

Containing the “Arab Spring”

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Abstract

The article discusses the developments in the Arab world since the beginning of the Arab revolutions in 2011, and the way regional and global forces have been trying to deal with, contain, and obstruct their development, in line with long standing Western interventions in the region, based on Western interests and ideologies.

Introduction

Striking with the force of an avalanche, the so-called “Arab spring” (who was it who thought of this phrase?) caught everyone off guard, off balance and unprepared, none more so than the governments who, through their intelligence services, were supposed to know what was happening in every crevice of their country. Tunisia’s Zine el Abidine ben Ali was swept away quickly, but in Cairo Hosni Mubarak held on grimly until his fingers lost their grip as well. The US clung to these men, their proteges, as long as it could, as it had done with the Shah in the late 1970s until it was clear even in Washington that he was finished, as it had done in the past with authoritarian governments and “pro-western” dictators around the world until they, too, were finished.

Hillary Clinton arrived in Cairo, declaring that she, and her government, were on the side of the people, on the side of democracy, freedom and human rights. She was not believed, of course; the January 25 Revolution Youth Coalition refused to meet her because of her “negative position from the beginning of the revolution and the position of the US administration in the Middle East”.¹ While *irhal* (go!) dominated Arab world rhetoric, as the uprisings spread, transition and dialogue were the key words for the US and its allies as they sought to regain their footing in a volatile situation. Transition for the people demonstrating in Tahrir Square and elsewhere meant transition to a fully democratic system. Transition for the US meant transition to a system that might be different from the old regime, might turn out to be better or worse for the local people, but would not disrupt “western” interests across the region. Dialogue meant negotiations with the parties likely to dominate the restructured Middle East.

¹ Kristen Chick, “Clinton, Rebuffed in Egypt, faces tough task on Arab upheaval”, *Christian Science Monitor*, March 15, 2011.

Early developments and election results

The overthrow of the dictators in Tunisia and Egypt was merely the first stage of an unfolding process. By November 2011, Tunisians had elected a coalition government formed between Rashid al Ghannushi's Islamist Al Nahda party and the liberal Al Takattul.

In Egypt, by this time, the confrontation between the people and Mubarak had been replaced by an increasingly bitter confrontation between the people and the SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces), in particular its commander-in-chief, Hussein Tantawi, who had been inside Mubarak's inner circle for decades. By late November Egyptians had also shown their electoral preferences, in the first of a three stage process. The Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party won about 45 per cent of the vote and 49 per cent of parliamentary seats in the first round. Polls had predicted a sweeping triumph for the brotherhood (the *ikhwan al muslimin*), so the real surprise was the extent of the success of the salafist parties, especially Al Nour, which came home with 20 percent of the seats. These results were confirmed in December and early January, when the second and third round of elections were held.

Leftist and even liberal centrist parties, including the oldest in the country, the Wafd, were left trailing in the rear. Good news for the *ikhwan* and the salafists was bad news for Christians, secular liberal women's groups, gays and liberals, irrespective of gender and religion but, as the Islamists will lose no opportunity to point out, and this is democracy. Egyptians will now be ruled by an *ikhwan*-military duumvirate instead of the Mubarak-military duumvirate. It will take some time for the real differences to become apparent but the *ikhwan* and the salafists want to build an Islamic state. All the tools of surveillance and repression are now falling into their hands and it would be unrealistic to think they will not use them. The military hesitated before finally coming in behind the demonstrators in Tahrir Square but soon reverted to its role as a tool of the system. Its brutality in crushing dissent reached some sort of horrible climax in December with the stripping, kicking and beating of the girl with the blue bra as she lay defenseless on the ground. Did this signify that men think the election results have given them some kind of license to beat rebellious women?

Western responses to the revolutions

Throughout spring the turbulence spread across the region. The declaration by the UN Security Council of a no-fly zone set the stage for armed intervention in Libya, culminating seven months later in the overthrow of the government and the open murder of Muammar Gaddafi. The destruction of the *jamahiriyya* left Libya in a fragmented turbulent state, with militias showing no inclination either to disarm or acknowledge the authority of a central government so nominal that it had no real authority. This was not a revolution but the destruction of an Arab-African government by Britain, France and the United States.

