

# Contested Revolutions: The Arab Spring and its Impact

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## Abstract:

In eighteen days of mass protests, an authoritarian ruler in the thirtieth year of his rule was unseated. The Arab Spring triggered similar events in Israel and Iran and also contributed to worldwide protest movements, including the 2011 Spanish “indignant” movement and the global “Occupy” movement. The international reaction to the Arab Spring typifies the “new world disorder,” a world in which globalization sits uneasily without coordination or leadership. The domestic, regional and global implications of this event are likely to evolve rapidly over the short to medium term.

*Keywords: Arab Spring; Middle East; Political Relations*

## INTRODUCTION

Egypt, 11 February 2011: In eighteen days of mass protests, an unarmed, sparsely organized but united citizenry had faced down the nation’s security apparatus and unseated an authoritarian ruler in the thirtieth year of his rule. Sparked by a 26 year old Tunisian vegetable seller, as obscure as he was hapless, who set himself alight after an altercation with a local official, spontaneous uprisings across the Arab world claimed two “Pharaohs” and the thrones of many others suddenly looked very shaky indeed. It captured the popular imagination like no other event since perhaps the collapse of the Iron Curtain and the fall of the Berlin Wall. A casting off of the yoke of oppression. A new dawn. A spring.

## BUT WAS IT?

One year on, what have been the outcomes of the Arab “insurrectionary wave” of 2011?<sup>1</sup> How has it shaped the domestic political arena in Arab states? How have regional power balances and key geostrategic concerns such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Iranian question been affected? What are the general implications for international politics? These are some of the questions that I seek to explore in this article.

## DEFINING THE ARAB SPRING

The term “Arab Spring” is a political construct. It portrays the events of 2011 as more than the political convulsions of individual countries—rather, they are suggested to be an “awakening” of an entire people group. It alludes to the hopeful and bold liberalizations of the 1968 “Prague Spring,” and at the same time harkens back to the Pan-Arabic hopes that Nasser once kindled.

The reality of 2011 was less clear cut. For one, the scope and extent of the movements differed widely across the Arab world. Leaders were toppled in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. On the other hand, Bahrain has been profiled extensively in the international media for a (hitherto) successful campaign of violent suppression. The other Arab states are experiencing murmurings of various intensity, which were met with equally diverse responses. Some amended constitutions (Morocco) and others had government reshuffles (Jordan). Some seemed able to contain the uprising with the time-honored tactic of fiscal largesse (most notably Saudi Arabia, to the tune of USD\$36 billion).<sup>2</sup> In the face of demonstrations, others such as the Iraqi Prime Minister “gave his ministers 100 days to provide better services or face dismissal.”<sup>3</sup> When that period ended they were given another 100 days and “the issue has now drifted into obscurity.”<sup>4</sup>

Even states with nominally similar outcomes exhibited very different trajectories and social bases of protest. For example, in Tunisia the protests began amongst the “neglected rural areas” and made their way to the capital city, while the protests started with “cosmopolitan young people in the major cities” in Egypt.<sup>5</sup> Libya experienced a civil war, but the military’s seeming neutrality was crucial in Tunisia and Egypt.<sup>6</sup> What these examples indicate is that the Arab Spring was a non-uniform experience, highly refracted by the particular sociopolitical and historical circumstances of each country.<sup>7</sup> The “Arab Spring” is a convenient shorthand for the events of 2011, not an analytical category.

What can be said, however, is that the protests of 2011 shared some similarity in causes, methods employed, and demands. In most Arab countries billionaires presided over states with high income inequality (resulting from the phenomenally corrupt neo-liberalization processes of the 1990s) and young, unemployed, and “disaffected” populations.<sup>8</sup> The protests were constituted by cumulative small-scale organization enabled by technology: social media enabled alternative political elites to organize the masses outside the spaces traditionally controlled by the regime, and to break the efficacy of the *mukhabarat* (security apparatus).<sup>9</sup> The protestors’ calls were centered on “pragmatic” demands for “jobs, justice, and dignity.”<sup>10</sup> Crucially, the demands were focused on domestic concerns: in Egypt, for example, there was no burning of foreign flags or chants against the United States (US) or Israel.<sup>11</sup> The simultaneity of the protests was also significant. Episodes of social mobilization of varying intensity have been a regular fixture of the Arab World; this installment, with the benefit of hindsight, started in April 2008 with the social media enabled protests of the April 6 Youth

Movement in Egypt, or with the June 2009 mass demonstrations following the Iranian presidential election.<sup>12</sup> While President Obama’s June 2009 Cairo University speech did not cause the uprising, his declaration that America would support the pursuit of human rights everywhere at the very least “set expectations for how the US would react.”<sup>13</sup>

