

The Middle East in Revolution: The “Arab Awakening”

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Working Paper - The 12th Herzliya Conference

Published in 2011 as an article adapted from Dr. Bar's talk at an ICFR seminar dedicated to the memory of Dr. David Kimche on “The Current Maelstrom in the Middle East,” on March 22, 2011.

For the last two decades, the Middle East has been characterized by the conflict between "status-quo" and "anti-status-quo" forces. The former were represented by the regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, Saudi Arabia et alia, and the latter by Iran, the Islamic movement, Hezbollah and their allies. Between these two camps, the United States played a pivotal role in support of the former.

The revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya and Yemen were the result of developments within the countries themselves; deep economic and social malaise and the perception of the loss of domestic deterrence by ossified regimes led by aging leaders. However, the popular perception that the United States had abandoned its erstwhile allies to support those revolutions facilitated their spread. This turnabout in American policy is seen as a policy of “jumping on the band wagon”, and an expression of the decline of American (will) power in the region. This perception will have as profound effect as did the projection of American power had at its height.

The prospects for each of these countries to develop full fledged (or any sort of) democracy vary according to their underlying social and political features: educational levels, participation of women in the work force and politics, strength of Islamic movements, economic conditions and tribal as opposed to national identification. Looking at these features, we can assess the prospects for many of these countries.

Tunisia is almost sui generis. Its exposure to France and to the ideas of democracy, its GDP per capita and per capita income during better days and even today (in contrast to its neighbors) the level of literacy, the weakness of the Islamic movement and the role of women are all without comparison in the region. Its proximity to its large diaspora in Europe also plays a role – for the first time through a positive influence of the diaspora on the home country instead of the negative influences that we have seen over the last decades. The opposition of the Tunisian civil society to Islamist attempts to intimidate (attacks on movie theaters for example) is an indication of the strength of the secular tendency in the country. The Nahdah is also aware that it achieved its majority to a great deal thanks to the weakness and splintering of the secular parties, the “Winner takes All” system of the elections and the massive support it received from Ex-patriot voters in Europe (mainly France), who expressed their disillusion with western society by voting for Islamists at home. This awareness may temper the movements zeal to impose Islamic mores on the secular population.

Libya and Yemen, on the other hand are cases of tribal societies in which the fabric of the state was held together by a military regime. In Libya – whose opposition was only a few months ago members of the oppressive regime -the chances of the present uprising deteriorating into endemic civil wars are great. Such a situation may open the door to infiltration of Jihadi elements as we have seen in the past in other non-governed areas. In Yemen, this process has already taken place. The fall of Ali Saleh is the end of Yemen as a unified state. Tribal areas of influence in Yemen are not limited to the artificial national borders and extend deep into neighboring Saudi Arabia.

Egypt, on the other hand, is a society with a strong centralist tradition. However the liberal forces in the country are in retreat. The only political force in Egypt, which can to mobilize itself on short notice to take advantage of free elections, is the Muslim Brotherhood. It will therefore be part of any coalition and perhaps the ruling party after the forthcoming or next elections. Its positions will therefore have an impact on the policy of any new regime. Pundits argue that the Egyptian military will not allow the Muslim Brotherhood to come to power or will restrain their more provocative policies (such as annulment of the Peace Agreement with Israel). However, the "grand deal" with the Egyptian military has already unraveled. The military elite is first and foremost interested in maintaining its particular interests (financial and personal - to prevent members of the military from joining Mubarak in court). Hence, keeping the mobs from destroying the peace agreement with Israel, preventing Hamas from smuggling sophisticated arms from Iran into Gaza or Iran from sending warships through the Suez Canal to threaten Israeli gas drilling in the Mediterranean are all secondary. The military regime has shown its willingness to step back to allow the mob to vent its rage as in the case of the Israeli Embassy. This is not an issue of Israel alone. What will happen tomorrow when a Danish or Swedish newspaper publishes cartoons of Muhammad? Or there is a terrorist attack on the US and American retaliation? Will the regime then stop the mob?

Bahrain is still at the early stages of revolution. If the Shiites achieve full enfranchisement – a demand that the West will find difficult to reject – the Iranian influence in the country will be immediate. Of course, Arab Shiites are not eager to be dominated by Persians either in Iraq, Saudi Arabia or Bahrain. However, the dynamics of representation of Iranian proxies in the country will have an enormous psychological effect on the other Gulf Countries.

Syria – the regime is on its way out; it has lost its legitimacy even in the eyes of the lenient American administration and more importantly – its populace has passed the “fear barrier”. There are already signs of disintegration of the military. The question when it turns from popular protest into civil war is just a matter of coincidence of a brigade or division commander whose son/ brother/ cousin was killed by the regime. I think we are nearing that point and the strategic questions will be what happens with the Iranian and Turkish involvement and whether the regime may decide on the "Samson Option" of attacking Israel. If the regime were to fall, serious questions may arise regarding the ability of a new regime to control the northern and border regions of the country. Syria suffers from a great social, religious and political disparity between various parts of the North and the South. Even the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria represents different streams – a Jihadi-Salafi trend of the North and a more moderate stream which is wooing the merchant and business communities of Damascus. Decades of Alawite domination combined with a strong Jihadi-Salafi presence in Northern Syria may result in a settling of accounts which the West will not get involved in but will destabilize the country.

