-fly zones from Saudi soil ever did. Moreover, the imperatives of the 'war on terror' reinforced America's relationships with authoritarian regimes, and in particular their intelligence services, which were simultaneously legitimated in their tactics – used equally against political dissenters as against terrorist suspects.

Yet for all the priority given to oil supplies, Israel's security and the regimes that sustained American hegemony over the Arab world, after 9-11 the United States diagnosed the region's authoritarian regimes as the root of the terrorist problem, and prescribed democracy as the solution to the Middle East's socio-economic woes. Launching the 'Freedom Agenda' in 2003 at the National Endowment of Democracy, George W. Bush renounced sixty years of 'excusing

and accommodating' in the Middle East, asserting that 'in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty.' Bush emphasised that democracy promotion was not just a case of promoting American values, but was emphatically in the American national interest, since regimes that oppressed their populations created the conditions for radicalisation and terrorism.

Whilst Iraq headlined the Freedom Agenda in the region, there was significant development of institutional capacity for democratisation, and by the end of Bush's presidency hundreds of millions had been spent on democracy promotion in the Middle East and North Africa. Initiatives such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) and the Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA) were regional expressions of a clear policy shift, and caused significant concern among Washington's regional allies, most notably in Cairo and Riyadh, who had to be reassured by senior administration officials that they were to be 'partners' in this policy rather than targets.

Nonetheless, the contradictions of the Freedom Agenda as part of the wider 'war on terror' were clear. Did the United States seek short-term counter-terrorism measures enacted through the security apparatus of allied authoritarian regimes, or was it prioritising the long-term emancipation of societies in the Middle East in an attempt to address the deeper roots of marginalisation and underdevelopment from which violent extremism grew? The administration's reaction to Hamas' victory in elections in Gaza in 2006 highlighted the broader contradiction between supporting democracy and the implications for Israel and the United States of what the popular will of societies in the region expressed, and increasingly led democracy promotion efforts to focus on economic liberalisation over political reform. Officials in the State Department and the Pentagon were well aware that the United States was pursuing policies in the broader Middle East that were fundamentally at odds with one another, driven by competing bureaucracies in Washington and the region in the absence of genuine strategic coordination. Yet the tensions – long-term versus short-term; hegemonic interest versus specific security priorities; stability versus reform – were in some ways insurmountable.

## THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION AND THE ARAB SPRING

There can be no doubt that these basic contradictions formed the sclerotic backdrop to the United States' response to the unfolding events of the Arab Spring. Obama had come to office determined to reverse what one senior official called America's 'Middle East detour over the course of the last ten years' and to refocus America's strategic priorities on the Asia Pacific region in which China had been allowed to rise unchecked. Yet the legacies of his predecessor's war on terror had first to be addressed, as Obama attempted to rebuild America's reputation among Muslims within a region that in 2008, according to the Pew Research Centre, had more confidence in Osama Bin Laden than they did in George W. Bush. Obama's speech in Cairo in June 2009, in which he proclaimed his intention 'to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world', did improve the United States' credibility and standing, at least initially, and the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq proceeded as per the Bush administration's schedule. Yet the administration's failure to follow through on the hopeful rhetoric – particularly the failure to successfully pressurise Israel with regard to the Palestinian question – if anything led to a further deterioration in America's standing with publics in the region. In Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian territories, as well as in Turkey, over three-quarters held an unfavourable view of the United States at the time of the Arab Spring. Moreover, the pro-democracy movements haven't themselves improved perceptions of the United States, with views remaining profoundly negative, as they have been for a decade.

If dealing with 'legacy issues' had at best mixed success, the more fundamental contradictions in American policy remained. Foreshadowing the Arab Spring, protests in Iran in June 2009 represented the first test for an administration committed to engagement with Iran in the hope of opening up diplomatic pathways on the Iranian nuclear programme. The White House was determined not to 'interfere' in Iranian domestic politics, both to avoid the regime being able to present the protests as rooted in foreign conspiracy and to keep open the possibility of engaging Ahmadinejad's government. The actions of a junior staffer in the

State Department, who contacted Twitter to ask the social network to postpone upgrade work that would have shut down the service in Iran, exposed the divisions within Obama's foreign policy team that reflected the deeper issues in American policy. In part this was a deliberate decision to create a 'team of rivals', giving voice to both foreign policy realists such as Robert Gates and Tom Donilon, as well as hawkish liberal internationalists including Anne-Marie Slaughter, Susan Rice and Samantha Power. These divisions would be exposed later in the debate over whether to intervene in Libya, in which the latter two 'interventionistas' (Slaughter having left the administration complaining of a gender divide within the national security architecture) teamed up with Hilary Clinton to successfully make the case for intervention, a position that saw them dubbed 'Valkyries' by *The National Interest*.

Gender stereotyping aside, Obama's foreign policy team reflected the President's eagerness to hear diverse voices, a process vividly demonstrated throughout the protracted review of the Afghan strategy, in which Obama's confidence in his ability to play the role of honest broker between competing factions almost amounted to a desire to be his own National Security Advisor. On no issue was the debate more fraught than over the Arab Spring, as competing ideologies and worldviews within the administration wrestled with longstanding conflicts between American interests in a region of vital strategic importance. It has been suggested that a President inexperienced in foreign policy was 'pushed and pulled' in all directions by this divided team, but on the evidence of the Afghan strategy deliberations it seems more likely that open debate is at the heart of Obama's decision-making style, in which he seeks out all the options before attempting to find the middle ground.

It has been regularly asserted that the events of the Arab Spring took the administration by surprise and found it uncertain and underprepared. Whilst the White House was reportedly irritated – rather unfairly – that the CIA had failed to provide early warning of the explosions in Tunisia and Egypt, the administration had been reconsidering the sustainability of the status quo in the Middle East since the protests following Iran's Presidential election in 2009.