## DOMESTIC IMPACT: ISLAMISM AND POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION

In order to work out the regional and international implications of the Arab Spring, it is first necessary to understand its domestic impact. A few of the debates in this area surround the rise of political Islam and what it means, and the prospects for political liberalization or even democratization in the Arab World. These issues are relevant across the Middle East, but are particularly poignant for Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya where an incipient “new order” is starting to emerge. In Tunisia, out of 217 seats in the Constituent Assembly tasked with appointing a transitional government and writing a new constitution, the veteran Islamist party Ennahda won 90 seats—more than three times the number of its nearest rival, with five times the vote share.<sup>14</sup> In the Egyptian elections, 366 out of 503 MPs were members of Islamist parties, with the Freedom and Justice Party (affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood) winning the largest share of 235 seats.<sup>15</sup> The Islamist strand is an important one among the assortment of rebels in Libya—the military commander of Tripoli and his deputy, for example, are both Islamists.<sup>16</sup>

While Islamist factions are clearly doing well in the Arab Spring, it is not clear how much power they have *vis-à-vis* the “Deep State.” Egypt’s case illustrates this point. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), under the chairmanship of Field Marshal Tantawi, assumed guardianship of the Republic

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*Protests in Tunisia*

upon the departure of President Hosni Mubarak. The military promised to hand over control to an elected President following polls in June 2012.<sup>17</sup> Alongside loud declamations of support for the “martyrs of the revolution,” Tantawi has been angling to secure the interests of the military in the new constitution.<sup>18</sup> It was reported that these include dubious provisions such as granting the military “immunity from civilian supervision,” and the power to strike down some legislation enacted by parliament.<sup>19</sup> Some observers go so far as to call the Egyptian Arab Spring a “virtual military coup.”<sup>20</sup> While that may be an extreme (but by no means implausible) position, the military has certainly been treading a double line with the revolutionaries. One memorable incident was Air Force aircraft being used to drop gifts in various parts of the country in the hope of preventing people from gathering on the anniversary of the revolution.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the argument is that while Islamist parties are gaining a foothold in political

institutions, the power of these institutions are significantly circumscribed.

The power that Islamist parties do have, however, cannot be underestimated. This is perhaps more so in Tunisia, where a well-educated population, a large middle class and a strong labor union tradition increase the likelihood of successful participatory politics.<sup>22</sup> Yet the Tunisian example also serves to caution that “Islamist” is not a deterministic category and can mean different things in different contexts. Ennahda in its early years did engage in violent acts, but its ideology shifted to a “more moderate path” during its leader Rachid Ghannouchi’s years of exile in London.<sup>23</sup> Today the party officially supports “pluralism,” is vocal for the defense of “human rights,” and has vowed “not to change the country’s progressive personal status laws.”<sup>24</sup> Having said that, Ghannouchi was due to relinquish his position in early 2012, and more radical salafi views are well represented in Ennahda’s power base if not in its leadership.<sup>25</sup> It is not immediately clear what

the attitude of Islamist parties in the Arab World will be regarding pluralism, tolerance, and the status of women, among other issues. The dynamic at this time, if only because of the multiplicity of parties and viewpoints in the Assemblies and Parliaments, is towards compromise.<sup>26</sup> More generally, it could be argued that the Islamist narratives are at a major point of inflexion—the Arab Spring and the death of Osama bin Laden have dealt major blows to the extremist doctrine of revolution through violence.<sup>27</sup> Although Al-Qaeda is looking for a base in the region (Yemen looks the most promising in this regard), the new “participatory” environment is by and large unfavorable for radicalism.<sup>28</sup> It remains unclear how moderate Islamism will evolve in the new political climate. Much still depends on the choices of the coming months—will political actors resolve their differences through debate or turn to extra-institutional means; will governments (of which Islamist parties will be a significant component) be able to resolve the underlying economic malaise or will these be found too intractable? The Arab Spring’s ability to deliver on its promises will determine the future texture of Islamism and the nature of Arab politics more generally.

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In that context, a significant dimension of the Arab Spring is that those who started the revolution have not necessarily been the ones benefitting politically thus far. In Egypt, the coalitions of young people who started the demonstrations won a paltry 10 seats in the November elections.<sup>29</sup> This was due to their “strategic mistake” of depending too much on protests as a means of change and thus failing to organize for the elections.<sup>30</sup> The Islamist parties, on

the other hand, joined in the demonstrations after a few days’ wait and are now seeking to consolidate their position with a tacit power sharing agreement with SCAF.<sup>31</sup> In Tunisia, the “rural south and west [that] initiated the uprising [and] paid the most significant price ... today feels more aggrieved than ever” after their favored party won only 19 seats in the Assembly.<sup>32</sup> Another disturbing dynamic is exemplified in Libya: it was observed that Tripoli locals continued to man checkpoints to their neighborhoods long after the fighting subsided within these barricades. States in the Arab world have historically only penetrated their respective societies imperfectly—they have not established the kind of hegemonic narrative that Western states have. These examples indicate that the Arab Spring might accentuate the weakening of the state through deepening alienation and even wholesale withdrawal from the state. In the worst case, the situation could spiral out of control into violence. In Libya, some rebel groups left Tripoli soon after the city’s liberation after helping themselves to generous quantities of looted weapons.<sup>33</sup> The signs of the times are more ominous in some countries than others.

