

# New Geopolitical Dimensions in the Middle East

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In the immediate aftermath of the overthrow of Presidents Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, initial analyses of what these unforeseen events would herald focused on the contagion or 'domino' effect elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The potency of images of unarmed, popular protests did indeed translate rapidly into a changing political mood, with copycat revolts and protests affecting states to differing degrees across the whole region. From Morocco to Iran, what began as an infectious *Zeitgeist* in early 2011 has provoked, and continues to provoke, very different approaches to political contest in states as diverse as Libya, Syria, Jordan, Bahrain, Yemen, Oman and Saudi Arabia.

At the time of writing, six months on from the departure of President Ben Ali, the region is still in a state of flux. However, there are a number of reflections that can already be made about the geopolitical dimensions of change, which, as will be argued here, may well affect the Mediterranean states of North Africa differentially from the more entangled geopolitical web of the Levant and Gulf states. If the direct roots of contestation have been local, then the spirit of revolt has undoubtedly drawn strength at the regional level, and engaged the minds of Arab citizens more than most, above all the youth of the region.

Other groups (Israelis, Iranians, Kurds, Turks inter alia) have had to take events in their immediate

neighbourhood on board, and are responding to the perceived opportunities and threats these pose accordingly. The consequences of this interaction of new interests and popular demands in some parts of the Middle East and Mediterranean with the counterweight of clampdowns and continuing restrictions elsewhere in the region are likely to be very diverse. In all likelihood it will result in the emergence of an increasingly variegated region of states in coming years. This, in turn, will require a change in the way the region is viewed, where for the last four decades, the rule of narrowly-based, authoritarian regimes has provided the backdrop for the perceptions and policy reactions of both local and international actors.

## Domestic Elements in New Geopolitical Equations

The first element in the region's evolving equations is the advent of more, and not just new, actors on the regional scene. Just as Tunisia was starting the trend towards revolt, the Egyptian writer Ezzedine Choukri Fisher wrote a piece describing how the Arab world was a place where nothing much happened in 2010 and that 2011 would be no different. His argument was not that all was well in the Arab world, nor that the signs of pressure were not mounting, but rather that the 'tipping point' for change was difficult to predict.<sup>1</sup> In practice, it has been a false assertion on the part of many observers to conclude that no one saw any of the protests coming, even if virtually no one, including the main actors, could predict the speed with which Presidents Ben Ali and Mubarak fell.<sup>2</sup> Un-

<sup>1</sup> Ezzedine CHOUKRI FISHER 'The Arab World's Tipping Point' in *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 30<sup>th</sup> December 2010-6<sup>th</sup> January 2011 <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2010/1029/op81.htm>

<sup>2</sup> See Ayman al-Amir's perceptive article of April 2010, when he argued that tensions across the Arab world were rising to the point of boiling over: Ayman AL-AMIR 'People's Power' in *Al-Ahram Weekly* 15-20 April 2010 <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2010/994/op1.htm>

derlying this view was the long-held perception that neither public opinion nor concerted public action could change the political status quo of so many years' standing. With the confidence brought by the fall of two presidents in quick succession, and the courage shown by armed and unarmed opponents of their respective leaders in Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and Syria, public opinion is now unlikely to be taken for granted by Middle Eastern leaders, even if their choice has been to repress or sideline protests in favour of alternative strategies for remaining in power.

A second, and qualifying element in the new equations is that revolutions almost always face counter-revolutionary forces. The element of surprise that worked so well in favour of the protestors in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011 has eluded others in the region. The fear of long drawn-out conflicts and/or stalemates has haunted NATO action in Libya, a political resolution for Yemen following the departure to Saudi Arabia of President Ali Abdullah Saleh and any clear outcome for the protest movement or Assad regime in Syria. Even in Egypt and Tunisia, progress towards elections in the autumn of 2011 has been hampered by the interplay between the old and new guard in each state. Too great a focus on the new actors to the political scene, whether Islamists or the Facebook generation, risks overlooking the role of the hidden, but doubtlessly active, losers of the 'Arab Spring'.<sup>3</sup> The return of protestors to the streets of Tunisia and Egypt in mid-July 2011, for example, highlighted fears that the slow pace of change and reform in each state signified the re-emergence of vested interests as opposed to the kind of radical changes demanded by protestors.

Building a national consensus will take time, as will changing mind-sets unused to accommodating differences of opinion over the way forward. For this, new ways of doing business in both public and private sectors will need to replace the habits of nepotism and corruption that have governed much of the distribution of state resources in recent years. It is by no means clear that under economic pressures, post-revolutionary Tunisians and Egyptians have the patience to compromise over a new set of rules – above all the rule of law impartially applied – through

which to govern public and corporate life. Reforming existing state structures and drawing up new constitutions, as well as reorienting economies towards more productive and inclusive ends will all take longer to get right than many might imagine.

