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## Geo-Strategic Consequences of the Arab Spring

Erzsébet N. Rózsa

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*Erzsébet N. Rózsa\**

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**Pre-Arab Spring Regional Transformation**

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The Arab Spring started in the midst of a deep structural transformation of the Middle East, in the course of which three non-Arab power centres were emerging (Israel, Iran and Turkey), while the group of Arab states were losing relevance in comparison – both as a group and as individuals. Although the group of Arab states has never been a homogenous political (economic, social, etc.) unit, the political rhetoric and the cultural and especially emotional sense of belonging lent power (albeit mostly soft power) to the concept of Arab unity. The individual Arab countries traditionally accepted as leading voices among the other Arab states (Egypt, Iraq, Syria) have lost much of their projected “charm” due to several factors, while among the former “moderate” Arab states Saudi Arabia preferred not to take the lead.

Israel's strategic neighbourhood was swiftly changing: political actors identifying themselves increasingly with Islamic credentials were taking the place filled formerly by mostly secular states. The increasing Israeli disinterest in seriously putting the Palestinian issue on the agenda resulted in Israel's almost total isolation within its geographical region, making it impossible for the Gulf Arab states to join Israel in its attempt to curb the perceived Iranian threat of the nuclear programme.

Iran had possibly reached the limits of its expanding influence, which most notably included the ability to spoil rather than the ability to constructively contribute to the region's security. Its ongoing conflict on the global level over its nuclear programme has added to Iran's relevance and self-perception, while raising concern among its uneasy Arab neighbours in the Gulf.

Turkey seemed to emerge as the benevolent regional power, on the one hand setting the example of a democracy within a Muslim context, highly propagated by the US and the European Union and, on the other hand, acting as a mediator in conflicts in its direct and not-so-direct neighbourhood.<sup>1</sup> Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's zero-problem-with-the-neighbours policy, Turkey's NATO membership, its accession negotiations with the European Union (even if stalled) and its being accepted both by the Arab political elite and the public, for the first time since the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, clearly boosted its position.

The external Middle Eastern power, the United States, was rapidly losing sympathy, in which the foremost element was its unconditional stand by Israel<sup>2</sup> and also unprecedented influence in the region. While still the global superpower, the individual interests of the regional states and the region's own dynamics have come to overrule or even counter US interests. This included the fast deteriorating Turkish-Israeli

1. I. Balogh “Törökország szerepe az iráni atomvitában” [Turkey's Role in the Iranian Nuclear Debate], *Külvügyi Szemle*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2009/4, pp. 18-37 or I. Balogh et al., “Building on Experiences of Mediation in the Arab World – Assessing Positive Conditions for the Middle East Conference”, *The Academic Peace Orchestra*, <http://academicpeaceorchestra.com/?p=policybriefs>

2. Arab public opinion polls have regularly confirmed that it was the US “biased” behaviour in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that mostly defined its perception. See e.g. the Arab Public Opinion Polls led by Shibley Telhami annually, [www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu)

relations and the inability to forge an alliance countering the perceived Iranian nuclear threat.

The role and the capability of the European Union to influence events, in spite of the already three layers of institutionalized cooperation within the Mediterranean basin (the EMP, the ENP and the UfM<sup>3</sup>), were declining. Although its attraction on a personal level was high (as reflected in the public opinion polls<sup>4</sup>), due to the financial crisis even its ability as the “economic giant” was losing credibility. Politically (as a “political dwarf”) it could never gain a strong position (as reflected, for example, by the southern participation, or the lack thereof, on the 10th anniversary of the Barcelona Process).

The Arab Spring gave a new impetus and possibly a new direction to the transformation of the region, by the very fact that the “people” became mobilized and Islam officially entered politics. But the developments were not always and not necessarily induced by the Arab Spring only, although they may have been influenced by it. The main strategic trends influencing the transformation were the proliferation of weak states and the withdrawal of US troops. As a result, the internal dynamics of the region have become more important than the interests of the external powers, which have increasingly lost the power to influence the developments.

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3. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) or Barcelona Process, started in 1995; the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), launched in 2004; and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), established in 2008.

4. See e.g. the Arab Public Opinion Polls led by Shibley Telhami annually, [www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu)

**What Has Changed in the Arab Spring?**

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## Changes of Actors – New Actors Emerging?

Beside its unexpected and spontaneous character, one of the most striking factors of the Arab Spring was that there was no organizing political force. Neither did the old actors try to take control of the situation, nor has any new actor emerged, apart from the “people”, the appearance of which in the form experienced during the demonstrations was an unusual phenomenon in the Arab world.<sup>5</sup> The Arab Spring started as a popular grass-roots mobilization of the society in every country, yet, while it indicated undergoing social change, the neo-patrimonial character of the Arab societies was maintained. What happened was the reorganization of the old political actors and a new distribution of power, which included the “legalization” of the so far sidelined or suppressed Islamists.

### The “People”

The most unforeseen element in the Arab Spring was precisely the “people”, who, although in reaction to the long well-known serious public grievances, took to the streets and by peacefully demonstrating (in Tunisia and Egypt, but initially elsewhere too) achieved the departure of the dictators. Whether the “spread of democracy” initiatives by the US<sup>6</sup> and the European Union<sup>7</sup> had any impact over the years is difficult to say. However, the very fact that the Arab Spring started as an indigenous grass-roots democratic exercise also meant that if the “people” did not organize themselves into a political force, they would soon disappear from the political scene as a political actor. Although they would still retain the ability to influence politics as the controversy evolving in Egypt over the power of the President shows, it is increasingly clear that demonstrations are no substitutes for political organization and programmes covering the wide range of issues a government has to manage, even if the rhetoric of “reform” and the increased attention to public opinion have changed the political scene. Ultimately, the “people” could not become part of the real sphere of political decision-making in the traditional Arab social order,<sup>8</sup> yet any government will have to be careful to take public opinion into consideration. It may be argued though that this coincides with and complements the Islamic sensitivity to public needs and the increasingly Islamic character of the governments (both in the Arab Spring states and elsewhere). So, while in a way the “people” could not become real political actors, they and the satisfaction of their needs have become an important factor on the agenda of any regime or government.

5. It could be argued that the bread (or food) riots that swept through Egypt in 1977 and the Maghreb in the 1980s could have been a kind of forerunner to the demonstrations in the beginning of the Arab Spring, yet those were of a different dimension and have not become politicized the way the events of the Arab Spring have.

6. E.g. President George W. Bush's Greater Middle East Initiative, G.C. Gambill, “Jumpstarting Arab Reform: The Bush Administration's Greater Middle East Initiative”, *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, Vol. 6, No. 6-7, June-July 2004, [http://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0407\\_me2.htm](http://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0407_me2.htm)

7. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership included in its political and security “basket” issues of democratization. However, it was the European Neighbourhood Policy which included democratization steps, reforms, etc., in the Action Plans concluded with the partner states and made them the condition on further developing relations.