### **REGIONAL IMPACT: IRAN, ISRAEL, AND THE BALANCE OF POWER**

The relevance of Iran to the Arab Middle East has been traditionally seen in the light of the Sunni-Shi’a division, thrown into sharp relief by Iran’s nuclear aspirations. Iran is also a major geostrategic player because of its oil and natural gas reserves and commanding position at the maritime entrance to the Gulf. The impact of the Arab Spring on the Iranian question can be examined in the light of these two strands of thought.

Iran has been a strategic competitor for regional influence with large Sunni Arab nations, especially Saudi Arabia. This competition is reinforced by and expressed in Sunni-Shi’a tensions. It was for this reason that Saudi Arabia reacted firmly by sending in troops “to guard infrastructure” when the Arab

Spring took hold in Bahrain, a country with Sunni rulers and majority Shi'a subjects.<sup>34</sup> The Bahraini authorities put down the uprising violently with the "strategic silence" of the US, which bases its powerful 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet on the island. For its part, Iran has sought to portray the Arab Spring as inspired by the 1979 Iranian Revolution. By most accounts it has not involved itself directly against the King of Bahrain.<sup>35</sup> While a plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to Washington was uncovered, one should be cautious about interpreting events as Iran does not have a monolithic government—its actions must be seen in the light of the tussle between Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Ahmedinejad, the increasing clout of the Revolutionary Guard, and the 2012 Presidential Elections.<sup>36</sup>

The more subtle development with respect to Iran is the tentative thaw in Cairo-Tehran relations. One of the objectives of Egyptian foreign policy post-Arab Spring is to cultivate "good and balanced relations with all powers in the region."<sup>37</sup> This is, to some degree, in service of Egypt's ambitions to reclaim its place of leadership within the Arab world.<sup>38</sup> To this end, two Iranian warships were permitted to sail up the Suez Canal (something that has not been done since 1979), much to the chagrin of the Israeli government.<sup>39</sup> Iran appointed an ambassador to Egypt and high level delegations were exchanged.<sup>40</sup> It should be noted that Cairo is also pursuing closer relations with other states which it deems strategically important, such as the Nile Basin countries. Moreover, Egypt insists that it will not sacrifice relations with Israel or the US.<sup>41</sup> These are but tentative steps and it is not clear at this stage what it would mean for Egypt's relations with Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the US in the medium term, particularly with the sharpening rhetoric over Iran's nuclear program.

These developments must also be appreciated in the context of the increasing clout and activism of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. The Arab

Spring provided an opportunity for the GCC states to gain diplomatic leverage within the region by providing monetary grants and troops or by acting as "intermediaries" between rival parties.<sup>42</sup> The GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have also provided leadership within the Arab League (most notably over Libya and Syria) in its fitful involvement with the crisis.

With respect to the Arab-Israeli conflict, the most direct impact of the Arab-Spring resulted from the "March 15 Youth Movement" in Palestinian territories. Under pressure from demonstrations in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, the leaders of Hamas and Fatah signed a unity agreement in Cairo regarding the provision for presidential and parliamentary elections in a year's time.<sup>43</sup> This agreement was at best "stillborn" and foundered very quickly over Fatah's choice of Prime Minister.<sup>44</sup>

On the other hand, there is little doubt that the foreign policy of Arab states will be less in Israel's interest. This is particularly true as the only Arab states to have recognized Israel are Egypt and Jordan. Although Mubarak profited handsomely from sales of natural gas to Israel, SCAF reversed Mubarak's policy by opening the Rafah Crossing into the Gaza Strip, easing the Israeli blockade on the territory run by the Hamas. Yet it should be noted that the crossing was open for only a week before being shut again. This is either because of tensions or uncertainty within the Egyptian government (within SCAF, or between SCAF and some segment of the revolutionaries), or the unwillingness to provoke an outright confrontation with Israel.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, SCAF took pains to emphasize, in its initial days, that it would respect all treaty obligations (including the 1978 peace treaty with Israel) and parliamentary candidates affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood who "vowed to maintain ties with Israel."<sup>46</sup> Jordan, on its part, is rumored to be exploring a potential offer to Hamas of a base in the country should Syria, where Hamas is currently

headquartered, descend further into civil war.<sup>47</sup> However, this might have more to do with the impact of the Arab Spring on Jordan's internal politics than Jordan-Israeli relations; King Abdullah, like his father before him, has had a tactic of offering "tentative overtures" to domestic Islamists as and when his power base required shoring up.<sup>48</sup>