The President himself, in the aftermath of the failure the 'Green Revolution', took the time to think through the potential for unrest in the region, and in August 2010 wrote a five page memorandum entitled 'Political Reform in the Middle East and North Africa' which was circulated among senior members of his national security team. Documented by Ryan Lizza in the *New Yorker* in May 2011, the memo observed that socio-economic trends were feeding into citizen discontent, and that progress towards political openness had stalled at the same time as a number of countries, most notably Egypt, were facing the challenge of upcoming political successions. America's autocratic allies, the President noted, were likely to 'opt for repression rather than reform' when faced with domestic dissent. Such developments might leave the United States 'with fewer capable, credible partners' as well as undermining America's credibility 'if we are seen or perceived to be backing repressive regimes and ignoring the rights and aspirations of citizens.'

Obama's memo mandated a Presidential Study Directive, a country-by-country review of strategies for political reform. Led by Power, alongside Gayle Smith, Senior Director for global development in the National Security Council, and the roving Dennis Ross, the review attempted to rethink the costs and benefits of American support for its allies in the region from first principles. The resulting report, finished 'the week that Tunisia exploded' according to one official involved in the process, came down firmly on the side of the liberals within the administration; political reform was in the overarching interests of the United States, and was neither unsustainable in the region nor incompatible with America's other priorities. Such conclusions tallied with the analysis of the 'Egypt Working Group', composed of neoconservatives, liberal hawks and human rights activists outside the administration, with which Ross had been overseeing the White Houses contacts.

Yet the long-term indefensibility of the status quo clashed with both America's hegemonic interest in the stability of the world oil market and America's unchallengeable commitment to Israel which generated immediate interests in the survival of the Saudi regime and the containment of Iran; notwithstanding the ongoing campaign against Al-Qaeda in the region.

Obama was reluctant to throw the weight of the United States behind revolutions and in doing so threaten those core interests. Moreover, the White House was keenly aware of the hamfistedness of its predecessor's Freedom Agenda, and worried that over-enthusiastic American support might actually undermine the revolutions' authenticity. Obama's rhetoric in public was therefore cautious, as he sought to balance competing interests in the context of events that exhibited great contingency and whose outcome was fundamentally uncertain.

Yet whilst seeking to avoid getting 'ahead of the game' in public, the administration used its long-developed relationships in the region to attempt to shape developments. This was most clear in Egypt, where the United States' decade of bankrolling the Egyptian military had enriched its generals and arguably made the Egyptian top brass more dependent on Washington's patronage than on their relationship with Mubarak's inner circle. Accounts of US diplomacy during the protests in Tahrir Square paint a picture of constant badgering of the Egyptian military through contacts at all levels – from Joe Biden in the White House to the Pentagon top brass right down to mid-ranking officers – as America's mil-mil relations were leveraged for diplomatic purposes to insist that under no circumstances should Egyptian forces fire on protestors. Communication with Mubarak was less well coordinated, and the White House's mixed signals almost certainly contributed to the Egyptian President's increasingly bizarre attempts to hold on to power by offering the protestors vague commitments of reform. In Egypt then, America's military relationship proved stronger than its political commitments, allowing the protestors to (initially at least) carry the day.

The United States had no such relationship with Colonel Gaddafi's forces, following more than a decade of international isolation before the Libyan leader's post-9/11 rapprochement with Western weapons inspectors. Here the White House allowed pressure on the regime to be driven by the Europeans, and in the ill-judged words of one administration official, sought to 'lead from behind'. The phrasing may have politically difficult for the President, but it captured both the administration's concern that the United States should not be seen to be dictating movements

for liberation, and the post-Bush awareness that American unilateralism often caused more difficulties than it solved.

If the administration's publicly cautious but privately proactive management of the Egyptian crisis ultimately led it to the conclusion that Mubarak could be abandoned and Gaddafi overthrown, in other areas of the Arab Spring the United States had either less capacity to support change or less inclination to bring it about. In Yemen, where American counterterrorism assistance had been directed at reinforcing Ali Abdullah Saleh's ability to exert control over a failing state, the dictator flatly refused direct American demands that he cede power. The Sunni monarchies in the Gulf were not questioned, even as Saudi Arabia led troops from the Gulf Cooperation Council to 'maintain order' in Bahrain, where the regime, responsible for some of the worst human rights violations of the Arab Spring, is the pliant host of America's Fifth Fleet.

In Syria, the Assad regime's crackdown exposed the limited range of options in the United States foreign policy toolkit. With no leverage to bring to bear over a regime that the United States had sought to isolate as a result of its alliance with Iran, and the administration's commitment to UN routes stymied by Russia, and to a lesser extent China, it was left to Kofi Annan to attempt to broker a distinctly unconvincing ceasefire. The administration is now urgently seeking new policy options on Syria, having hardened its stance to insist that Assad step down, and seems prepared to push for a Libyan-style escalation. Yet even with regional actors such as Turkey and the Gulf states committed to anti-Assad positions, their demands for 'American leadership' in providing resources, legitimacy and political cover threaten to involve the United States in precisely the kind of complex regional conflict that the administration had come to office seeking to extricate itself from.

## PROSPECTS

The United States has had to tread a fine line between support for its values – and what it conceives as its long-term interests – represented by political reform in the region, and the protection of what it perceives as its core regional interests. Doing so has however had its own impact: whilst Israel expressed its concern at the United States' willingness to jettison its Egyptian ally, the Saudi government reportedly threatened to prop up Mubarak rather than see him 'humiliated'. Yet the irony is that the very channels of influence that allowed the United States to successfully prevent the Egyptian regime from using mass violence against pro-democracy demonstrators now align the United States with a ruling military elite more interested in protecting its position than in transitioning to genuine democracy. King Abdullah's friend Mubarak has gone, and the budgets of democracy promotion programmes on the ground in Egypt have been boosted, but the United States remains wedded to a transition run by a military leadership that represents more continuity than change.