Jordan - The rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt will be a force multiplier for its sister movements in other countries. The immediate casualty may be the “Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan” , which its opponents liked to call “the Jordanian Entity” (a slur in Middle Eastern political discourse usually reserved for Israel as the “Zionist Entity”). The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan is more radical than its Egyptian counterpart, its constituency tends to come from the Palestinian camps and it has demonstrated a high level of support for the Jihadi-Salafi movement in Iraq. Without the Hashemite regime, the rivalry between East Jordanians and Palestinians will erupt with all its fury. This is already evident in warnings by the tribal leaders to the King that he must protect their interests and not give

in. The implications of disintegration of the Jordanian regime are enormous; the absence of the restraining factor of Jordan will mean that Israel will have to deal on its own with terrorist threats emanating from east of the Jordan. Such a development may return us to the days of constant skirmishes across the Jordan.

Other Regional Developments

Lebanon – where Hezbollah has consolidated its control over the country, which is rapidly becoming an Iranian satrap. Many of the requirements of democracy exist in Lebanon, but they are overshadowed by the rule of the gun. There is little hope that the Arab Awakening will bring about a movement in Lebanon, which will push Hezbollah out of its positions of power and dismantle its militia. It is more likely that Hezbollah itself may initiate a controlled uprising for change of the Lebanese arrangement dating back to the foundation of the state of allocation of positions to the different communities.

Iraq - is certainly as disparate as any other of the countries in the region. The current government is showing its pro-Iranian and undemocratic colors more and more, alienating both Sunni Arabs and Kurds. After the final American withdrawal Iraq will come deeper under the Iranian sphere of influence with repercussions for Iraqi regional policy. This is already evident in the manner that the Iraqi regime has closed ranks with Iran in support of Iran's Syrian ally. While the Sunnis do not have the strength to challenge this process, the Kurds are already showing unrest. Just the other day thousands of Iraqi Kurds demonstrated in Khanqin in the Kurdish area to demand the right to raise the Kurdish region's flag over government buildings. Under the impression of growing Shiite and Iranian predominance, the Kurds may revert to their old demands for autonomy or even independence. The Sunnis will probably reach out to allies in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, reviving their alliance with the Jihadi movements, which are dedicated to fight the Shiites.

In **Saudi Arabia** - the sense that Iran is now free to pursue its hegemonic goals also exacerbates the age-old Sunni-Shiite conflict. The Wahhabi clerical establishment, representing, as it is a movement, which was born as an anti-Shiite movement, sees the increasing Shiite predominance in Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain and possibly in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia as cataclysmic.

Meanwhile, the system of succession of the sons of 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Sa'ud, creates an accelerating rate of change and instability due to health issues and successive deaths of Kings. Whether the wave of revolution hits the Kingdom or not, within ten to fifteen years, the regime will change. During the next ten years we can expect more and more frequent successions. Given the ages of Abdallah and Sultan we may expect that they will be off the stage - physically or politically - by 2015. But by then the youngest of the remaining sons of Abdul Aziz will be 70 years old and there is no way of knowing what the physical and mental health of the successor candidates will be. This uncertainty will give rise to jockeying among the next line of successors. While in each case there will be a clear understanding regarding the identity of the King, the question who will be third in line (a status which will become increasingly relevant given the expectation for a new round of succession) will be increasingly important. Therefore, it may not be assumed (or it would be highly unlikely) that the traditional Saudi regime will leapfrog over the elders to crown a younger generation just in order to guarantee stability for a long period (the Soviet Union didn't during the Andropov-Cherenenko era). Therefore, the sons who will then compete for the line of succession will try to recruit support. The role of the Bay'a Council (basically a family council made of all the above) will become more and more pivotal as the line of succession becomes problematic. However, since the 'Ulama are formally seen as the "King Makers" - the "Ahl al-Hal wal-'Aqd" (those who bind and unbind (loyalty) it will be only natural that

the princes compete for their support. Some of the princes are already perceived as close to the Salafi and radical Wahhabi establishment. This will facilitate their outreach to the 'Ulama.

Iran

The latest IAEA report will undoubtedly intensify the drive of other states in the region for nuclear weapons. Prince Turki al-Faysal has already stated on a number of occasions that if Iran acquires nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia (or the GCC) will have to follow suit. Even without such statements, it is clear that if the Gulf states realize that they cannot rely on American extended assurances; new regimes in the region will also most probably view acquisition of a military nuclear capability as a sign of having broken with the subservience to western dictates and an ability to provide their peoples with something to be proud of – in lieu of bread and employment.