8. It should be noted that it was in one of the most conservative Arab societies, Libya, that Muammar Gaddafi introduced the *jamahiriyya*, the direct participation of the “people” in political decision-making, but the experiment failed.

## The Islamists

Increased attention to the public and the reference to public legitimation is not far from the Islamists, whose presence on the political scene was not an entirely new phenomenon in the absolute sense, since they, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, used to be present in different forms and positions well before the Arab Spring started. The regimes had developed different methods and tools to “manage” the challenge the Muslim Brotherhood posed, and suppressed them underground or into exile, or imprisoned their leaders and activists, or – to a different extent over space and time – pushed them quietly into the background, or even let some of their political formations (parties) run for and get into parliament. One of the biggest changes initiated by the Arab Spring, however, was the unprecedented acknowledgement and embracement of the Islamists, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, which used to form the backbone of the Islamist opposition to any Arab government, into the official political fold. Their “skyrocketing” into government positions in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco, mostly as the main coalition partner, was not unexpected. In the past decades the public has turned towards Islam and the Islamization of everyday life has become increasingly manifest. The Islamic organizations, however, many in opposition to the governments but outside the legal political arena, could remain clear of the charges against the political elites (corruption, nepotism, etc.). Therefore, their legitimacy was very strong. It was, therefore, unexpected that the Islamists maintained such a low profile in the demonstrations. However, when the Islamists decided to enter the political arena and play by the “rules”, i.e. the internationally accepted norms of organizing themselves into parties, participating in elections and writing the constitution, and so on, they were bound to win and by large margins. In return, their legitimate presence in politics was not only established in domestic terms, but was also accepted by the West, the US and the European Union.

This, however, had several direct and indirect consequences: by becoming part of the “official” political elites, the Muslim Brotherhood had been at once challenged by other more radical Islamist groups, usually belonging to different Salafi interpretations and by some with terrorist links (al-Qaeda). This may be the case even if some Salafi movements also made it to the parliament in the course of the elections, as in Egypt.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the success of a transforming Muslim Brotherhood in government is in the best interest of the US and the European Union, because either an eventual failure or an unfolding chaos would probably be followed by further Islamization and radicalisation.

By accepting the Islamists as legitimate political actors and by engaging with them, the US and the European Union will soon have to find an answer to how they should relate

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9. In Egypt, the Salafi Nour Party received 24.3% of the votes and thus gained 121 seats in the People's Assembly.

to Hamas, which was elected democratically according to western “rules of the game” in January 2006. Historically, Hamas is an offspring of the Muslim Brotherhood, which by coming into power is providing an opening and possible international acknowledgement for Hamas if it keeps to the new rules of the game and undergoes a transition. With Israel’s increasing isolation, its unrelenting policy of settlement expansion and the new status of the Palestinians in the UN General Assembly, it will be increasingly difficult for the European Union and the US not to talk to Hamas.

### The Myth and Reality of Arab Unity

The Arab *umma* was broken down into several “nation-states” in the framework of the new world order following the First World War. Paradoxically, this was the period when Arab nationalism started to take root. Although the new state borders prevented the Arab countries from re-establishing the political unity of the Arab countries within one state, Arab unity (*wahda arabiyya*) has remained an obligatory element of Arab rhetoric ever since.<sup>10</sup> This disguised the fact that during the decades the Arab states have developed indigenous state identities based on indigenous interests within territorial borders, and that even the public, for which the common Arab identity has been an emotional issue, have developed a territorial state-based identity. Stereotypes among the inhabitants of the different Arab countries have been noted for decades, while the political slogans of Arab unity have run hollow, especially with the increasing failures of representing joint-Arab issues on the international fora.

For the Arab public the Arab Spring was an emotional process as it filled the long hollow concept of Arab unity with a new meaning. The sense of belonging together was palpable and people in the different Arab countries were proud of the achievements in the other countries. On the other hand, the Arab Spring signalled the end of Arab “exceptionality” and proved that the Arab people are also capable of initiating democratic transformation. The feeling of “yes, we can” has swept through the region.

At the same time, the events in the different Arab states have clearly manifested the end of the “Arab world” as it had been known and gave way to a group of historically, culturally and linguistically related “nation-states”. During the demonstrations, not only Islamic but pan-Arab slogans were missing too. Instead, national flags were presented and the demonstrators were Tunisians, Egyptians, Libyans, and so on. The new Arab nation-states’ identities may be made up of similar elements, but the identities they produce will be different. Their “Arabness” will be different from the old and politically failed notion of Arab nationalism. Their Islam, so far either co-opted or “managed” has become an acknowledged and legitimate political element, reflecting the fact on the ground that

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10. With such phrases as the “Arab community” (*al-umma al-‘arabiyya*), the “Arab homeland” (*al-watan al-‘arabi*), the “Arab citizen” (*al-muwatin al-‘arabi*), etc.

Islam has come back as the “natural” context of state and society. But the most differentiating element will be the indigenous national identity based on the territorial state.

This process of fragmentation and further development away from each other by the Arab states eliminated once and for all the dream of a politically and strategically viable Arab *umma*. While emotionally the sense of unity was re-strengthened, there in fact remained only two issues, which (may) still enjoy all-Arab support: Palestinian statehood and regional arms control, also closely related to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In a stark contrast with the increasing individualization of the Arab states, the Arab League, symbolizing all-Arab unity, seemed to come to a new life, reflecting the transformation and acting in an unprecedented way. Asking for and supporting a UNSC resolution on Libya was followed by Arab League action on Syria. Although the monitoring mission and mediation efforts failed, and Syria’s membership was suspended, the Arab League alone was not able to solve the Syrian crisis. Kofi Annan and then Lakhdar Brahimi were appointed as the representatives of both the UN and the Arab League but the management of Arab hotspots has been increasingly left to indigenous Arab states: the Gaza conflict to Egypt, and the Syrian civil war and regime change to Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

### Models to Follow or Indigenous Development?

The first attempts to describe the strategic implications of the Arab Spring tended to see the developments in a simplified way, drawing up models which embodied the “wishful thinking” of some, and the prestige and even propaganda of others. The starting point of these models was the soft power Iran and, more recently, Turkey were successfully projecting in the Arab states and especially among the public. While Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has been among the most popular politicians for some years, by 2010 Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has overtaken him in Arab public opinion polls.<sup>11</sup> Turkey has become generally considered as the country playing the most constructive role in the Middle East, before Saudi Arabia and Egypt in 2010.<sup>12</sup> In 2011 it was considered the country which played the most constructive role in the Arab awakening<sup>13</sup> by far.