In essence the United States remains limited in the impact it can have in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The reality is that Washington no longer holds most of the cards in the region, if it ever did. Its capacity to cajole, co-opt and coerce varies immensely from place to place, as does its willingness to do so.

Moreover, the reality remains that in a region that exhibits strong anti-American sentiment, coup-proofing illegitimate regimes creates stronger ties between patron and client than the United States could hope to forge with regimes that command broad societal support. Yet the paradox is that propping up inherently weak regimes can never generate the lasting domestic stability – and with it, a degree of constancy in international behaviour that the United States craves in the region – in the way that social contracts based on consent can; indeed, it has been America's support for failing regimes that is the source of much of the region's anti-American opinion.

If the United States is serious about turning off its Middle detour and genuinely reorienting itself strategically to focus on the challenges of the Asia-Pacific, then in the Middle East and North Africa the US needs to prioritise long-term trends over short-term concerns. This may not always mean pushing for revolutionary change in support of democratic values in the region. But it would mean making it clear that continued American support for those regimes that have ridden out the storm of the Arab Spring will be made dependent on their putting in place processes of political reform.

Whether a long-term strategy for political reform in the region can survive either the short-term pressures presented primarily by Iran's nuclear programme remains to be seen. Moreover, the challenge to America's economic hegemony presented by the rise of China, the source of Obama's desire to become 'the Pacific President', cannot be disassociated from the United States' support for the House of Saud, and its share of the world's dollar-denominated oil supply. The United States' cautious and contradictory approach to the Arab Spring thus reflects the fact that the Arab world does not exist in a vacuum, and there are wider issues at stake. ■

# ➤ Turmoil and Uncertainty: Israel and the New Middle East

Yaniv Voller

**M**any observers consider Israel the biggest loser of the recent political turmoil and dramatic changes in Arab states. With the overthrow of the Mubarak regime, Israel has now lost a leader who shared with it a desire for maintaining the 'stable' status quo, and who was willing to accept, if grudgingly, Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip. Now Israel is facing the rise of Islamist parties-led governments across the region, not only in Egypt and Tunisia, but also in non-revolutionary states, such as Morocco and Kuwait. Although cautious in their rhetoric toward the Arab-Israeli conflict, these new governments could hardly be described as adhering to the Israeli-inspired regional status quo. These geopolitical changes in the Middle East have therefore forced Israel to reassess its current strategic arrangements amid its two immediate security threats: the Iranian nuclear programme and the emerging cold war in the region over that issue; and the risk of deterioration on the Palestinian front.

## ISRAEL AND THE POLITICAL CHANGES IN THE ARAB WORLD

The popular commentary that argues that Israel was caught unprepared by the political turmoil in the Middle East is rather inaccurate. The lessons of the Iranian Revolution, which resulted in Israel losing one of its most important allies in the region, has been guiding the Israeli intelligence sector since 1979. As early as 2006, two senior Israeli Defence Forces officers publicly declared that the regimes in both Egypt and Jordan faced existential threats and might disappear from the regional political map. These statements elicited harsh responses from Cairo and Amman, and were quickly censured by the Israeli government. Yet they demonstrate Israel's constant concern about the stability of its allies. Based on both its past experience and its general perception of Middle Eastern politics, the Israeli intelligence community assumed that educated and internet-savvy middle class protests will soon give way to Islamist politicians. For this reason, the Likud government's immediate response involved a very thinly veiled appeal to Western governments to support the existing regimes. As a result, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his cabinet, already viewed as the most hawkish in Israel's history, now came to be portrayed as a reactionary force in the region, disengaged from reality and embroiled in conspiracy with regional despots.

The rise of Islamist parties in the elections in Egypt, Tunisia and other states was hence something of a relief for the Israeli government. These parties' antipathy toward the existence of the Jewish state and their hostility toward any signs of normalisation with it, buttressed by their leadership's ambiguity with regard to the future of existing cooperation agreements with Israel, allowed the Israeli government to rebuke the international community for its initial enthusiasm and to once again underline the fragility of prevailing peace agreements that involve territorial compromise. Instability in some of the post-revolutionary regimes, and images from the near-civil war in Bahrain, and what is evolving into a civil war in Syria, have further reinforced Israel's sense of isolation and underpinned its justifications for unilateralism in the region.

This sense of relief, however, was short-lived. Israel faces several major threats and the new reality necessitated a reconsideration of existing security arrangements. Israel has faced, or at least perceived itself to be facing, existential threats since its inception. Therefore, Israeli foreign policy and security arrangements have always been relatively flexible, oriented toward ad-hoc alliances against a major regional threat. Currently Israel is facing two major threats, sometimes overlapping and sometimes detached: the Iranian threat, which has dominated Israel's foreign policy-making since the 1990s; and the risk of new escalation on the Palestinian front.

### **ISRAEL'S OVERARCHING SECURITY CONCERN: IRAN**

The debate taking place in Israel's public media demonstrates that the Iranian threat is perceived as the most immediate issue facing the Israeli state. This threat carries two particular elements: the first is the Islamic Republic's explicit and vocal objection to Israel's existence, which has been further enhanced by the anti-Semitic discourse of its incumbent president, Mahmud Ahmedinejad. Iranian hostility toward Israel has gone beyond mere rhetorical attacks against the 'Zionist entity,' taking the form of military and financial support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. In addition, Iran is also held responsible by several security agencies for attacks against Jewish and Israeli targets across the globe, for example the recent attacks against Israeli diplomatic targets in New Delhi and Bangkok, as well as the attacks against Jewish and Israeli targets in Buenos Aires during the early 1990s. The second element that turns Iran into a major security threat is its ongoing nuclear programme and alleged aspiration for obtaining nuclear weapons technology. It is this second element that makes deterioration into a full scale war a tangible proposition.