What can be said is that a "recalibration" in Arab-Israeli relations is bound to come, but the scope and degree remains uncertain. While developments thus far have been modest, major uncertainties remain, including the future of the Assad regime and the new shape of domestic politics in Egypt.<sup>49</sup> The Arab-Israeli conflict will also be crucially shaped by developments in Israeli domestic politics. One of the interesting consequences of the Arab Spring was the "summer of discontent" in Israel. Motivated by surprisingly similar concerns of economic inequity, high prices, and a sense of political alienation, thousands of young people participated in sit-ins and marches in many Israeli cities from July 2011 onwards.<sup>50</sup> It was significant that in doing so, middle-class Israelis openly acknowledged drawing upon Tahrir Square for inspiration.<sup>51</sup> Israel's political choices in the coming months have the potential to significantly affect the domestic outcomes of the Arab Spring.

## GLOBAL IMPACT: NEW WORLD DISORDER

The Arab Spring posed a stark choice for the US: it could either stand by its ideals and support the popular campaigns to oust authoritarian rulers or it could defend its strategic interests and stand by the authoritarians.<sup>52</sup> Whereas President Obama and Hillary Clinton suggested that American values and American interest were not necessarily opposed, the reality of US choices demonstrated otherwise. Thus after vacillating over Tunisia and even "abandoning" erstwhile ally Mubarak in Egypt, the US restricted itself to tentative reproaches over the violent clampdown in Bahrain.<sup>53</sup> In some sense US diplomacy was sure to fumble because it was caught between two undesirable positions. The US can either walk

away from friendships with "unshakeable" mutual interests or be in "association with discredited regimes," which will add to the widespread view of America as the "enabler of Israeli policies."<sup>54</sup> It is therefore inevitable that states in the Arab world will not align their foreign policies too closely with that of America.

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Having described the limits to US power in the Middle East, it is important to note that the preponderance of power is still with the US. Moreover, the US and Saudi Arabia continue to share strong and fundamental concerns over Iran, Yemen, Syria, and energy security.<sup>55</sup> Relations at the military level are very good. The generals of SCAF, for example, are of the generation who worked closely with America since 1978, as exemplified by the US seeking to assuage Saudi Arabia with a USD\$60 billion arms sale in 2011.<sup>56</sup> Whatever the hue of the new government in Egypt, it will have to consider the annual grant of USD\$2 billion that America provides Cairo.

What was perhaps more interesting was the way in which the emerging powers—China, Russia, Brazil, India, and South Africa—responded to the Arab Spring. With the Libyan and Syrian crises, these countries sought to resist any "erosion of the norm of sovereignty" and regarded with great suspicion the doctrine of the "responsibility to protect" that some Western nations were advocating at the UN.<sup>57</sup> With the exception of South Africa, they abstained from Resolution 1973, which formed the legal basis for the international military action in Libya. South

Africa registered its unease by delaying the recognition of the National Transitional Council as the government of Libya. Over Syria, the emerging powers also counseled against “interference” in the domestic affairs of another sovereign state. Imad Mansour plausibly suggests that this position is typical of “middle powers”—these nations are “constrained in their ability to affect global outcomes” but nonetheless “wish to be the dominant power in their respective neighborhoods.”<sup>58</sup> They resist superpower interventions around the world, so as to better defend against superpower encroachments in their own areas of influence.<sup>59</sup>

The Arab Spring became a globalized event by spawning similar events in Israel and Iran. It also contributed to protest movements worldwide including the 2011 Spanish “indignant” movement and also the global “Occupy” movement. In this sense, the international reaction to the Arab Spring typifies what might be termed the “new world disorder,” a world in which globalization sits uneasily with a lack of global coordination or leadership.<sup>60</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reported that on the first day of the new Egyptian parliament, members were required to swear an oath to “respect the constitution and law.” A member of an Islamist party added the words “God’s law,” while other “pro-reform” members added the words “to complete the 25 January revolution” and to “respect the rights of the martyrs.”<sup>61</sup>

This anecdote illustrates how the Arab Spring is an ongoing movement. It is a series of dissimilarly contested revolutions and while to some the “revolutionary” phase might be complete, the struggle to define what the revolution means is far from over. The domestic, regional and global implications of this event, therefore, are likely to evolve rapidly over the short to medium term. 🌐

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