

THE ARAB UPRISINGS AND THE NEW GEOPOLITICS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

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The Arab uprisings are not only transforming the political structures of Arab states and societies. The geopolitics of the region is also undergoing profound change. New bonds and alliances are formed, and new regional powers are on the rise. This new security architecture is obviously still in the making and much depends on the final outcomes of the Egyptian revolution and the Syrian crisis. However, this article will suggest that we are witnessing the contours of a change in the Arab regional order not seen since the 1967 war.

Power Change

The last decade in the Arab World has to a large extent been dominated by powers in the Gulf, and especially by the fierce security competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The two historical rivals have competed for political and religious influence, and have engaged in proxy-rivalling in the region's hotspots from Lebanon to Palestine and Iraq. Often, the two regional players have succeeded in using foreign policy to balance domestic discontent, playing on sectarian and ethnic strife regionally, while calming dissent internally. Each side has thus led competing regional forces and division between Sunnis and Shias, pro-Western and anti-Western movements causing some regional actors to fear a so-called Shia Crescent and others to fear the growing influence of Wahabism. However, with the Arab uprisings, the Gulf powers may now see their regional influence partially weakened as they are challenged both domestically and regionally. This may also potentially shift some of the regional power from the Gulf to the Levant and the Mashreq.

Until now, the calls for political change in neighbouring countries have not led the Saudi King to pursue reforms from above, as in for instance the Kingdoms in Jordan and Morocco. Instead, King Abdullah has appointed the highly conservative and only ten years younger Prince Nayef as his new Prime Minister and possible heir to the throne. However, this may make the Kingdom more vulnerable to political developments in the rest of the region and to accusations of double standards. Saudi Arabia has succeeded in balancing its foreign policy against domestic grievances, supporting the uprisings in Libya and Syria, while repressing dissent internally and in neighbouring Bahrain. But it is far from certain that the Kingdom will be able to maintain its foreign policy balance faced with new political leaderships in

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Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and possibly in Syria. Under Mubarak, Egypt was a close ally of the Saudi Kingdom, but the new leadership in Egypt is more likely to lessen its ties with it, aspiring to becoming a regional heavyweight and political model in its own right, possibly competing for regional influence against the Saudi Kingdom.

Paradoxically the Iranian regime also appears increasingly strained in part as a result of the Arab uprisings. Initially, Tehran certainly viewed the demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt favourably and quickly dispatched emissaries to meet with the Egyptian opposition. In the eyes of Tehran, the Arab peoples were ousting their leaders because they were mere puppets of the US and Israel, and Iran consistently spoke of the Arab uprising as an Islamic awakening rather similar to Iran's own revolution in 1979. Some Western observers also feared that the Arab uprisings would strengthen Iran, if in no other respect because the regime changes seemed to weaken Israel. But with the fall of Gaddafi – who obviously was no puppet of the US and Israel – and the continuous bloodshed in Syria, it has become difficult for Tehran to maintain the anti-imperialist narrative. The Iranian leadership is now faced with economic hardship at home and a hardening of international sanctions. Politically, the Iranian leadership has lost much political legitimacy as a result of the crackdown on the Green Movement, and the leadership may fear that Iranians once again are spurred to demonstrate as they watch the uprisings in neighbouring Arab countries unfold. Economically, Tehran is also under heavy pressure due to skyrocketing inflation rates, dwindling foreign exchange reserves and a toughening of international sanctions. Geopolitically, Iran will probably step up its engagement in Iraq as the US withdraws. However, Iran knows that it will lose its most important ally in the region if the al-Assad regime falls and Iran may, as a result, see its influence over Hezbollah and Hamas similarly diminished. The last few months of high rhetoric and threats to close the Strait of Hormuz can therefore also be seen as an indication of Iran's strenuous position, rather than just declarations of Iranian policy and intent.

Whereas Iran is currently on the losing end of the Arab Spring, other regional powers stand to gain. Egypt and Turkey are the two most obvious candidates here. Much of course depends on the final outcome of the on-going changes in Syria and the Arab world at large, and on how the new Egyptian leadership performs in terms of the difficult economic challenges ahead. However, if the military withdraws from political life and Egypt manages to marry pluralism, Islamism and some form of neo-liberal economy, Egypt arguably has the potential to re-emerge as the region's leading player as in the heyday of Nasser and Pan-Arabism. Egypt may play a new role as "inspirational model" and may strengthen its role in the Arab League as well as in regional conflict resolution and mediation, which for more than a decade have been dominated by the Gulf States. Recently, the Egyptians sponsored unity talks between Fatah and Hamas and have negotiated the exchange of prisoners between Israel and Hamas, and this type of brokering will also be in increasing regional demand in terms of the conflicting parties in Lebanon,

Palestine and Syria. Here, Egypt might also hold an advantage compared to some of the other regional players trying their hand at regional conflict solution, insofar as Egypt is not weighed down by the “Ottoman heritage” nor by the mistrust surrounding some of the smaller Gulf States.