In Yemen mass protests were met by state violence continuing over months and unfulfilled promises by President Saleh that he would step down. In Bahrain protests continued ahead of the release of a government-sponsored report in late November, denying, unexpectedly, that the February demonstrations had been stirred up by Iran and accusing security forces of using excessive force and torture. This did not deter the government from deploying the security forces against demonstrators as before. In Syria peaceful protests were soon overwhelmed by continuing violence, with the army on one side, armed gangs and "defectors" on the other and innocent civilians caught in between.

The response of western governments to all of these situations varied: support for Ben Ali and Mubarak until support was no longer feasible; support for Bahrain's ruling family behind the patina of mild criticism; tacit support for Saudi intervention in Bahrain; criticism of President Saleh but no suggestion that a no-fly zone should be imposed over Yemen.

Unsurprisingly, the dominant element in these variations of response was self-interest. Saudi Arabia is an "ally" of the US; Bahrain is the gulf home port of the US Fifth Fleet; President Saleh has opened Yemeni air space to US drone missile attacks which have killed some militants (including US citizens) along with many innocent citizens.

Only Libya was deemed worthy of armed intervention. Whatever the damage being done to human rights, western governments had long-standing grievances against Gaddafi. He had been a thorn in their side for decades, and had recently been putting together a program which would have given Africans their own central bank, investment agency, monetary fund and currency (based on the gold dinar). This, more than oil, to which western companies already had generous access, was the most probable reason for the decision of France, Britain and the US to take advantage of the moment and attack in the name of protecting human rights.

Themes of the Arab revolutions

Within the countries caught up in the "Arab spring", there were common themes as well as dissimilarities. Unemployment and rising prices added to an awareness of the gulf between the world of the rulers and the world of the ruled. After Zine el Abidine ben Ali fled, his villa at Sidi Bou Said was searched and bundles of 500 euro notes found stacked on shelves, as if they were small change the president and his wife couldn't be bothered taking with them. Along with the wealth was the miasma of corruption around Ben Ali's inner circle and the general detestation of his wife, Leila Trabelsi and her relatives.

The catalyst for revolution was the death on January 4 of Muhammad Bouazizi, the street vendor who set fire to himself outside the municipal offices in the town of Sidi Bouzid. Demonstrations spread across the country and spilled across the border into Egypt as hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets to shake off the parasites who had fed off them for decades. Twitter, facebook, mobile phones and digital cameras took the place of the wall posters

of the 1960s, mobilizing people and showing the world in graphic detail how far governments were prepared to go in crushing them with their security forces – soldiers and police – and their thugs, running amuck in the lanes around Tahrir Square.

Young activists had the technological skills to pull the various strands of the opposition into one swelling and ultimately irresistible movement. In Egypt, there were many catalysts along the way: the campaign for a nationwide general strike on April 6, 2008, and the attempts of police to force textile workers at Mahalla al Kubra to stay on the job; the death of Khalid Saaed, beaten to death by police in Alexandria in June, 2010; the arrest of bloggers and activists; finally, the video posted by Asma'a al Mahfouz on January 18, 2011, an impassioned declaration to the people: "do not lose hope – hope only disappears only when you say there is no hope". A week later hundreds of thousands of people gathered in Tahrir Square.

It was the beginning of the end for Mubarak, even with the army, the police, the swarms of armed thugs and the camels and horses being ridden into the middle of demonstrators. There were numerous parallels with Tunisia. A dictator who had ruled the country for longer even than Ben Ali (from the assassination of Anwar al Sadat in 1981); the suppression of dissent using the most brutal means; an enriched upper echelon; and, against their own rhetoric of freedom and democracy, the support of outside governments for a dictator in return for protecting "western interests" across the region.

Rising prices, poverty, unemployment and the youth demographic all have their place in the story of the uprisings. During the Mubarak years the Egyptian economy experienced dynamic growth; population growth slowed; official unemployment fluctuated between eight to 12 per cent before dropping below 10 per cent in 2010, lower than in many western developed countries (including the US and the EU), while "extreme poverty" (purchasing power of less than \$1.25 a day) was almost eradicated.