Although the Iranian government has denied it aspires to nuclear weapons capability, the Israeli, American, British, German and French governments, among others, suspect that Iran's final goal is achieving such capability. This assessment is based on several indications.

First, Iran failed to report the construction of two nuclear sites to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), as required by the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Second, in a visit by IAEA inspectors to these sites after their discovery, they revealed a significant number of centrifuges, as well as heavy water facilities. Moreover, in 2011 the Iranian government declared the instalment of new sets of centrifuges, which would allow 20 percent uranium enrichment, the threshold level for military uses. Finally, several reports by the IAEA, as well as Israeli and other Western intelligence agencies, have indicated that Iran has conducted experiments in the use of nuclear technology for military purposes.

In addition to the evident Iranian enmity toward Israel, the government in Jerusalem, as well as Israeli security experts, have suggested several other justifications for viewing Iran not only as an Israeli, but also a regional and global threat. First, Iran is known to have ballistic missiles whose range reaches not only Tel Aviv, but various European capitals. Moreover, the Iranian government, some argue, is an irrational actor driven by religious zeal; therefore, deterrence cannot be reliably applied in the Iranian case. Even if Iran might not launch nuclear missiles at Israel, its agents still might plant 'dirty bombs' in Israel, causing mass casualties and spreading panic. Finally, Israeli and other analysts have underlined the danger of nuclearising the Middle East. Regardless of Iran's intentions, its nuclear ambitions would push other states in the region, and particularly the militarily vulnerable but financially capable Gulf monarchies, to acquire nuclear capabilities as well. And again, due to the unpredictability of the regional regimes, from the Israeli perspective, and the inability to coordinate relations between the different actors effectively, the logic of a multipolar Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) system of deterrence does not hold.

Given Israel's assumption that Iran is now seeking nuclear weapons capability, the questions that remain are: how far is Iran from obtaining such capabilities; can Iranian nuclear proliferation be stopped; and, how can it be stopped?

The Israeli government's preferred solution to the perceived Iranian threat is a direct Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities, a tactic very much inspired by Israel's successful attack on the Iraqi Osirak Nuclear reactor in 1981. Such a plan encounters several difficulties, the most important of which is domestic opposition within Israel to such a move. Several senior Israeli security figures, including former heads of Mossad Ephraim Halevi and Meir Dagan, have come out publicly against such military adventurism, arguing that Israel does not have the capabilities to launch such an operation, and that any Iranian reprisal might be devastating. Rather, these individuals have suggested that Israel should continue the existing line of operation, which includes (allegedly) the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists; sabotaging the Iranian nuclear facilities through cyber-attacks such as the Stuxnet worm; and sponsoring local proxies such as the opposition movement Mujahedin-e Khalq and Kurdish rebels. A further hindrance is American and European discomfort with regard to an Israeli attack on Iran. Rather than a direct conflict, which is bound to draw in the US and perhaps other Western states, the Obama administration and its European allies have advocated tightening economic sanctions, with the hope of crippling the government and instigating public unrest. Russian and Chinese objections to military intervention in Iran further deters the United States and the European Union from going down the military route, or alternatively, supporting Israel in the aftermath of such an attack.

Israel, however, is not the only regional actor to be worried about the implications of a nuclear Iran. Jordan, Egypt and the Gulf Cooperation Council states have all been following the Iranian nuclear programme with great anxiety. King Abdullah II of Jordan warned of the 'Shia Crescent' in the aftermath of the overthrow of the Ba'ath regime in Iraq in 2003, referring to attempts to increase Iranian influence both in Iraq and elsewhere in the region, namely Lebanon and the Gaza strip. This alleged sphere of influence often also includes Syria, Iran's traditional ally in the region. Much like Israel, the above states, often defined collectively as the 'moderate Arab states,' have pushed for an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. Fearing domestic public opinion, however, such demands have

been made in secret, with no direct reference to Israel leading the attacks. Nevertheless, without American support, the prospects for a military rollback of Iran's nuclear programme remain low.

The current situation, therefore, is best characterised as a cold war between Iran and its allies, on one side, and Israel and the so-called moderate Arab states, backed by the US, on the other. The summer 2006 confrontation between Israel and Hezbollah was therefore perceived as a proxy-war within this wider strategic context, not only by Israel but also by Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf states, which not only avoided condemning Israel, but in fact pointed to Hezbollah as the main culprit. Similarly, the 2008-9 Gaza War, in which Israel invaded the Gaza Strip resulting in a relatively high number of civilian casualties, elicited only mild Arab condemnation of Israel, and in the case of Egypt even an unprecedented mutual condemnation of Hamas along-side Israel. This has served Israeli and foreign commentators to believe that this regional cold war could actually serve as a platform for Israeli-Arab reconciliation and as a catalyst for the continuation of the peace process.

## **THE UNDERLYING SORE: THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN DISPUTE**

The second strategic threat facing Israel is that of the renewal of violence in the occupied territories. Negotiations with the Palestinian Authority (PA) have stagnated under the Likud government and levels of distrust and mutual hostility are unprecedented. The Israeli government has largely failed to comply with the international demands to freeze building in the settlements in Eastern Jerusalem and is not likely to do so. The Hamas government in the Gaza Strip is still under an IDF blockade, which whilst achieving some of Israel's main goals, namely a significant reduction in the number of rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip toward Israeli towns and settlements on the border line, has also further increased hostility and consequently enhanced the popularity of Hamas and its ideological objection to any recognition of Israel.