Since following 1979 Iran has pursued an ambitious regional agenda, starting with the declaration of the spread of the Islamic revolution but more significantly taking on a new dimension after the regime changes in Afghanistan and Iraq, one obvious model was the

11. 2010 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey, [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2010/8/05%20arab%20opinion%20poll%20telhami/0805\\_arabic\\_opinion\\_poll\\_telhami.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2010/8/05%20arab%20opinion%20poll%20telhami/0805_arabic_opinion_poll_telhami.pdf)

12. Ibid.

13. In the opinion of 50% of the respondents, with France as the second (30%) and the US as the third (24%), 2011 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey, [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2011/11/21%20arab%20public%20opinion%20telhami/1121\\_arab\\_public\\_opinion.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2011/11/21%20arab%20public%20opinion%20telhami/1121_arab_public_opinion.pdf)

“Iranian model”. In the official Iranian rhetoric it was the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979 that provided the ideological pattern for the Arab uprisings; consequently, the Arab Spring was usually referred to as an “Islamic awakening”.<sup>14</sup> The fact that Islamist political forces have entered the Arab legal and acknowledged political arena disguised the fact that the *velayat-e faqih* concept and the theory of Islamic government underlying the structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran could not find much acceptance in the Arab countries, if any. This is partly because it is considered too Iranian in an Arab context but mostly because Shiite Islam has no roots or impact, for example, in the practically homogenous, conservative Sunni societies of Libya or Tunisia. The same could be said of Egypt, where the coexisting and “competing” religious minority is Coptic Christian. But even in the Arab countries with some or more Shiite traditions (Syria, Yemen, Bahrain) Ayatollah Khomeini’s *velayat-e faqih* is not welcome. Therefore, the Iranian opposition rather thought that it was their 2009 demonstrations that could have been the model for the Arab people.

In the western (US and European) perception, the Iranian model was more a threat than an option since, in a way, they also interpreted the developments following the Arab uprisings, as the Iranian leaders did, as an “Islamic awakening”. Therefore, Turkey’s recently found popularity among the Arab public was most welcome and the Turkish example of Islam and democracy was presented as a model to be followed. This western stance, however, was controversial. It is widely observed in the Middle East that although Turkey is officially conducting accession negotiations with the European Union, these have come to a halt. And although in the official reasoning Islam is not mentioned, the fact that more than 95% of Turkey’s population is Muslim and the AKP government has often been called Islamist by European leaders is very much noted in the region. Yet the “Turkish model” was taken up by public parlance, even if its main attraction for the public was most probably Turkey’s unprecedented economic development. Although Turkish politicians and intellectuals warned that Turkey should not be considered a model but rather as “a source of inspiration”,<sup>15</sup> they tried to capitalize on the pro-Turkish sentiment and realize Turkish business interests. In this vein, it was Prime Minister Erdogan who was the first foreign leader to visit Libya after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi.

By the end of 2012, however, it became increasingly clear that the countries of the Arab Spring are going their own way and not only are they not following either the Iranian or the Turkish model but each is developing a model of its own. While in Tunisia the elections resulted in a coalition government of Islamist and secular parties, in Egypt the struggle for power between the military and the Islamists ended with the victory of the latter. Elections in Libya surprised everyone with the victory of secular parties, while in Yemen

14. E.g. “Supreme Leader’s view of Islamic Awakening”, 19th May 2011, [http://english.khamenei.ir/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1458&Itemid=13](http://english.khamenei.ir/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1458&Itemid=13)

15. E.g. Turkish Minister for European Affairs Egemen Bagis in his lecture at the Andrassy University in Budapest, in December 2012.

all the main political forces gathered behind the former vice-president, now elected president. In Bahrain, the demonstrations were put down with GCC help, and in Syria the protracted civil war prevents any model from evolving for the time being. Nevertheless, it has become evident that the transitions are taking much more time than originally expected and the end results are far from predictable.

### New Regional Order Arising?

The transformation of the Middle East and the Arab Spring seem to be finally and definitively reshaping the post-colonial regional order in the Middle East, which started to erode following the end of the Cold War. The basis of the emerging regional order will still be the nation-states, but

- The idea of several Arab states snowballing into one Arab political unit seems to be a closed chapter.
- The different Arab states have come very close to the European concept of nation-states; therefore, politically the notion of “Arab unity” has been taken over by a kind of historically, culturally and emotionally based “Arab alliance” or “Arab cooperation” over certain issues, based on coinciding interests.
- The Islamist parties in government, mostly the different local organizations of the Muslim Brotherhood, show no sign of attempting an “Islamic caliphate”, even if they are accused of cooperation based on shared values across the political borders, which seem to undergo transformation themselves.
- The transformation in the region carries the potential of the disintegration of some states, either formally (the Sudan), or de facto (the Kurdish regions in Iraq and most recently in Syria).

The two major strategic trends defining the new regional order are the proliferation of weak states<sup>16</sup> and the withdrawal of US troops from the region. The balance of power in the region has been changing fast, not because some states have become stronger but because they have become weaker; in other words, it is their relative balance that has changed. In consequence, five power centres can now be distinguished in the region: besides Israel, Iran and Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have re-emerged, partly reconstituting a former balance. At the same time, such “traditional” power centres among the Arab countries such as Iraq and Syria have temporarily lost weight, with the potential of a comeback only in an uncertain medium-to-long-run. Although occasionally smaller states may arise with huge political ambitions, most recently Qatar with its diplomatic activity, their relative weight – in hard and soft security terms – is limited.

16. The term “weak states” in this context means states that are not able to perform their core functions (enforcement of decision, weak rule of law, transitional institutions, etc.). This, however, has a direct impact on their ability of power projection, both hard power and soft power. “This leads to a significant loss in political latitude and [...] fewer options to influence their foreign policy trajectories in their regions. Their foreign policies become more reactive and their relations with foreign entities become less intensive in general.” I. Balogh, “The Middle Eastern Balance of Power in 2012 and its Implications for the Future”, in M. Majer, R. Ondrejčák and V. Tarasovic, *Panorama of global security environment 2012*, Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs, Bratislava, 2012, p. 468.

Therefore, while most of the traditional power poles are there, they have become stronger in relative terms only.