With a slower and more contested pace of regional change in coming months, a third element in the equation is undoubtedly the risk of continuing instability. Developments in Tunisia and Egypt will be closely watched across the region, where the risk to other states lies in the competing tensions between contingent and structural pressures within the political and economic systems of the MENA region. The similarities that existed in the region's authoritarian political systems have already been noted. Where these systems differ, however, is in the resources available to them to react to social-economic and political pressures and in the demography underlying those pressures.

The contingent pressures are those, like the *Zeitgeist* of early 2011, which created the regional and local environment for popular protest. If handled adroitly and/or decisively by exiting elites and leaderships, these largely circumstantial triggers could well fragment and limit the impact of organised protest, as has been seen in Algeria and, to some extent, Morocco. The structural pressures are those identified in the wake of the Tunisian and Egyptian protests, and by a number of attentive observers beforehand: namely, high levels of unemployment and the increasing visibility of officially sanctioned corruption and nepotism, above all in societies with a median age in the 23-28 age group.<sup>4</sup>

Unless the educational, vocational and participatory demands of this 'youth bulge' are met, the underlying pressures of demography will increase, not decrease in coming years. One of the consequences of educational expansion, however imperfect in recent years, is that it has provided the MENA region with a questioning class of people, able to inform themselves and formulate their own views and opinions, especially in defence of their civic rights. It is not the poor who rise up in revolt, but the lower middle classes upwards, and their ability to form worldviews beyond those provided by official state media is a

<sup>3</sup> See Claire SPENCER 'You've ousted an Arab autocrat. Now what?' in *Financial Times*, 26<sup>th</sup> July 2011 [www.ft.com/cms/s/0/100a348c-b6f011e0-a8b8-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1TIHXHWIG](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/100a348c-b6f011e0-a8b8-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1TIHXHWIG)

<sup>4</sup> See, inter alia, the analysis in 'This is Africa', April/May 2011 [www.thisisafricanonline.com](http://www.thisisafricanonline.com): Peter GUEST 'Freedom & Chaos' which charts the median age in 8 North African states. For underlying tensions, see Claire SPENCER 'North Africa: The Hidden Risks to Stability' *Briefing Paper*, April 2009 [www.chathamhouse.org.uk/publications/papers/view/-/id/732/](http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/publications/papers/view/-/id/732/)

sign of the incipient global integration of this region's younger generations.

A fourth and final element in the evolving geopolitics of the broader Middle East is the reaction of outside powers. This applies not only to the West, but to remaining authoritarian regimes within MENA with little appetite to see democracy flourish in their immediate neighbourhood. Interference from outside can generate both negative and positive outcomes. For the West, above all Europe and the US, the real risk arises from continuing to assess MENA's new and evolving realities through the assumption-laden prisms of Islamism, secularism, terrorism and short-term stability, which no longer reflect the changing perceptions and priorities of regional actors themselves. Current debates in the Arab Middle East are more akin to age-old struggles for power, influence, economic access and self-determination than the external depictions of the region that have gained currency since the Iranian revolution of the late seventies.

## China and the Gulf states have already made their presence felt in North Africa through investment and construction contracts, and are likely to play a role there, not always in support of democracy or wider popular participation

It may be tempting, as a result, to suggest that the outside world (primarily, but not exclusively, Europe and the US) allow regional and internal developments in MENA to run their course. One emerging realisation, however, is that few of the region's developments are entirely external to the core of interests of Europe, as an immediate neighbour and key trading partner, and the US as a strategic partner to Israel and Saudi Arabia, inter alia. The policies of the European Union (EU) and the US have become factors in the domestic, as well as regional calculations of Middle East actors, to the extent that downplaying or ignoring the influence that both already bring to bear on regional developments would be akin to a policy decision in itself.

Ultimately, the current challenges to MENA's geopolitical configurations should be perceived as an op-

portunity for Europe and the US to engage with this strategically important region in new ways. Over the longer term it is not just the effects of the protest movements that will shape EU and US responses towards the Mediterranean in particular. China and the Gulf states have already made their presence felt in North Africa through investment and construction contracts, and are likely, along with other international actors to play a role there, not always in support of democracy or wider popular participation. As North Africa's closest neighbour, Europe cannot remain immune indefinitely to the geopolitical changes taking place on its doorstep, nor continue to see developments in the region as entirely external to the future of Europe itself.

### Changing Geopolitical Assumptions

Geopolitics is normally discussed in terms of what individual states do to align and adjust themselves to the challenges and changes they face in their external environment. Where governing regimes are limited in scope and virtually synonymous with their states, it has been the norm in discussions over the MENA region to equate regimes with the international stances adopted by individual leaders. Pre-2011, what Egypt was likely to do, for example, was largely discussed in terms of what President Mubarak declared to be Egypt's position. While this approach has not entirely been displaced by his departure, decisions adopted by the interim government of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) have been monitored, reacted to and challenged by a larger array of domestic political actors.