In an attempt to resolve this impasse, the PA decided to declare official Palestinian independence and seek recognition in the UN General Assembly and Security Council in September 2011. Eventually, the Palestinian leadership agreed to postpone its plan, following American pressure and guarantees from Israel to renew negotiations. Yet this can hardly be considered a diplomatic victory for Israel. International support for such unilateral Palestinian diplomacy, as well as domestic enthusiasm within the occupied territories, were a sharp reminder of the volatility of the situation. Moreover, Israeli objections to such moves might drive Hamas to conduct attacks against targets within Israel, as it chose to do in the past. The memories of the second intifada and its demoralising effects are still fresh in the minds of many Israelis and the fear of deterioration is still prevalent.

Since Iran is perceived as the preeminent security threat facing Israel, many within the Israeli security apparatus have actually come to see a peace agreement with the Palestinian Authority as a necessary step to further consolidate a regional coalition against Iran. Others, nonetheless, maintain that as long as Hamas, Iran's ally, is still in power in the Gaza Strip, such reconciliation cannot take place.

## ISRAEL AND THE ARAB SPRING

Due to the proximity of events and the rapid political changes in surrounding countries, Israel has been careful in its statements to date on the events of the Arab Spring. Yet the turmoil in the Arab world has had a direct impact on Israeli foreign policy, in particular with regard to Israel's security concerns.

On the Palestinian front, notwithstanding its ambiguity about the prospects of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, both the SCAF and the FJP-led government have made it clear that Mubarak's tolerance of Israeli policies in the Gaza strip is to be revoked. The first, and at the moment the only major, sign for that has been the military's decision to ease the blockade and allow greater freedom of movement between the Gaza Strip and Egypt. So far, Egypt – whose influence over the Gaza strip has always been immense – is still playing the role of a mediator between Israel, Hamas and the Palestinian Authority.

Yet Egypt's willingness to play this role is sure to come under severe scrutiny in future cases of clashes between Hamas and Israel.

The events of the Arab Spring have also forced other Arab governments, in particular the so-called moderate axis, to reconsider their policies toward Israel, namely the secret but not so discreet *de facto* (and in some cases such as Qatar and Oman, *de jure*) recognition of Israel, and collaboration with the Israeli government in the fields of security and trade. More pressured than ever to pacify their public, the conservative regimes in the region are in dire need of political causes to demonstrate their attentiveness to public opinion. Since the Palestinian cause is a key theme in Arab political discourse, it would be safe to assume that in the case of an escalation, those Arab regimes will be less lenient toward Israel than in previous years. This means further pressure on Israel to reconsider attacks in the occupied territories in the near future. Such pressure may also have an impact on the moderate axis' willingness to cooperate with Israel vis-à-vis the Iranian threat. So far Israel has relied on silent Arab acquiescence for military strikes against Iran, under the assumption that such an attack would also serve Egyptian, Jordanian and GCC interests. Yet, in light of the current atmosphere in the Arab states and the fear of unrest sparking new attempts at regime change, it is doubtful that Arab regimes will want to be associated with an attack on another Muslim country, even if Shia.

Perhaps the most salient impact the recent turmoil in the Arab world will have on Israeli policy-making is the unfolding civil war in Syria. Still a major actor in the front against normalisation with Israel, Syria plays a key-role in the region, mainly as a channel of weapons and funds from Iran to Hezbollah. It is generally assumed that such policy is part of Syria's constant effort to put pressure on Israel to sign a peace agreement with Syria which would bring the Golan Heights, occupied by Israel in 1967 under Syrian control.

Since the situation remains in flux at the time of writing these lines it is impossible to predict the fate of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Yet, there are certain potential scenarios that can be discussed

with relation to Israel. If the Ba'ath regime survives (with or without Bashar al-Assad), one may assume that the alliance with Iran and the Hezbollah would not change dramatically. However, in the case of the collapse of the Assad regime, any new government may well abandon its support for Hezbollah, either on the basis of ideological resentment toward the radical Shia movement, the need to concentrate on Syrian internal affairs, or a desire to attract international aid.

Much to its frustration, there is not much Israel can actually do to affect the situation in Syria. Although it has often been argued that the Israeli government prefers the survival of the 'known evil' of the Assad regime, this is rather inaccurate. The constant description of the Syrian-Israeli border as Israel's most tranquil border region should be rejected based on Syria's alliance with Iran and its use of Hezbollah as a proxy against Israel. Even if its Ba'ath regime survives the current conflict, Syria has probably lost its legitimacy to make any concessions to Israel and sign a peace-agreement in the near future. A new regime, even if inherently hostile toward Israel, might at least be focused more on rebuilding Syria, rather than reasserting its nationalist credentials by means of a military adventure against Israel. Moreover, dependence on international aid from the Gulf States might drive any new regime to accept the ad-hoc arrangements between Israel and the other regional actors. Much to its frustration, there is not much Israel can do, since any direct Israeli intervention would necessarily delegitimise any incoming regime.

After nearly a decade of relative stability, then, Israel is once again facing a conundrum. The tendency in such situations is to further entrench in unilateralism. Yet, the price of such unilateralism can be higher than ever, a fact which Israeli government is becoming painfully aware of. Though no Israeli government has been prepared to publicly acknowledge it, Israel still relies heavily on American material, and even more so moral, support. Although Israel has acted unilaterally in the past, launching a war that could potentially destabilise the entire region, and the global economy, in a presidential election year, would put the special relationship between the two countries to an unprecedented test. ■

# Conclusion: the Middle East After the Arab Spring

Toby Dodge

"After an evil reign, the fairest dawn is the first." Cornelius Tacitus, 109.

"As the fates of previous *journées révolutionnaires* warn us, spring is the shortest of seasons, especially when the *communards* fight in the name of a 'different world' for which they have no real blueprint or even idealized image." Mike Davis, 2011.