The Arab Spring has added to this trend of weakening not only by destabilizing several Arab states for shorter or longer periods but, with Egypt in transition, by weakening the most populous<sup>17</sup> and from many points of view still symbolic leading Arab state. Although after the fall of the “strong man” or dictator the sequence of events was taking a similar route in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya (transitional government and assembly > constitution > general elections), Egypt has become the symbol of the Arab transformation and thus the point of deduction and generalization. The Muslim Brotherhood winning the elections (with the Salafis coming in second)<sup>18</sup> and providing the new President signalled the advent of a new era: the readiness of the strongest and by far the most powerful regional Islamist movement and organization to enter politics according to the international norms, and the readiness of the international community, especially the western states, to acknowledge and embrace them. This was interpreted as a victory for the Islamist factors in general and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular. It also highlighted the fact that while the international community's norms and rules go on providing the context, the dynamic of the region itself has definitely gained in importance over great power interests in relative terms.<sup>19</sup>

The withdrawal of US troops from Iraq by the end of 2011 and the announcement of withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 give the impression and further strengthen the general belief that the United States is losing influence both globally and regionally. The debate within the United States about the cuts in the state budget, and especially in the military budget, seem to provide the rationale for downscaling the military presence in the Middle East and in the Persian Gulf, especially when maintaining security is gradually handed over to the local security forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. While this goes against the notion in American argumentation and academic thinking<sup>20</sup> that US military bases are necessary in order to avoid the eruption of local conflicts and maintain the security of strategically important regions, it can be expected that following the withdrawal competition, conflict and even armed clashes may/will increase in the region. This is a realistic scenario in a region where “overlapping Cold Wars” or even proxy wars have been evolving between Saudi Arabia and Iran (in Iraq, Yemen and Syria), between Turkey and Iran (in Syria and over the deployment of the missile shield), over and above the Arab-Israeli conflict.

17. Egypt has a population of approx. 82.5 million within the approx. 300 million combined population of the Arab states, <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/egypt/population>

18. The Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party won 235 seats (47.2%), while the Salafi Nour Party 121 seats (24.3%) in the 498-seat People's Assembly. “Egypt's Islamist parties win elections to parliament”, *BBC*, 21st January 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16665748>

19. “I firmly believe the relationship between Egypt and the US must be the best strategically and tactically, economically and politically... It is in our best interests to have good, solid relations with the US. It is not in our best interests to have tense relations with them. Egypt is the largest country in this region, so it has to have a place in the American strategy of relations with the Arab world. It's two-way traffic... I hope that there will be clear, frank and transparent relations between us. And I hope that the Egyptian government and Egyptian president will be in a position to say yes to the US, representing the consensus of the nation. And also to say no to the US when no is necessary. The era of 'yes sir' has to come to an end.” Former Egyptian Foreign Minister and former Secretary General of the Arab League Amr Moussa, “Egypt to US: Era of 'Yes, Sir' has Ended”, *Al-Monitor*, 28th May 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/egypt-to-us-era-of-yes-sir-has-come-to-an-end.html#ixzz2GpFoZhri>

20. See e.g. J. Mearsheimer, “Imperial by Design”, *The National Interest*, No. 111, January/February 2011, pp. 16-34.

Arab public opinion has, for several years in a row, perceived the United States and Israel as the gravest threats by far,<sup>21</sup> and the US military presence, especially in Saudi Arabia during and after the Gulf War (1991) did cause much resentment. This was further aggravated by the sanctions regime and the 2003 war in Iraq, including the public perception of the “success” of the democratization and state-building project there. After the widely advertised programme of the democratization of the Middle East launched by US President George W. Bush, the conduct of western governments, especially of the Obama administration, caused a huge disappointment among the public. The western support for the demonstrations came too late and was not substantial enough, even if the scope and content of that support has never been defined. And while the public gravely noted the support for the rulers, which is going on unabated in the “non-transiting” countries,<sup>22</sup> the Arab political elites have become more cautious in their assessment of their relationship with the US and of the role it is playing in the region. The circumstances surrounding the fall of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, but especially Mohamed Hosni Mubarak, which was considered as a betrayal by many, are perceived as warning signals.

Therefore, US withdrawal will be generally welcome in the region, even if some Arab states, especially those in the Persian Gulf, may feel uneasy about it. Yet even a downgraded US military presence will probably deter any direct consequences for them, although the indirect impacts are still too early to foresee. It should be noted, however, that while withdrawal of US troops has been a basic Iranian demand for more than two decades now, the American military presence – including the tactical nuclear weapons deployed – in NATO member Turkey has not been seriously challenged until recently. It was the planned deployment of elements of the NATO missile defence shield in Turkey that provoked some harsh Iranian statements.<sup>23</sup>

Downscaled US military presence coupled with decreasing US influence in general will probably result in the further decline of the US ability to influence the developments in the region. One of the most striking elements of the Arab Spring has been that it was happening without the US and Europe, with the only exception of Libya, and the possible intervention, even if indirectly, in Syria, the exact form of which is still to be seen. Though intervention as such has not been foreseen so far, the recent but not yet confirmed news about the use of chemical weapons, which was declared by President Obama a redline, may change that. The US (and the European Union for that matter) had no say whatsoever in the domestic transition of any of the Arab Spring countries, apart from the rather vague support for “democratic development”. While this may threaten the viability of the most basic US redlines – Israel’s security, including the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, the safe and secure flow of oil and gas supplies –, neither is expected to be

21. See e.g. the Arab Public Opinion Polls led by Shibley Telhami annually, [www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu)

22. Saudi Arabia is usually mentioned in the first place when the US and other western support for democratization is discussed in the Middle Eastern context. Should Bahrain be mentioned here as well?

23. For a summary of the controversy, see e.g. S. Demirta, “Turkey, Iran close to the point of no return on ties”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 19th December 2012, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-iran-close-to-the-point-of-no-return-on-ties.aspx?pageID=449&nID=37137&NewsCatID=429>



seriously challenged as it is in the best interest of any political actor in the region to keep its relations with the US stable, even if low-profile. Yet the bargaining position of the US and the terms of negotiations when safeguarding these interests may be different from what it used to be before. On the other hand, the weakening of the US positions in regional terms and the shrinking military presence will most probably induce a rush among the regional states to fill in the perceived vacuum, aggravating the regional Cold Wars and forming new alliances.

The European Union was mostly invisible in the course of the Arab Spring. With the institutions of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation defunct, no project started in the framework of the UfM since 2008, and ties to the (former) authoritarian regimes, the EU was losing more credibility, especially after Libya, and more specifically due to Syria. The EU's "New response to a Changing Neighbourhood" was too little, too late and did not reflect the facts on the ground in its southern dimension.