Turkey also seems to be gaining slightly from the Arab Spring. Over the past years, Turkey has increasingly turned toward the Middle East and revised its former zero-problem foreign policy. Turkey has dissociated itself from its close alliance with Israel and has taken a strong position on the Palestinian issue. This increased Turkey’s popularity in the Arab world even before the Arab uprisings. However, Turkey’s break with al-Assad in Damascus and its acceptance of the Syrian opposition sent an unusually strong signal to the region. Siding with political change, Turkey estimated that Bashar al-Assad was on the wrong side of history, and decided to support the opposition in exile. This is likely to give Turkey a strong position vis-à-vis a new leadership in Damascus, but also in the region at large. The parliamentary successes of the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt and al-Nahda in Tunisia have led many to discuss the extent to which Turkey can serve as an inspirational model, especially in terms of the economy. The Islamist parties in Egypt and Tunisia know that the road to re-election runs through economic progress and they look to the AKP in Turkey for inspiration, not to Iran or Saudi Arabia. Even so, Turkish influence should not be overstated. Turkey remains a secular and non-Arab state and is unlikely to claim the same kind of regional legitimacy as competing regional powers, just as Egypt is more likely to view itself as an “exporter” rather than an “importer” of political ideas.

New Alliances and Divisions – New Risks and Opportunities

The Arab revolutions are not only changing the regional balances of power, they are also creating new bonds and divisions. Throughout the past decade, the region has been marked by a somewhat rigid divide and alliance structure that have separated so-called moderates from radicals and pro-Western from anti-Western states. Countries such as Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have occupied one side of the divide, while Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas have occupied the other. Sectarian divisions between Sunnis and Shias have been heavily reinforced as a result of this alliance pattern, just as local conflicts have become scenes for regional rivalling between the two camps as evident in Lebanon, Iraq and the Palestinian territories.

However, the Arab revolts may now create a new division between what could be called “revolutionary powers” and status quo powers. The former is made up of states in which the people have successfully

revolted or where governments unequivocally have sided with the uprisings, such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Turkey, whereas the status quo powers consist of such different states as Iran, Algeria, Syria and perhaps Israel, which are all keen to keep the old regional order intact. This new divide obviously creates rather strange bedfellows and sparks new regional tensions and arenas for conflict, as is evident from the crisis in Syria. But it also has the potential to dampen old fault lines because it cuts across the rather rigid pro-Western, anti-Western, Sunni-Shia moderate-radical divide.

In fact, the moderate-radical, anti-Western-pro-Western divides may turn out to be increasingly irrelevant. For instance, the Islamist parties hold a majority in the new parliaments in Tunisia and Egypt but this will hardly make the two states part of a "radical" Islamist side together with, for instance, Iran and Hezbollah. Conversely, Saudi Arabia can with its strict interpretation of Islamic laws and its take on political reform only with difficulty be described as belonging to a moderate camp, and this situation is unlikely to change even as the Arab uprising carries on. Similarly, the pro-Western, anti-Western divide may turn out to be less meaningful for our understanding of regional politics in the years to come. Egypt, Tunisia and Turkey will not be as pro-Western as in the past, and they will likely be more critical of the foreign policies of the EU and the US in particular. But this does not imply that they will be anti-Western. Rather, it can be expected that the new incumbents will be interested in deepening the economic cooperation with the EU, developing the European Neighbourhood Policy framework and the Union for the Mediterranean, just as a new leadership in, for example, Egypt is unlikely to turn down US billion dollar aid and military hardware.

What we may be seeing the contours of is, however, a new sense of Arab consciousness and assertiveness, which can give the region more autonomy vis-à-vis outside powers, somewhat similar to what Europe gained in the aftermath of the Cold War. Social media and transnational news networks playing such a vital role in the Arab uprisings have created a new sense of Arabness and community feeling, and this may also translate into increased regional cooperation, as we have already seen for instance in terms of the new Egyptian and Libyan cooperation agreements – unthinkable just a year ago – just as the Arab League's Syrian Peace Plan is a testimony to this development. Amidst the tragic events in Syria and the uncertainties concerning the revolutions in Egypt and Libya, this is a positive development, which should be celebrated. However, it is also clear that this new regionalism might be hampered by the impetus of some powers to use regional organizations to further their own geostrategic interest at the expense of stability in the region as a whole. Syria will be a litmus test of the degree to which the region is heading towards more cooperative security arrangements.