The American announcement regarding an Iranian plot to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador, Adel Jubair raises questions regarding renewal of Iranian terrorist campaigns. If the Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, Qassem Suleimani, doesn't lose his job, one may reach the conclusion that the action was authorized by the Supreme Leader to whom he is very close. This raises a serious question about American deterrence. The threats coming out of Washington of "more stringent sanctions" targeting the IRGC (as if the IRGC was an independent entity not directed by the regime) do not seem to have much impact on Iran, or as Khomeini liked to say: "America cannot do a damned thing!" The real messages of the plot are, therefore, the serious decline in American deterrence vis-a-vis Iran, the Iranian feeling that they have to deter Saudi Arabia and a re-asserting of Iran in anticipation of changes in the region.

Turkey – the AKP regime has adopted a neo-Ottoman policy of intervention and projection of power. The alliance with Iran therefore does not seem to be long-lived. Iranian and Turkish interests will collide in Iraq, Syria and in the Mediterranean. The Turkish threats to Israeli-Cypriot-Greek drilling of gas in the waters of these countries coincide with Iranian pledges to support Lebanon against Israel's drilling. This all raises potential for conflict in the Mediterranean between two EU nations (Cyprus and Greece) and Israel on one hand and Turkey and Iran on the other hand.

The end of the Peace Process

Palestinians always looked for Arab backing for any steps that could be perceived as concessions. The driving force behind this was Mubarak. Even without the fall of additional regimes, the pressure will be reduced and the Palestinians will fear more from the radicals. If the Palestinian leadership was unable to cross the necessary Rubicon in the strategic circumstances that existed before, today it will be far less likely. The Palestinian decision to take unilateral action for recognition of a Palestinian state and Abu Mazen's statement that the PA will not hold any more negotiations with Israel is indicative of this situation.

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process is frequently seen from Europe – and increasingly now from Washington – as a question of Israel ceding of territory. The issue of security for Israel has been almost removed from the agenda. However, security has a whole gamut of elements: starting from the commitment of the Palestinian partner to refrain from terrorism and to effectively prevent and

punish terrorism, through the confidence building by cessation of incitement and education to denial of Israel's right to exist and to define itself as a Jewish state, and finally – and here is the rub – the strategic environment in which the peace agreement has to take place. This environment has changed dramatically for the worse. No longer are the negotiations taking place in the context of stable peace agreements with two other key neighbors who are committed to peace – Egypt and Jordan. The uncertainty surrounding the Middle East in general will have a deleterious effect on any negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

The American stance on negotiations has been counter-productive. The position of the Obama administration does not refer to the need for the Palestinians to forego the demand for the right of return. This and Jerusalem are the real sticky points. Had Obama said in his speech that Israel must realize that it will have to settle for borders based on the 67 lines (they were cease fire lines and not borders) but the Palestinians will have to realize that they will not get the right of return to Israel, that would have made more sense. There is a contradiction between the reference to the need to negotiate security and the categorical statement that there should be a full withdrawal of the IDF and the Palestinian borders. If the President of the United States already determines that security cannot include IDF presence in any part of the Palestinian state, what will the talks be about?

Again, by taking a position close to the Palestinian one, Obama is letting the Palestinians off the hook in regards to renewing negotiations. As long as Israel does not agree to the pre-determined outcome of the negotiations, Abu Mazen can refuse to re-enter negotiations. In any case, the agreement with Hamas and his latest article in the NYT indicate that he will continue to move towards a more radical stance, believing that he can draw the US with him.

So what could Obama had done? He could have indirectly disagreed with the idea that the conflict (or any conflict) can be resolved by placing blame and returning to a real or perceived status quo ante of 63 years ago. It didn't work in the Versailles agreement and no amount of arm-twisting will bring Israel to agree to national suicide by accepting historic responsibility for the conflict and agreeing to the "right of return". He could have mentioned the word "compromise". That is the stuff that historic agreements are made of. And he could have warned - albeit indirectly - the Palestinians that aligning themselves with the radicals will not bring them the good will of America.

Prospects

The euphoria that swept the West in the wake of the "Arab Spring" came from an identification of the revolutions of the Arab world with the events of the fall of the Soviet Bloc. However, it is clear now that these events will not necessarily lead in the direction of democracy and freedom. Indeed, even among the former Soviet bloc, some countries developed into healthy democratic societies and others (Russia included) have reverted to corruption and autocracy.

So, how will all of this affect the international community? Instability in the Middle East will certainly have an effect on energy security. Spread of insecurity to North African countries will force Europe to review its immigration policies, including wielding a stronger hand to prevent illegal immigration. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has moved further away from resolution in the wake of the recent developments. If we add developments in Pakistan with possible ripple effects on the Middle East, the near future will be fraught with dangers.