### Israel

In the course of the Arab Spring, Israel has become even more isolated in the region. With its self-understanding as a regional territorial state based on the Jewish-religious "promised land", economically and culturally it is connected to the outside world, especially to the US and Europe, rather than to its geographical surroundings. Israel has only 4% of its trade conducted with the Arab countries and feels no need or inclination to increase this trade volume.<sup>24</sup> The former Jewish communities in the Middle East have practically disappeared in the course of the Arab-Israeli wars, leaving no "recipient" for Israeli soft power.<sup>25</sup> Israel's regional relevance is based on its military supremacy, including its not-acknowledged-not-denied nuclear arsenal, and its conflict with its neighbours (Arab-Israeli/Palestinian-Israeli conflict). Consequently, its regional influence should rather be understood as its capacity and capability to defend itself rather than as a "core-state" in any political or civilizational (a la Huntington) sense.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, the Arab Spring – for most of the time – left Israel an outsider and bystander, which was in the beginning a rather favourable position: Israel was not mentioned in any demonstrations, and the Israeli leaders could see themselves justified in stating that the real problem – as the events show – was not the Palestinian issue but the presence of the autocratic regimes. No wonder Israel has kept a very low profile and the Israeli leaders were very cautious in their comments on the Arab Spring developments. Their main concern was Egypt where the transformation may have threatened the peace treaty, which they wanted to maintain by all means. Although Jordan, the only other Arab state

24. "Regional Cooperation as a Necessary Condition for a Successful and Sustainable Middle East Conference (MEC) on a WMD/DVs Free Zone (I)", workshop of the PRIF Academic Peace Orchestra Middle East, 23rd-25th May 2012, Alghero, Italy.

25. Paradoxically, the biggest Jewish community in the region – outside Israel – live in the Islamic Republic of Iran (approx. 25-30,000 people).

26. S.P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, Summer 1993, pp. 22-49.

to have concluded a peace treaty with Israel, has not undergone similar events, the domestic situation<sup>27</sup> there is closely followed by Israel for the same reason, and also because of the high percentage of Palestinians among Jordanian society.<sup>28</sup>

Paradoxically, the “democratization” of the Arab countries, the surfacing of the public will and, finally, the Islamist movements coming into power have proved contrary to Israel’s interest and even pose a threat for the country, which takes pride in referring to itself as “the only democracy in the region.” It has quickly become obvious that public feeling in every Arab country is much more anti-Israeli than the former and/or the remaining authoritarian governments are or used to be. But the Arab Spring has had some other, highly unwelcome consequences as well. It diverted hard-earned international attention away from the Iranian threat Israel still perceives as “existential” (in spite of the huge controversy of the nature of this threat among Israeli society, politicians, security forces and academia<sup>29</sup>). It completed the process of Israel losing Turkey as an ally, and manifested that – at least for the time being – emerging regional power Turkey was standing with the Arabs. And it has brought the Palestinian issue into the forefront of international attention in a most unwelcome way (for Israel).

Well before the Arab Spring started, the Israeli leaders made it clear that they do not think the time is right to negotiate a settlement with the Palestinians.<sup>30</sup> They claimed that with the rift between the Palestinian National Authority/PLO and Hamas there was no one to negotiate with and that they could not accept pre-conditions.<sup>31</sup> Although the Palestinians felt betrayed again,<sup>32</sup> the demonstrations in the Arab streets and for that matter in Israel as well,<sup>33</sup> provided new tactical tools, such as the Palestinian rush for the Israeli border or the use of the internet and Facebook to mobilize, and so on.<sup>34</sup> The developments have provided unprecedented support, both Arab and non-Arab, in the international arena, most notably in the UN. This signalled a new beginning: while in 2011 when Mahmoud Abbas presented the request for Palestinian statehood, the case could be indefinitely postponed and prevented from decision, in November 2012 the UN General Assembly approved by 138-to-9 (with 41 abstentions) the “non-member observer state” status of Palestine.<sup>35</sup> It should

27. The demonstrations at the beginning of the Arab Spring and re-starting in November 2012 were of special concern not only for King Abdullah but for Israel as well.

28. There are no precise statistics but it is widely believed that at least half (or maybe even more) of the Jordanian population are of Palestinian origin.

29. E.g. the statements by former Mossad chief Ephraim Halevy. “Halevy: Iranian nuke not existential threat to Israel”, *Jerusalem Post*, 4th August 2012, <http://www.jpost.com/Headlines/Article.aspx?id=280054>

30. Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Avigdor Liebermann in Budapest: “We can live together with this low intensity crisis.” “The Current Situation of the Middle East Peace Process”, lecture at the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, 1st February 2010, <http://www.hiia.hu/events/default.asp?id=XVXLLT>

31. PNA President Mahmoud Abbas demanded a freeze on settlements as a pre-condition as these would irreversibly change the geography and would make any viable Palestinian state impossible.

32. They were frustrated that their cause was not mentioned among the demands in the Arab demonstrations.

33. Parallel to the Arab Spring, Israel was the scene of regular social justice demonstrations.

34. E.g. “Palestinian Facebook group urges rushing of Israel’s borders”, *YNet News*, 18th May 2012, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4070748,00.html>, “Thousands of Arabs rushed the borders of Israel in order to stop the Judaization of Jerusalem”, *Prophecy Today*, 10th July 2012, [http://news.prophecytoday.com/2012\\_07\\_10\\_archive.html](http://news.prophecytoday.com/2012_07_10_archive.html)

35. “Palestinians win upgraded UN status by wide margin”, *BBC*, 30th November 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20550864>

be noted, however, that the Israeli political elite and the public are also divided on the issue, many, including former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert<sup>36</sup> and the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, supporting Palestinian statehood.<sup>37</sup>

The fact that with the exception of the Czech Republic, which voted no, the EU member states have either abstained from voting or voted yes is a clear shift from 2011<sup>38</sup> and a strong message to Israel. It signals Israel's further isolation in a context taken for granted for decades. (Germany's shift from "no" to abstention is especially remarkable.) The Israeli countermove of authorizing first 3,000 and then 1,600 new settlement buildings, especially in East Jerusalem, revealed a further widening gap between Israel and Europe. But it causes inconvenience for the US and the Obama administration, which has had a tense relationship with the present Israeli government.<sup>39</sup>

All this confirms Israel in its belief that it stands alone and can only depend on itself. It is yet to be seen what impact the January 2013 election results and the centrist challenge to the right-wing parties will have in the long run on Israeli security policy.

### The Islamic Republic of Iran

The Arab Spring seemed to offer a new opportunity for the Islamic Republic to position itself as a regional power by expanding its sphere of influence, taking advantage of the transition to further spread and re-strengthen its appeal as a state standing up to the Pax Americana and some of the staunchest US allies in the region. This was accompanied by the wish to deter the threat of a war by the US and/or Israel to prevent and pre-empt a perceived Iranian military nuclear programme and the impacts of the economic and financial sanctions.