However, the number of people living beneath the poverty line (less than \$2 purchasing power a day) jumped sharply between 2005 and 2010. The correlation with a steep rise in food prices between 2005-11 can scarcely be missed (Korotayev and Zinkina 2011: 155). Of particular importance to a country such as Egypt, where fluctuations in basic foodstuffs can completely disrupt a family budget (as the reductions of subsidies on IMF advice did in 1977 before riots forced the government to withdraw them), the world price both of cooking oil and wheat soared in 2010-11. It was price rises which generated support for the general strike called in 2008. The government followed up by holding the price of *baladi* bread at affordable levels and significantly increasing the number of Egyptians (from 39.5 million to 63 million) entitled to buy food (bread, cooking oil, butter, sugar etc.) at subsidized prices. Other items had to be bought at market prices.

Government attempts to hold prices down and stave off social explosion were matched by measures to control population growth, but while both birth rates

and death rates began to decline from the mid-1980s, the birth rate remained much higher (Korotayev and Zinkina 2011: 162). The outcome, by 2010, was the rapid growth in the number of young people in the 20-24 age group. Egypt's official unemployment rate at the onset of the revolution was nine per cent, but of this number half – a total of about one million young people - came from the 20-24 age group. As more than 43 per cent of the unemployed had university degrees, "the impact force of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution was not only young but also very highly educated" (Korotayev and Zinkina 2011: 168). The young also had the networking skills needed to mobilize, and they were able to draw into protests millions of people who were feeling the effects of low wages and continually increasing prices. Educated and aware, the young activists sought to end an oppressive system of government which they had known all their lives.

Revolutions and counter-revolutions

The first successful stages of a people's revolution in Egypt were followed by counter revolution. The army took control of the electoral process and even sought to impose its will over the constitutional process (through "supra constitutional" principles that would have put the military above parliamentary scrutiny had they not been withdrawn). It used the emergency laws in place since the assassination of Sadat as ruthlessly as Mubarak had done. In September these laws were expanded to include "the obstruction of roads, disruption of transportation, possession of weapons and dissemination of false information".² On October 4, SCAF announced that the state of emergency would be maintained until the end of May, 2012, and would not in fact be lifted until "stability" was restored.

Five days later, an orchestrated attack on demonstrators outside or near the Maspero building (headquarters of state radio and television) by the army, police and thugs wielding an assortment of weapons left 27 people dead, some crushed to death when military vehicles were driven into the crowd. The demonstrators – mostly Copts but supported by Muslims – had marched to Maspero in protest at the failure of the state to investigate arson attacks on Coptic churches and the biased reporting of these attacks by state television. By November, some 12,000 people had been tried before military tribunals, more in ten months, as one commentator observed, than had faced the tribunals during the three decades of Mubarak's rule.³ The decline in the standing of SCAF, and especially of Hussein Tantawi, was striking when compared to the popular support the military had enjoyed closer to the overthrow of Mubarak.

² "Egypt. State of the Transformation Process", Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law, www.mpil.de/ww/en/pub/research/details/know_transfer/.../_gypten.cfm

³ Jack Shenker, "Tahrir Square crowds vow 'fight to death' for end of military rule", *Guardian*, November 21.

A poll taken early in November predicted electoral success for the Muslim Brotherhood, while underestimating support for Al Nour and overestimating it for the Wafd, which ended up with seven per cent of the vote in the first round as opposed to the predicted 26 per cent. A further pointer to the future was the response to questions dealing with foreign relations: 51 per cent of those polled had "very positive" feelings towards Saudi Arabia and 30 per cent "somewhat positive" feelings. Of those who felt positive, 74 per cent said the reason was because Saudi was "a model for the Islamic community" (Al Ahram 2011).

Both the *ikhwan* and the salafists were slow in joining the revolution. Indeed some salafi scholars denounced the January demonstrations as "un-Islamic" but by late July both the *ikhwan* and the salafists were holding their own demonstration in Tahrir Square. In a radical change after the overthrow of Mubarak, because until then they had shunned political engagement, salafis formed their own political parties, among them Al Nour, Al Nahda, al Asala and Al Fadila. The core of salafi activism is "satellite salafism". In the past eight years salafi television channels have proliferated. Of the ten or so now broadcasting, Al Nas (The People), part of a network of salafi satellite channels owned by Saudi investors, is the most popular. Al Rahma (The Mercy) is owned by the salafi imam Muhammad Hasan, whose tapes and books are widely available. The absence of women from salafi air waves and the presence of salafi men and women on the streets of Cairo and Alexandria, the men wearing long untrimmed beards and gallabiyas foreshortened halfway down the calf and the women covering their faces with the *niqab* (full veil), was seen as further evidence that "a new and distinctly conservative or puritanical strain of Islam is gaining ground in Egypt" (Field and Hamam 2009). This assessment has now been confirmed by the election results.