**The title of this report, 'After the Arab Spring: Power Shift in the Middle East?', deliberately ends with a question mark. The events over the year and a half since the death of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, have left the politics of the Middle East in tumult. The Arab Spring has certainly resulted in a change of regime in Tunisia and then Egypt. The uprisings against Gaddafi's regime triggered a military intervention by NATO that drove the Libyan leader and his entourage from power. Ali Abdullah Saleh finally relinquished his grip on power in Yemen. However, the ramifications of regime change for state-society relations in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya are still uncertain. Mubarak may be on trial, Gaddafi is dead and Ben Ali is currently enjoying the dubious pleasures of exile in Saudi Arabia. But the ruling elites they created, the state structures they built, the powerful secret services and crony capitalists they nurtured did not disappear when the despots were deposed. The post-revolutionary transitions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya are unlikely to deliver on the hopes that united the courageous protestors in their struggle. As Ewan Stein argues in this report, 'the utopian vision of Tahrir was soon tarnished'.**

Across the broader region, beyond Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya, the wave of protests emboldened by North African success were driven by similar demographic realities, failures of state policies and demands for greater representation. However, they failed to effect regime change. The Arab Spring was a historic moment in the politics of the Middle East but its long-term impact remains unpredictable.

George Lawson, in his piece for this report, makes three powerful points about how to best understand the ongoing dynamics unleashed by the Arab Spring. The first concedes that 'very few movements lead to successful revolutions'. The region is currently divided between four states in some form of post-revolutionary transition and the rest. Although some ruling regimes have faced systematic challenges, they have been able to repress the protestors and for the moment at least, contain demands for political change.

Central to the states now entering transition is Lawson's second point, the comparatively modest demands of most contemporary revolutionaries. With the decline in the popular influence of Marxism and state-driven agendas for revolutions from above, there has been a shift away from political mobilisation designed to push for social transformation. In their place revolutions have become 'self-limiting', focused on individual liberal political emancipation rather than collective economic transformation. The demands for full citizenship, for the recognition of individual political rights, were a powerful unifying theme across the Arab revolutions. However, now that four autocrats have been driven from power, the crucial questions at the centre of these transitions are as much economic as they are political.

How do the new ruling elites set about reorganising the economy to meet the unfulfilled aspirations of their populations?

This question is pressing. The 'authoritarian upgrading' that Steven Hyderman identified as a key strategy for regime survival across the Middle East during the 1980s and 1990s placed limited economic reforms at its centre. Using the rhetoric of neoliberalism to ingratiate themselves with the United States and the international community, Middle Eastern dictators sought to jettison the costly developmental promises which had once been key to their legitimation. As the state retreated from the economy, the indigenous bourgeoisie were brought back in; crony capitalists became a crucial, if junior member, of the ruling elite. This turn to neoliberal justifications for continued rule created an influential group of economic entrepreneurs who remain dominant in key sections of the Egyptian and Tunisian economy. Authoritarian upgrading also transformed the barriers between the public and the private, the state and the economy. This part-privatisation of powerful sections of the ruling elite became a region-wide phenomenon. However, post-regime change the legacy of this process is most problematic for the political transition in Egypt. For a brief but crucial period of time, the Egyptian military were celebrated by protestors in Tahrir Square for not unleashing their coercive power in support of Mubarak's continued rule. However, this act of omission was in part at least motivated by the threat the revolution posed to their economic interests. Mubarak's son Gamal was attempting to expand the grip of his own group of crony capitalists over the economy, thus encroaching on the military's own economic fiefdoms. The Janus-faced relationship that Field Marshall Muhammed Hussein Tantawi and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces have had with the Tahrir protestors since the removal of Mubarak has alternated between celebration and repression justified by sinister but hidden foreign conspiracies. This political schizophrenia is shaped by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces' desire to protect their control over up to 40 percent of the Egyptian economy.

It is essential to understand the role and influence of crony capitalists empowered by the old regimes because they may act as a counter-revolutionary force, as has been the case in Egypt.

A coalition of commercial interests, threatened by meaningful economic change could bring together the crony capitalists of the old regime with their allies and business partners still embedded in the highest ranks of the state's bureaucracy. Alternatively, and more likely, as has already happened in Egypt, major indigenous economic interests may use their collaborators within the state to place clear limits on how transformatory the post-revolutionary governments can be. This issue will overtly or covertly dominate the path regime transition takes, because the shock troops of those revolutions, the young people of Egypt and Tunisia, were motivated in large part by their own economic exclusion. The flagrant corruption of the old ruling elite had publicly expanded the chasm between the haves and have-nots within society. The post-revolutionary regimes have not to date shown any clear idea, beyond the neoliberal orthodoxy parroted by their predecessors, about how they will deliver meaningful growth. Mubarak and Ben Ali were partially successful in delivering economic growth, opening their economies to foreign direct investment and multi-national companies. However, the positive results of such neoliberal expansion were not felt across society.

The urban poor did not benefit from the *infitah* and the state-employed middle class were directly targeted by it. Neoliberal reforms produced a politically connected but small *nouveau riche*, with the majority of the population excluded and increasingly resentful. The transitional governments need to reformulate economic policies in a way that delivers meaningful growth to this previously alienated majority. This is especially problematic in Egypt, which has demographically passed the peak of its youth bulge, placing increasing numbers of young people on the job market. If the government fails to deliver hope to this section of society, there will be the temptation to revert to the tried and tested mechanisms of blaming uneven economic growth on the vagaries of the market. Coercion will then once again become the main tool used to demobilise an alienated youth, exposed to but excluded from the benefits of transnational capitalism.

The problems surrounding the delivery of meaningful economic growth leads on to Lawson's third point, the lack of 'contemporary revolutionary ideologies' binding these movements together and the fact that

they have '... little sense of what an alternative order would look like once such processes have taken place'. The internationally dominant cliché of an Arab Spring revolutionary was a young, network-savvy, college-educated member of the middle class. As Stein points out, the role that Facebook and other new technology played in the revolutions was much more complicated and inconclusive. The 'demonstration effect' which drove protest from Tunisia into Libya and Egypt and then on into the Gulf was powered by an older form of technology, satellite television. Al Jazeera was heralded as revolutionary when it launched in 1996. However, its long-term effects may if anything have been more influential. Broadly comparable to the Sawat al-Arab radio station under Nasser, Al Jazeera and other Arab satellite stations played a key role in recreating a region-wide Arab public sphere, which amplified the demonstration effect of Ben Ali's departure.