Establishing formal and informal alliances has been a frequently used diplomatic tool especially characteristic of the two Ahmadinejad administrations, which looked far beyond the region – to the Far East, Africa and Latin America – for support to counterbalance the great powers in the debate before the UN Security Council over the Iranian nuclear programme. Militarily, however, Iranian ambitions had so far been restricted to Iran's direct neighbourhood (with the exception of the Lebanese connection). In the course of the Arab Spring developments, however, as the strongest partner in the "Resistance Front"

36. "Ehud Olmert, the former Israeli prime minister, today lent his support to the Palestinians, saying it was 'congruent with the basic concept of the two-state solution... Once the United Nations will lay the foundation for this idea, we in Israel will have to engage in a serious process of negotiations, in order to agree on specific borders based on the 1967 lines, and resolve the other issues,' he wrote in an e-mail message to Daily Beast reporter Bernard Avisahi." *The Telegraph*, 29th November 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/palestinianauthority/9711968/Europe-backing-for-Palestinian-UN-bid-surges.html>

37. As a principle, *Haaretz* started to use the term "Palestine" instead of "the Palestinian territories".

38. "Map: How Europe voted on Palestine at the UN, in 2011 and now", *The Washington Post*, 29th November 2012, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2012/11/29/map-how-europe-voted-on-palestine-at-the-u-n-in-2011-and-now/>

39. It also did not help when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was accused of trying to influence the US elections. "Senator Slams Netanyahu for Interfering in US Elections", *Jerusalem Post*, 14th September 2012, <http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=285067>, "PM: I'm not interfering in US presidential elections", *Jerusalem Post*, 14th September 2012, <http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=285089>

(*jabhat-al-muqawama*),<sup>40</sup> Iran was quick in presenting its ambitions, making rapid use of the change in the Egyptian government when, in February 2011 and then again in February 2012, two Iranian warships passed through the Suez Canal and docked in Tartous, Syria.<sup>41</sup> But the Iranian navy visited the Saudi port of Jeddah as a show of strength,<sup>42</sup> Iranian officers were negotiating in Sudan on joint training exercises,<sup>43</sup> and Iran pledged to deploy warships in the Atlantic on the day its first domestically-built oil tanker was launched.<sup>44</sup>

The balance of the Arab Spring for Iran is still negative, and the Iranian room for manoeuvre has been countered swiftly both in the Persian Gulf, where the US and its allies held their "largest-ever" joint military exercise<sup>45</sup> and US aircraft carriers have been coming and going in spite of Iranian threats to close the Strait of Hormuz,<sup>46</sup> and in the Levant, where Israeli leaders warned that they considered the Iranian warships' presence a provocation and they would be watching their movements closely.<sup>47</sup>

In spite of the fact that the regimes in transition are on the whole more benign towards Iran than their ousted predecessors, with closest ally Syria in a protracted cycle of violence and crisis, and the perhaps temporary halt to its Hamas contacts,<sup>48</sup> Iran is rapidly losing influence and soft power in the Levant, partly as the result of the Arab Spring developments, partly over its support for the Syrian regime, in spite of the fact that in Lebanon it still has a strong position.

On the global level, the sanctions aiming at the elimination/termination of the Iranian nuclear programme are gaining momentum, in spite of the fact that Iran has been successful in preventing political isolation. The Non-Aligned Movement presidency for the next two years

40. The "Resistance Front" is an ideologically based loose cooperation of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas. In "membership", it looks very much the same as the "Shiite crescent" (see e.g. "Making sense of the Arab Spring 7: Syria and the 'Shiite Crescent'", *The New Middle East*, <http://new-middle-east.blogspot.hu/2012/03/making-sense-of-arab-spring-7-syria-and.html>), but the ideology is different in the "Resistance Front" as it is the "war between the front of hegemony and the front of resistance" that features strongly, and not Shiite Islam. "Why Iran supports Syria?", *CNN*, 9th August 2012, <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/08/09/why-iran-supports-syria/>

41. These were the first and the second time since the 1979 Islamic revolution that Iranian warships were granted permission to pass through the Suez Canal. "Iran warships enter Mediterranean as tensions with Israel grow", *The Telegraph*, 18th February 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/9091084/Iran-warships-enter-Mediterranean-as-tensions-with-Israel-grow.html#>

42. "War of nerves: Iran's warships arrive in Saudi Arabia", *RT*, 5th February 2012, <http://rt.com/news/saudi-iran-navy-jeddah-533/>

43. "Sudan, after blast, greets Iran ships", *The Wall Street Journal*, 30th October 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203335504578088602246847788.html>

44. "Iran pledges to deploy warships in the Atlantic", *CNSNews.com*, 24th July 2012, <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/iran-pledges-deploy-warships-atlantic>

45. E.g. "US allies gear up for largest ever naval exercises in Persian Gulf, as Iran says it will watch", *Fox News*, 13th September 2012, <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2012/09/13/us-allies-gear-up-for-largest-ever-naval-exercises-in-persian-gulf-as-iran-says/>

46. "Iran Warns US Warships to Stay Out of Gulf", *The Wall Street Journal*, 4th January 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203462304577138451763801424.html>

47. "Iran warships enter Mediterranean as tensions with Israel grow", *The Telegraph*, 18th February 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/9091084/Iran-warships-enter-Mediterranean-as-tensions-with-Israel-grow.html#>

48. In February-March 2012, Iran and Hamas were drifting apart ("Hamas drifting away from longtime patron Iran", *al-Arabiya*, 10th February 2012, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/10/193818.html>), but by the end of 2012 they seem to have made up again ("Hamdan: Ties with Iran, Hezbollah Intact", *The Daily Star*, 7th December 2012, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2012/Dec-07/197548-hamdan-ties-with-iran-hezbollah-intact.ashx#axzz2GqESnsyM>).

will make isolation impossible, while oil and gas supply is still a strong bargaining chip. In this respect the Arab Spring does not feature strongly, with the only exception of Bahrain, and maybe to a lesser extent Yemen, where threats and counter-threats contribute to the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. On the whole, however, coercive measures are typically used by Iran to deter the US and Israel, and have not much relevance in the context of the Arab Spring.

## Turkey

In spite of the fact that Turkey's influence expanded during the Arab Spring as it was the model put to the Arab states and it was the only regional power that could engage with those in transition, the Arab Spring clearly manifested the limits to that power. On the one hand, the scope and substance of this influence was "selective". Geographically, Turkey was involved in its closer or direct neighbourhood only: it had no role in Tunisia, Bahrain or Yemen. But even in its closer neighbourhood it had no influence over the transition that was evolving either in Egypt or in Libya. Turkish leaders were quick to position their country not as a model but as a source of inspiration, and it was much more the expansion of economic and other soft power interests that was pursued.<sup>49</sup>

It is only in neighbouring Syria where Turkey has become directly involved. Syria has become not only the symbol of the limit to Turkish regional power but also a security threat. Syria terminated the myth of the "benevolent mediator" and signalled the failure of the "zero-problem-with-the-neighbours" policy as a means to secure Turkey's neighbourhood. The protracted civil war in Syria has resulted in huge waves of refugees<sup>50</sup> and in the formation of a Kurdish autonomy along Turkey's border.