The Muslim Brotherhood has always been effective when it comes to delivering social justice at the grass roots level and salafi organizations are equally committed to this same goal. Both want to convince Copts and their liberal Muslim or secular critics that they have nothing to fear: this is difficult for Christians to accept when salafists have taken the lead in attacks on their churches. When the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, visited Cairo, his advice that Egyptians build a secular state was immediately rejected by the brotherhood. As its adherents chanted in Tahrir Square, "Islamic, Islamic, we don't want secular".⁴

Ahead of the elections, the poll previously quoted shows the depth of support for this view. Of those polled, 62 per cent thought the laws of the state should follow the Quran and 31 per cent were sympathetic to "fundamentalism". Only 39 per cent gave a high priority to women having the same rights as men and only 36 per cent thought it important that Copts and other minorities should be able to freely practice their religions. One final figure bears on the revolution and the cohesive force of the "social media": 65 per cent of those polled had no

⁴ Lauren Bohn, 'Inside Egypt's Salafis', *Foreign Policy*, the Middle East Channel, August 2, 2011 www.mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/201108/02/inside_egypts_salafis

access to the internet or email. Hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated in Tahrir Square but in a population of 83 million this is a relatively small number. How many Egyptians across the country, relying on the television and newspapers for what they knew of what was happening in Cairo, felt strongly enough about Mubarak to want him brought down? What the election results showed was that the vision of the post-Mubarak Egypt – a secularized liberal state - animating the demonstrators in Tahrir Square was not shared by the majority.

Libya

Reading the signs in Egypt, as best as it could, the US entered into “dialogue” with the Muslim Brotherhood. While eventually supporting the right of the Egyptian people to freedom and democracy, the US was rather more reserved when it came to Bahrain, the Gulf home of the US Fifth Fleet. In March the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) authorized intervention by a Saudi force, nominally to protect strategic sites but in fact to prevent the ruling family from being toppled. The Saudis streamed across the causeway on March 14 and the next day Bahrain's king, Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa, declared martial law and set his security forces on the demonstrators massing at Pearl Roundabout. They were routed over a period of days and the monument at the center of the roundabout finally destroyed. Shia villages were attacked by regime thugs as part of the cleaning-up process. The violence extended into hospitals where the wounded were being treated.

At the height of the demonstrations in February, Ms. Clinton spoke of encouraging reform in Bahrain and speaking out “where we see them violating human rights and using violence inappropriately”. President Obama condemned the violence of governments in Bahrain, Yemen and Libya, but where the first two of these countries were reprimanded, and encouraged to proceed on the path of reform, the opportunity was seized to pounce on Libya and bring down the government of Muammar Gaddafi.

As soon as the citizens of Benghazi began protesting, France, Britain and the US moved without delay. A protest to the UN Human Rights Council was the trigger for a no-fly zone resolution passed by the UN Security Council and approved by the Arab League. Gaddafi's offers of negotiations (supplemented by offers from the African Union) were all rejected by the “rebels” and the NATO allies. Under the aegis of a “responsibility to protect”, Britain, France and the US launched a devastating aerial assault on Libya that lasted for seven months before ending in the downfall of the regime, the death of tens of thousands of people and Gaddafi's shocking murder, clearly set up by France and the US. The US had stationed a Predator drone overhead and a French fighter aircraft was called in as soon as Gaddafi's convoy left Sirte.⁵ The missile attack on the convoy was

⁵ Claude Angeli, “Kadhafi condamné à mort par Washington et Paris”, *Le Canard Enchaîné*, October 26, 2011, p.3.

apparently ordered in the knowledge that even if Gaddafi was not killed outright, bands of armed men who hated him was not far away.

Gaddafi was the same Gaddafi he had been a year before or ten years before, the very same Gaddafi who had shaken hands with Obama, Sarkozy, Blair and Berlusconi and had awarded the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Gaddafi International Award for Human Rights (worth \$250,000) as recently as November, 2010. Now they all turned on him. In the spring of 2011, Dr. Jekyll was transformed into Mr. Hyde. The Middle East madman returned to the printed page and electronic screen of the mass media.