Furthermore, beyond a collective sense of endeavour and empowerment, the movements of the Arab Spring were not united by a concrete or programmatic agenda for post-regime change transformation. The results of the Egyptian elections certainly proved that Tahrir was not Egypt, but also went on to demonstrate that neither was Cairo. The dominance of Islamist Parties in the elections, taking 67 percent of the vote, came as no surprise. The Muslim Brotherhood were able to protect and even foster their nationwide organisation under the rule of both Sadat and Mubarak. The years of brutal suppression alternating with toleration and cooptation turned the Brotherhood into a cautious and, given its origins and early ideology, a comparatively moderate organisation. The size of its presence in parliament and its organisational ability has given it the capacity to counter-balance the Egyptian military and win early victories in the war of position that is now shaping the transition. That said, the Muslim Brotherhood's 'auto-reform', its transition under state repression from a militant revolutionary organisation to one committed to democracy, has not given it a clear or insightful programme for the transformation of the Egyptian economy in a way that can meet the aspirations of its voters or the third of Egyptian society aged between 15 and 30. There is a danger, as Fatima El-Issawi points out in her chapter on Tunisia, that the pressing demands for economic transformation will be sidelined and the

newly empowered but largely inexperienced political parties will fight over secondary issues, such as dress codes and the policing of morality, which they have clear positions on but which of themselves do not deliver hope for meaningful change or prosperity.

The final issue surrounding the outcomes of the Arab Spring is the coherence of the old ruling elites and their ability to suppress or buy off the challenges they faced. In two of the four regime changes, the removals of Ben Ali and Mubarak were facilitated by the fracturing of the ruling elite. In Tunis, Rachid Ammar, the Army Chief of Staff refused to open fire on the demonstrators in a similar way to Tantawi in Cairo. This left the armed forces in both countries intact and in a central position to influence the shape of the transition. In Libya, the country's armed forces were overcome through the heavy and extended support of NATO. The nature of that support led to a fracturing of the state's security forces but this was mirrored by the highly fractured nature of the militias fighting to remove Gaddafi. In Yemen, whilst the figurehead of the regime has been removed, competition for power between tarnished former elites dominates the political landscape.

Without key defections from within the higher echelons of the ruling elite or extended external military support, the youthful revolutionaries at the centre of the Arab Spring have proved unable to remove any other ruling elites across the Middle East. A year and a half after the start of the Arab Spring, successful revolutions have proved comparatively rare, even at the centre of what Perry Anderson labelled a 'new concatenation of political upheaval'; comparable to the Hispanic American wars of liberation that started in 1810, the European revolutions of 1848-9 and the fall of the Soviet backed regimes in Eastern Europe during 1989-91.

Against this background, it is now possible to start a discussion about what the aftermath of the Arab Spring may look like, what the long term effects of this movement could bring. As things stand, the Spring has given rise to three broad sets of outcomes. The first contains the majority of states in the region, and represents little or no change. From Saudi Arabia to Jordan, the ruling elites have managed through adjustments to their ruling strategies to stay in power and face down

the protestors. The second category of outcomes indicates a more evenly balanced contest between those mobilising for change and the regime (or remnants of the regime) themselves. This has however caused the countries concerned to descend into civil war. As things stand both Libya and Syria are in this category with Yemen a clear contender to join. Finally, there are those countries which are in the midst of a largely peaceful transition after regime change, Egypt and Tunisia.

The first category of states, those where the regimes have survived the challenge of popular protest, could be understood as embarking on a new round of 'authoritarian upgrading'. As the Arab Spring spread across North Africa and into the wider Middle East, ruling elites set about a reassessment of their formula for continued rule. This involved adjusting the balance between William Quandt's four pillars of authoritarianism, 'ideology, repression, payoffs, and elite solidarity'. In Bahrain, the Al-Khalifa ruling elite faced the most serious and sustained challenge to their rule in the Gulf region. As Christian Coates-Ulrichsen demonstrates in this report, their response was to unleash a sustained barrage of repression against those involved in the demonstrations. Thus 'the Bahraini government mercilessly pursued all forms of dissent, detaining doctors and lawyers merely for treating or representing detainees, suspending opposition political societies and arresting their leaders'. Once the ruling elite's primacy had been secured, they embarked upon a post-facto attempt to downplay, justify and minimise the brutal suppression they unleashed. A 'National Dialogue' was set up but the main opposition parties were deliberately under-represented, which begs the questions of who is allowed to be a member of the nation and what the dialogue was for? The regime then set up the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, which to the surprise of many, turned out to be both independent and an inquiry! The report concluded that the authorities had indeed used excessive force and torture. It also undermined the ruling elite's central explanation for the protests, finding no evidence of Iranian involvement. The aftermath of the protests in Bahrain has left the government desperately trying to re-establish its international legitimacy but continuing to repress the majority of its population.

The balance of forces within the country, especially in the wake of Saudi intervention in support of the Al-Khalifas, means the regime itself faces no direct threat to its continued rule. However, in the aftermath of its extended and brutal crackdown, its carefully constructed decade-long attempt to portray itself as an open, fairly liberal base for multinational companies operating in the region lies in tatters. The population has become increasingly divided as the regime pandered to sectarian division as part of its survival strategy. This has solidified its base amongst the minority Sunni section of the population but may well constrain the regime's room for manoeuvre as Bahraini society is further partitioned.