Militarily, Turkey has kept a low profile until border clashes started on the Turkish-Syrian border in October 2012. (This was preceded by the shooting down of a Turkish fighter jet in June 2012.) Previously, the only dimension where Turkey turned to the military option was – in self-defence – in its war against the Kurdish PKK guerrilla fighters. This had meant occasional intrusions into mostly Iraqi territory or airspace, without any relevance for the Arab Spring. Although similar developments could have been expected from the Syrian Kurdish territory, it was along other parts of the Turkish-Syrian border (in the Sanliurfa and Hatay provinces) that most border incidents took place.

As a symbol of Turkey's break with the Assad regime, the finality of which was widely discussed in academic circles, Turkey has become not only the base of the Syrian opposition but also the channel through which arms and ammunition can be sent to the rebels.

49. Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan was the first foreign leader to visit the new Libya, even before French President Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister David Cameron.

50. "Syrian refugees in Turkey exceed 137,000: Minister", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 6th January 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syrian-refugees-in-turkey-exceed-137000-minister.aspx?pageID=238&nid=36678>

In October 2012 the Turkish Grand National Assembly authorized the military ground forces by a vote of 320-129 to enter “foreign countries” for operations.<sup>51</sup> In response to the armed clashes and airspace incidents, Turkey requested NATO to deploy Patriot surface-to-air missiles in Turkey. In January 2013, the deployment of Patriot missiles started, for “defensive purposes.”<sup>52</sup>

Although Iranian leaders were quick to criticize Turkey for the deployment of the missile shield, and the relationship between the two countries was shifting, Iran and Turkey have traditionally always been careful to avoid direct confrontation. Turkey has also been a crucial ally for Iran to circumvent some effects of the sanctions.<sup>53</sup>

In parallel, Turkey started to look for a new ally among the Arab states and in late 2012 the emergence of a Turkish-Egyptian axis defining the new regional order was increasingly mentioned. In March 2013, following the apology by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu for the 2010 flotilla incident, the way opened for a cautious amelioration of Turkish-Israeli relations.

## Egypt

The Arab Spring has evoked a mixture of opportunities and threats for Egypt. The demonstrations in Tahrir Square has made it the symbol of all Arab Spring developments, and the following domestic transition – including the victory of the Islamists in general and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, the consequent forcing of the military from political power and the controversy over the presidential powers – seems to offer a pattern for the transition of other Arab states, even if the circumstances elsewhere could be very different.

The perception of the emerging “new Egypt” seems to forecast the opportunity of a big “comeback”. The fact that it is the most populous Arab country by far (one third of Arabs live in Egypt), its historical experience and soft power, and its peace treaty with Israel are some of the most important elements supporting Egypt’s role. The coming into power of the Muslim Brotherhood provided a regional, if not international, cross-border dimension and leadership, which has contributed to the shift in the regional balance of power. Egypt has been “courted” by each regional power as a possible ally or at least collaborator. US-Egyptian relations may have become more cautious but strategic interests will keep them together. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited President Mursi two weeks after he entered office. The US is offering further support and debt relief but made it clear that Israel’s security is still very high on its agenda.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, President Mursi’s

51. “Parliament gives green light to Syrian cross-border raids”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 4th October 2012, [www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/parliament-gives-green-light-to-syrian-cross-border-raids.aspx?pageID=238&nID=31713&NewsCatID=338](http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/parliament-gives-green-light-to-syrian-cross-border-raids.aspx?pageID=238&nID=31713&NewsCatID=338)

52. “NATO deploys Patriot missiles in Turkey”, *al-Jazeera*, 4th January 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2013/01/201314192852477582.html>

53. The Turkish Halkbank was involved in mediating financial business when the leading Iranian banks came under sanctions.

54. “Clinton Visits Egypt, US Pledges Support for Egyptian People”, 15th July 2012, <http://geneva.usmission.gov/2012/07/16/clinton-visits-egypt-pledges-u-s-support-for-egyptian-people/>

brief visit to Tehran in August 2012 on the occasion of handing over the presidency of the Non-Aligned Movement to Iran was not received well by the US and Israel.

The maintenance of the peace treaty with Israel seemed to be a complicated affair. The Muslim Brotherhood signalled the possible renegotiation of the treaty, if not the outright cancellation thereof. The attack of the Israeli embassy in Cairo in September 2011, when the ambassador and the staff of the embassy had to be evacuated, and some one thousand people were injured,<sup>55</sup> manifested the public mood. And the fact that Hamas belongs to the Muslim Brotherhood family further complicated matters. On the other hand, quiet Israeli-Egyptian cooperation over the Refah crossing to Gaza had to be maintained, and the security situation in the Sinai made further understanding and cooperation necessary.

President Mursi was given a very warm welcome in Iran, in spite of the fact that he cut his visit as short as possible,<sup>56</sup> gave a speech taking sides with the “Syrian people” against the “oppressive regime”<sup>57</sup> and did not go to visit Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei although invited. But he also called for a regional group consisting of Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Egypt to help resolve the Syrian crisis – thereby providing legitimacy and a way out of isolation to Iran.

Egyptian-Turkish relations have started to be boosted, symbolized by Mursi's visit to Turkey and Erdogan's visit to Egypt, to the extent that a new regional order in the making was frequently mentioned.<sup>58</sup> It is yet to be seen if, with the economic problems and the increasing domestic challenges to President Mursi, Egypt will be up to the role the shifting regional balances offer it.

### Saudi Arabia

Following Egypt's isolation among the Arab states due to its peace treaty with Israel, the sanctions and then war and military occupation of Iraq, and the increasing isolation of Syria, Saudi Arabia has remained the politically most prominent Arab state, which, in certain cases, undertook a leading role, such as in the Arab peace initiative in 2002 or the mediating efforts at soliciting Palestinian national unity. On the whole, however, Saudi Arabia has usually preferred to stay in the background and pursue its interests in its closer environment, namely the Persian Gulf.