The lurid accusations that he was killing thousands of his own people, that he was bombing them from the air and that he was pursuing a "scorched earth" policy against the "rebels" were incrementally augmented: he was using black mercenaries and he was organizing the distribution of Viagra to his troops so they could rape the womenfolk of the opposition. None of this proved to be true. Hillary Clinton, paraphrasing Julius Caesar, even turned Gaddafi's murder into the occasion for a joke - "we came, we saw, he died". The most developed country in Africa, according to the UN's Human Development Programme index, was rendered dysfunctional and plunged into an uncertain future. The destruction of the *jamahiriyya* was followed by torture, murder and the disappearance of thousands of people regarded as "pro Gaddafi" loyalists. The government formed in the capital had little control over bands of armed young men refusing to go home and militias holding on to their patches of turf. Any quotidian gain from this transformation of the state was obviously not going to be apparent in the short term. The secrets that Gaddafi may have exposed had he been put on trial – notably the disappearance of the Imam Musa Sadr, Lockerbie and his dealings with western leaders - were buried with him.

Syria

The 'success' of the Libya operation created the template for action against Syria. The catalyst for the protest movement was the arrest in Dar'aa of children for writing graffiti on a wall, yet it soon became clear that Syria was being targeted by governments and groups whose interests were not reform but the destruction of a government which had stood in the way of Israel and the US for decades and was loathed by the *ikhwan* and salafists everywhere. The peaceful campaign for reform was soon swamped in violence, by the state against armed gangs and "defectors" and by the latter against soldiers and civilians.

As it had done in Libya, the western media developed a false narrative, until it could no longer be maintained, that all the violence was one-way. The claims of "activists" or "human rights" organizations were reported with little or no attempt at verification. The Syrian government broadcast the tapes of interrogation of hundreds of armed men who had been arrested and confessed to a range of crimes, including the shooting of demonstrators, in such a way that the blame could be laid on the government. As the evidence piled up it became

clear that not all of it could be put down to information squeezed out of suspects by means for which the Syrian *mukhabarat* is renowned, if not more so than any other state security organization. Weapons and money were being smuggled into the country in large quantities: the weapons went up the scale from pump action shotguns to machine guns and rocket propelled grenade launchers.

As the central arch in the strategic relationship with Iran and Hizbullah, the downfall of the Baathist government would be a triumph of great strategic magnitude for the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, which has sat behind the scenes and allowed Qatar to take the Arab lead in the campaign against Bashar al Assad.

As the struggle with these countries has unfolded in the past decades, Syria has shown itself to be a wily and resourceful opponent. In Lebanon the US and Israel were ultimately outmaneuvered by both Hafez al Assad and Hizbullah. Israel was to suffer the death of a thousand cuts at the hands of Hizbullah during its long occupation of southern Lebanon, which it was forced to evacuate in 2000. The game continued in 2003 when the US Congress passed the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act (SALSA), opening the way to a broad range of sanctions. The assassination of Rafiq Hariri in 2005 was another man-made opportunity to corner Syria. The shock was used successfully as leverage to get remaining Syrian troops out of Lebanon, but the attempt to pin the murder on Syria failed when the UN special tribunal ruled four years later that the four "pro-Syrian" generals who had been arrested and imprisoned should be released for lack of evidence. In 2006 Israel launched an attack designed to destroy Hizbullah. This again ended in humiliation for Israel, which proved incapable of capturing and holding Lebanese villages a few kilometers from the armistice line.

In January this year the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia suffered another setback when the Hariri government collapsed in Beirut. Hariri is a US and Saudi protégé, who had acted for their interests in trying to outflank Hizbullah. This latest triumph for Hizbullah – and through Hizbullah for Syria and Iran – was followed on February 14 (three days before the uprising in Benghazi) by the uprising in Bahrain. Revolution was spreading across the region, but these two developments in particular fully awakened the near paranoia of the Saudi ruling family at the extent of Shi'a power and influence, from Iran and the gulf through to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. The Shia were demonstrating as Bahrainis but as far as the Saudis were concerned this was a Shia uprising fomented by Iran.

Insofar as Syria is concerned, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, Saudi Arabia's former ambassador to the US, and Jeffrey Feltman, a former US ambassador to Lebanon and presently the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, were reported to be working on a multilayered plan of destabilization as far back as 2008.⁶ They were said to have \$2 billion in hand for the purpose.