The second category of states that have emerged from the Arab Spring are those that have descended into civil war, Libya and Syria. In the case of Libya, it is still not clear whether the highly precarious post-regime change situation will revert to civil war or stabilise into a potentially sustainable transition. The fact that Libya today has all the prerequisites of a failed state springs from the legacies of Gaddafi's rule, the way regime change was realised, and the actions of politicians and militia leaders in its aftermath. When he was murdered, Gaddafi bequeathed to the Libyan population a malfunctioning state, with weak governmental institutions and little or no civil society. Still traumatised by the extended quasi-imperial occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, the leading proponents of military support for regime change in Paris, London and later Washington, were determined to limit involvement in terms of both 'boots on the ground' and overt military assistance. The historical legacy and the nature of NATO's actions has left a post-Gaddafi Libyan regime with spurious legitimacy and little capacity to influence events on the ground. Ranj Alaaldin, in this report, quite rightly describes the National Transition Council now seeking to run Libya as suffering from a 'series of deficiencies' a 'democratic deficit' and a number of geographical as well as secular-Islamist divisions. To add to the country's current woes, the International Crisis Group estimates that real military power lies with anything up to 100 militias containing 125,000 armed Libyans. This situation of a weak and under-legitimised government seeking to impose control over a myriad

of militias, fighting to retain their military power and geographic autonomy, does not bode well for the transition of Libya.

The balance of military forces in Syria, the second country in the region to enter civil war during the Arab Spring, is not yet as fractured as Libya. Chris Phillips details how Syria's President, Bashar al-Assad, systematically undermined the political base that his father Hafez had created during his thirty-seven years of rule. When faced with the beginnings of political discontent at the start of the Arab Spring, the ruling elite in Syria divided, with those favouring an all out assault on the demonstrators winning. As a result the extended military campaign by the Syrian army has been against largely urban-based protests across the country. The violence meted out by the regime quickly forced militarisation on its opponents. Local Coordination Committees were formed in dissenting communities to try and offer protection to the ongoing demonstrations, and consequently Syria descended into civil war. However, Phillips correctly designates the current situation as a stalemate. The regime is not militarily threatened by the revolt. The majority of the armed forces have stayed loyal and defections have not escalated to a point where the state's coherence is in doubt. However, unlike the last extended revolt the regime faced from 1979 to 1982, the regime does not have the coercive capacity to suppress the revolt. Its use of sectarian ideology has solidified its base amongst the Allawite community and fears of radical Islam and uncontrolled violence have forced other minority communities to offer their begrudging support. However, as the violence has continued, it is clear that an increasingly large section of the population has withdrawn its support or even passive tolerance from the regime. That said, the exiled organisation that was formed to represent the opposition, the Syrian National Council, has failed to establish coherent and meaningful links with the revolt within Syria, which remains highly localised and fractured.

Attempts at international mediation have so far failed to break this bloody stalemate. With the government showing no signs of compromise and the opposition largely incoherent, neither able to overthrow the regime nor enter into sustained negotiations,

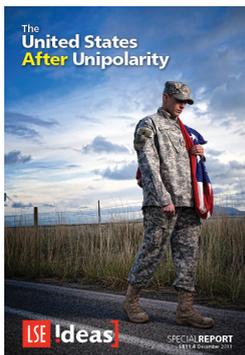
the temptations for some form of military intervention comparable to Libya are increasing. That said, one hopes that the lessons of intervention in Iraq, where the aftermath of regime change was far more murderous than the military action itself, have not been completely forgotten.

The final set of countries to emerge from the Arab Spring, those that have moved into what are currently peaceful transitions away from dictatorial rule have been discussed in detail above. For all the troubles and uncertainties surrounding politics in Tunis and Cairo, when compared to the violence and instability in Syria and Libya and the ongoing post-Spring authoritarian upgrading across the rest of the region, Egypt and Tunisia continue to offer hope for the populations of the Arab world that sclerotic dictators can be overthrown and a better freer future is possible through political mobilisation.

The events of the Arab Spring have given hope to millions of people across the Middle East and beyond that meaningful political change for the better is a distinct possibility. That said, of all the Arab countries effected by this wave of political protest, only two, Egypt and Tunisia, are now in what looks like political transitions to a more representative form of government. Two more, Syria and Libya, were driven into civil war with Yemen also showing some signs of following them. The rest of the countries of the Middle East retain the ruling elites they had before the Arab Spring started. Successful revolutions are very rare indeed. ■

When Hillary Clinton visited India in 2009, the US Secretary of State's verdict was unequivocal: 'I consider India not just a regional power, but a global power.' Following the success of economic liberalisation in the 1990s, which generated growth rates in excess of 8% and a rising middle class, expectations have grown that India might become a superpower, particularly in a West that sees in India's democratic heritage the potential for strategic partnership.

However, there remain deep and pervasive fault-lines within Indian society. Crony capitalism, the collapse of public health systems, a rising Maoist insurgency, and rampant environmental degradation all call into doubt India's superpower aspirations. Rather than seek to expand its influence abroad, India would do well to focus on the fissures within.



For the United States, the two decades after the end of Cold War could not have been more different: the first, a holiday from history amid a long boom; the second mired by conflict and economic crisis. By the end of George W. Bush's time in office, the United States' 'unipolar moment' was over, with emerging powers taking more assertive international roles as the United States looked to cut its budgets. Across a whole range of challenges, this waning of American dominance has defined Barack Obama's foreign policy.

After nearly a decade in power, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has grown increasingly confident in its foreign policy, prompting observers to wonder aloud whether the country might be leaving 'the West', forcing that group to confront the question 'who lost Turkey?'

This is to cast Turkey's role, and its emerging global strategy, in unhelpful binary terms. Turkey's emerging role reflects the changes in the world politics whereby power is becoming decentred and more diffuse, with established blocs replaced by more fluid arrangements that loosely bind states on the basis of shifting interests.





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