55. “Crowds attack Israel embassy in Cairo”, *al-Jazeera*, 10th September 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/09/201199225334494935.html>

56. Mursi spent only around 9 hours in Tehran.

57. “Our solidarity with the struggle of the Syrian people against an oppressive regime that has lost its legitimacy is an ethical duty as it is a political and strategic necessity.” “Morsi in Tehran: Crossing the Boundaries”, *al-Jazeera*, 5th September 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/09/20129375930824837.html>

58. “Turkey and Egypt Seek Alliance Amid Region's Upheaval”, *The New York Times*, 18th October 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/19/world/middleeast/turkey-and-egypt-look-to-team-up-amid-tumult.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/19/world/middleeast/turkey-and-egypt-look-to-team-up-amid-tumult.html?_r=0), “Growing ties between Egypt, Turkey may signal a new regional order”, *Los Angeles Times*, 13th November 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/nov/13/world/la-fg-egypt-turkey-20121113>

The basis of Saudi Arabia's abilities to undertake a leading role is its geo-strategic assets and its soft power mostly constituted by the presence of Islam's two holiest sites, Mecca and Medina. The influence of the latter was relevant even during the Cold War, when Saudi Arabia was considered the most powerful state within the Arab "moderate" conservative bloc, and thus a rival of Egypt, Iraq and Syria among the "radicals". But with the Islamization of the region in the past decades this element has added to the power and influence of Saudi Arabia among the other Arab states and the public.

Saudi Arabia has been a staunch ally of the United States in the Gulf. Their relationship was based on the oil wealth of Saudi Arabia, the common interest in fighting terrorism and the cooperation in containing Iran. Yet in spite of the Iranian threat Saudi Arabia is concerned about, the best efforts by the US to forge an anti-Iranian alliance between its allies, Israel and the Gulf Arab states were in vain, and the Saudis have consistently refused to get openly involved, whatever they may say "behind closed doors".<sup>59</sup> The underlying reason was, and still is, the unresolved Palestinian conflict.

Following the 2003 Iraqi war, Saudi Arabia's main challenge remained Iran. Although the Arab Spring brought back the idea of the Islamic revolution when the Iranian leaders were speaking of an "Islamic awakening", it was hardcore geo-strategic interests that evoked proxy wars (or the threats thereof) between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Bahrain, Yemen and Syria. In the regional Cold War with Iran, however, the Arab Spring provided opportunities for Saudi Arabia to openly assert its interests. In Bahrain, Saudi Arabia could make it clear that in its direct neighbourhood it does not allow the meddling of any foreign party and in Yemen Saudi influence was also clearly manifest. Although Saudi support and quiet involvement was essential in the Arab Spring developments elsewhere (most notably in Libya and Syria), the real sphere of Saudi foreign and security policy has remained the Gulf. With Egypt re-emerging as the leader of joint Arab understanding on Palestine and regional arms control, Saudi Arabia has to decide if it wants to face a new rivalry with Egypt or keep to its traditional foreign policy.

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59. It is an argument frequently mentioned by many Israeli strategic analysts that "behind closed doors" the Saudis are ready to cooperate with Israel against Iran and have even agreed to keep quiet should Israeli planes attack Iran flying through Saudi airspace.



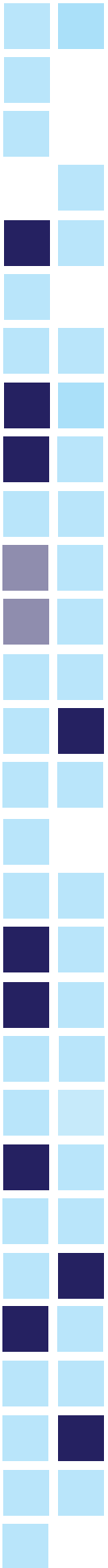
## Conclusion

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The Arab Spring initiated a new series of developments in the Middle East in the course of a transformation already underway. While it has brought the Arab countries back into the mainstream of regional developments, it pushed regional issues of global relevance, such as the Palestinians or the Iranian nuclear debate – temporarily – into the background. It also highlighted the fact that more than a hundred years after the boundaries in the region were drawn, they have become different “nation-states” pursuing different interests. They may still make up a distinct group of states with the potential to act together, but in fact only two issues have remained over which a joint Arab position is still possible: Palestinian statehood and arms control. Among the Arab states, two have emerged or re-emerged in a leadership role. Both Saudi Arabia and Egypt have traditionally been among the leading Arab states but while Saudi Arabia has often been reluctant, Egypt has a historic chance to lead. It remains to be seen if its economic hardships will let it take it.

The Arab League seemed to reflect the transformation when it started to not only frame an opinion on the ongoing events but also acted in an unprecedented way. It supported the UN SC resolution on Libya and it sent an observer mission to Syria, suspended Syria’s membership and invited the Syrian opposition to represent Syria at the Arab League summit in March 2013 in Doha.

The Arab Spring has also proven that the indigenous dynamics of the region have become much more independent from superpower – US and EU– influence, as regional states have increasingly pursued their own perceived interests and do not necessarily act according to superpower wishes. The United States and the EU were further losing influence and could not and cannot influence the ongoing transformations in spite of forging new ties with the Islamists in government. The closeness of the US to Israel in an increasingly anti-Israeli context further strengthens anti-US sentiment.



## IEMed.

The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), founded in 1989, is a consortium comprising the Government of Catalonia, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation and Barcelona City Council. It incorporates civil society through its Board of Trustees and its Advisory Council formed by Mediterranean universities, companies, organisations and personalities of renowned prestige.

In accordance with the principles of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership's Barcelona Process, and today with the objectives of the Union for the Mediterranean the aim of the IEMed is to foster actions and projects which contribute to mutual understanding, exchange and cooperation between the different Mediterranean countries, societies and cultures as well as to promote the progressive construction of a space of peace and stability, shared prosperity and dialogue between cultures and civilisations in the Mediterranean.

Adopting a clear role as a think tank specialised in Mediterranean relations based on a multidisciplinary and networking approach, the IEMed encourages analysis, understanding and cooperation through the organisation of seminars, research projects, debates, conferences and publications, in addition to a broad cultural programme.

## EuroMeSCo

Comprising 93 institutes from 32 European and South Mediterranean countries, the EuroMeSCo (Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission) network was created in 1996 for the joint and coordinated strengthening of research and debate on politics and security in the Mediterranean. These were considered essential aspects for the achievement of the objectives of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

EuroMeSCo aims to be a leading forum for the study of Euro-Mediterranean affairs, functioning as a source of analytical expertise. The objectives of the network are to become an instrument for its members to facilitate exchanges, joint initiatives and research activities; to consolidate its influence in policy-making and Euro-Mediterranean policies; and to disseminate the research activities of its institutes amongst specialists on Euro-Mediterranean relations, governments and international organisations.

The EuroMeSCo work plan includes a research programme with three publication lines (EuroMeSCo Papers, EuroMeSCo Briefs and EuroMeSCo Reports), as well as a series of seminars and workshops on the changing political dynamics of the Mediterranean region. It also includes the organisation of an annual conference and the development of web-based resources to disseminate the work of its institutes and stimulate debate on Euro-Mediterranean affairs.