⁶ "Media sources reveal details of a conspiracy by Bandar bin Sultan and Feltman to 'destroy' Syria", www.champress.net/index.php?q=en/article/view/86507. Feltman also served as special assistant to US ambassador to Israel, Martin Indyk, during the Oslo "peace process".

There is no “smoking gun”: government conspiracies are usually not exposed until the archives are opened 20 or 30 years later, but some things can be proven. One is the attempt to weaken Syria through SALSA and another is the funneling of millions of dollars to Syrian exiles and exiled groups through the State Department program called the Middle East Partnership Initiative. The money is channeled through the Los Angeles-based Democracy Council. The London-based Movement for Change and its Barada satellite television station are among the beneficiaries, according to information leaked by Wikileaks from US diplomatic correspondence. Proxy organizations have been used to send money to the opposition inside Syria as well. The deadly intent of the US government was made clear by Feltman when, speaking at a congressional hearing, he said that the US would “relentlessly pursue our two-track strategy of supporting the opposition and diplomatically and financially strangling the [Syrian] regime until that outcome is achieved”.⁷

In its confrontation with the Syrian government the US and its European allies were joined by Turkey, which gave support to the so-called “Free Syrian Army and hinted at the possible establishment of a “buffer zone” across the Syrian border. The French Foreign Minister, Alain Juppé, talked of establishing a ‘humanitarian corridor’ inside Syria. These euphemisms have to be reduced to what they actually mean, which is the invasion of Syrian territory, with all the dangers attendant on such a move. In both Libya and Syria – but not elsewhere – the US and its allies used the rhetoric of human rights to advance long-standing strategic aims, which, if successfully carried through, will change the shape of the Middle East for decades to come. An unprecedented opportunity has arisen to reshape the region behind the screen of the “Arab spring” and the “west” is reaching for it. One would have to be entirely oblivious to the last two centuries of European and American intervention to think that what is now happening is altruistic in nature.

Qatar and Turkey

A striking feature of the “Arab spring” was the emergence of Turkey and Qatar as key players. In the aftermath of the uprising in Egypt, the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, abruptly reversed the “zero problem” foreign policy they had developed since coming into government in 2002. In the wake of the uprising in Benghazi they decided to ride the crest of the wave of reform. This was bound to work with Libya, given that Gaddafi could not resist the aerial might of the US, Britain and France forever, but proved to be more problematic with Syria. Turkey appeared to dive in head-first without weighing all the consequences of the various strands of its policy.

⁷ Aisling Byrne, “A mistaken case for Syrian regime change”, *Conflicts Forum*, conflictsforum.org/2012/a-mistaken-case-for-syrian-regime-change/

Not only was there strong domestic opposition to the government's confrontational line, but the sanctions imposed by Turkey were hurting small businessmen in the southeast who trade across the Syrian border and often have relatives on the other side. As part of its new stance, Turkey allowed the "Free Syrian Army" to operate from bases in southeastern Turkey, with other NATO members reportedly providing weaponry and training. It supported the establishment of the Syrian National Council in Istanbul, only to discover that the council and the internal Syrian opposition could not work together.

A particular point of discord was the call for external intervention by leading members of the council (notably Burhan Ghaliun) and the rejection of western armed intervention by the internal opposition and even some exiles. Russian and Chinese opposition make it unlikely that the UN Security Council will be able to pass another 'no fly zone' resolution but intervention still remained possible. According to Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Russian Security Council, speaking in early January, NATO members and the Gulf States were planning to intervene: "The main strike force will be supplied not by France, Britain and Italy but possibly Turkey".⁸ If Turkey does go so far as to intervene in Syria, an historical precedent will have been set.

The slogan by which Turkey lives is "peace at home and peace abroad" and possibly not since the republic was established in 1923 has a Turkish government ordered military intervention across its borders without direct infringements on or threats to its territorial integrity. Turkey has intervened repeatedly in northern Iraq in pursuit of PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) fighters who have launched attacks inside Turkey and intervention in Cyprus in 1974 followed the intention of the military junta then ruling Greece to declare *enosis* with Cyprus. Overt armed intervention in Syria would be fraught with the most serious regional and global consequences yet it seems that Turkey's government has been swayed by the flattery it has received from the outside on its success as a "moderate" Muslim government and its standing as a regional power.

Given its miniscule size and population Qatar would seem to be punching above its weight, but its involvement in the attack on Libya and its influence in setting the agenda for Syria have been critical. It collaborated with the US, Britain and France in attacking Libya, committing special forces for the purpose, and went on to take an even more aggressive stance against Syria. It has orchestrated anti-Syrian sentiment at the Arab League and has consistently demanded armed intervention against the Syrian government. When General Dabi, the Sudanese head of the Arab League monitors sent to Syria, remarked during a visit to Homs that the situation seemed "quiet", Qatar campaigned (unsuccessfully) for the entire team to be withdrawn. With the monitors coming under continuing

⁸ "Discord Among Arab Monitors as Russia Warns of Syria Intervention", *Al Akhbar English*, January 12, 2012. Online at www.english.al-akhbar.com/content/discord-among-arab-monitors-russia-warns-syria-intervention.

criticism from "activists", Qatar's emir, Shaikh Hamid bin Khalifa al Thani, again called for intervention, this time specifically by an Arab military force.

In its coverage of the situation in Libya and Syria, Al Jazeera clearly followed the government line. As a main source of news and comment, it significantly shaped the mainstream western media position on Syria. Other sources included human rights groups and exiles feeding the accusations of activists inside the country to the global media. Reports by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the UN Human Rights Council were largely based on unverified accusations and took almost no account of the counter-charges by the Syrian government, despite the mounting evidence that armed gangs and "defectors" supported with arms and training from beyond Syria's borders were killing thousands of soldiers and civilians.

Conclusion

How the "Arab spring" is turning out obviously depends on perspective. For the Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and salafists everywhere it has certainly gone very well in North Africa. A new and unprecedented phase of history has been opened up. Moroccans, Tunisians, and Egyptians have elected governments which describe themselves as "moderate" but are bound by their own doctrines to push conventional law further in the direction of sharia law. The mainstream Muslim parties will be pushed to go ever further by the salafists. In theory the Muslim parties are committed to the struggle against Israel, but in fact their policies are likely to be pragmatic.

As long as Egypt maintains the treaty with Israel it will continue to receive US military and economic aid, with further financial support flowing in from Saudi Arabia. Money will be a powerful incentive not to rock the boat. Breaches of human rights as they affect women in particular but all liberals irrespective of gender or religion will be left for reprimands in the State Department's country reports. As the first year of the "Arab spring" drew to an end the results were mixed. The outcome in Syria remained uncertain, demonstrations continued in Yemen and Bahrain but elsewhere there had been no change or change that could only dismay the young activists who got the revolution off the ground.

This is particularly the case in Egypt, where the hundreds of thousands of people massing in Tahrir Square were calling for a liberal Egypt and not a religious reformulation of the old regime. The fruits of the revolution have been voted out of their hands into the hands of movements that played almost no part in it, but as the Muslim Brotherhood and the salafists will say, this is democracy. Now that the Islamists have taken the reins of government, the liberal tradition which has prevailed in Egypt through all vicissitudes faces its greatest challenge.

U.S. and Saudi interests converge almost seamlessly and in the "Arab spring" both have grasped the opportunity to remake the Middle East so as to isolate and if possible destroy their common enemies. The election results in North Africa have given significant impetus to their drive to block Iran and contain

Shiism whether in the gulf, Iraq, Syria or Lebanon. There are echoes here of western "defense" plans of the 1950s, centering on the building of an alliance of conservative states against "radical" Arab nationalism and the Soviet Union. These doctrinally committed Sunni Muslim governments could be expected to be antipathetic if not actively hostile to Iran and Shia Islam.

The US has suffered losses (Mubarak and Ben Ali) and has to live with numerous uncertainties, but for now the situation in the gulf has been stabilized, the Syrian government has been gravely weakened and governments have come into power in North Africa which has signaled their willingness to work with Washington even at the expense of Palestine. For Israel the "Arab spring" has allowed the Netanyahu government to move ahead with its settlement projects for the West Bank and East Jerusalem with less media attention than ever. The lasting, tragic legacy of the "Arab spring" may be the benefits it delivered to those movements which did not fight for the revolution but benefitted from it, along with those governments, notably the US and its western and regional allies, whom it caught off guard before they recovered their footing and set about turning it to their advantage.

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