The difference now is that limited elites no longer speak on behalf of whole nations, even where protests have yet to engineer significant political change. As the return of protestors to Tahrir Square in July 2011 demonstrated, the balance of authority and decision-making in Egypt is likely to be contested for some time. The focus has primarily been on the domestic actions of the Egyptian military, but eventually, this will translate into a longer term debate about Egypt's position in the world and the wider region. This will doubtless include more strident demands and expectations of its European neighbours, for which European states, both individually and collectively, need to be prepared.

For much of the past decade, the geopolitics of the MENA region was also seen in zero-sum terms, en-

capsulated by the 'with us or against us' philosophy of US President George W. Bush's administration. In pursuing the Global War on Terror (GWOT) from 2001 and the allied invasion of Iraq in 2003, conceptual fault lines were erected to depict the two sides of a regional 'Axis of Evil.' This pitched 'moderate', pro-US states (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, along with Israel) against an alliance of 'radical' opponents to the US's regional ambitions, combining state actors with increasingly active non-state actors (Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hezbollah). A further conceptual division arising from Iraq's descent into violence from 2003 was the sectarian divide between MENA's Sunni and Shi'ia Muslim communities, with the 'moderates' defending the interests of the former and the 'radicals' (with the exception of Hamas) on the side of the latter.<sup>5</sup>

Like many characterisations, there were elements of truth to these alignments. Critically, however, they did not reflect the region's biggest schism: namely, the division between MENA's rulers and ruled. For a number of observers, the awakening of MENA populations in 2011 can be traced back to the invasion of Iraq itself, which favoured the rise of Iran as a self-appointed champion of a broad swathe of Middle East opinion opposed to US intervention in the region. The failure of US-led diplomacy to secure Iraq, to recognise Hamas's election victory in 2006 or deliver a settlement for the Palestinians was popularly exploited by Iran to highlight the perceived duplicity in the US's commitment to Muslim self-determination. Instead of promoting democracy, the US was depicted by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as pursuing its own strategic interests in the region, namely, the defence of Israel, secure access to the energy supplies of the Gulf and a status quo that precluded Iran itself from asserting its own regional leadership.

In the event, the Iranian regime's own repression of domestic dissent after the contested general elections of 2009 lost President Ahmadinejad much of the popular support amongst Arabs that he had acquired by 2007-08. It was the street protestors of the Iranian 'Green Revolution', rather than the US's weakness in Iraq, or the failures of Middle East peace-making that went on to inspire the revolutionaries of Tahrir Square and beyond. The loss of

Egypt's President Mubarak from the alliance of regional 'moderates' inspired the Saudi leadership, in turn, to step in to limit the spread of revolt in its immediate neighbourhood. With the regional balance still unsettled, how much of the prevailing wisdom about the geopolitics of the Middle East remains, or is likely to remain in place, is now in doubt. A more compelling conclusion to be drawn from the changes unleashed across the Arab world in 2011 is that the previous decade effectively shielded the limitations of authoritarianism as a stabilising force behind the more visible threats of terrorism, sectarianism and Iran's nuclear ambitions.

## **The Mediterranean littoral states of North Africa, including Egypt, are only partially affected by this Levantine-Gulf logic. Sunni-Shi'ia divisions, if not sectarianism in other forms, also do not apply**

The centrality of Syria to so many of the old debates – about arcs of crises emerging along Shi'ia-Sunni lines, or of covert competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran for influence in Lebanon and Iraq – means that most of Syria's neighbours (including Israel, Jordan and Turkey) have a vested interest in securing a 'best case' outcome in Syria for their own larger strategic interests. That Europe and the US have only a limited ability to engineer their own preferred outcome in Syria, and even Libya, reflects how far regional dynamics have changed since the end of the nineties. A change of regime or less than decisive outcome in Syria will have profound effects on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the regional future of Palestinians, above all as refugees in at least three contiguous states (Syria, Jordan and Lebanon). With the recent change of government to a Hezbollah-led coalition in Lebanon, and continuing protests in Jordan, the inter-connectedness of developments in the Levant, and by extension, the Gulf region has become starker in 2011. The tide of events in Bahrain and Yemen, have likewise been heavily influenced by

<sup>5</sup> For an elaboration of this argument, see Claire SPENCER 'The Middle East: changing from external arbiter to regional player' in (Ed) Robin NIBLETT *America and a changed world: a question of leadership*, Chatham House, London, May 2010 [www.chathamhouse.org.uk/publications/books/view/-/id/969/](http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/publications/books/view/-/id/969/)

the interests of their immediate neighbours in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), above all Saudi Arabia.

It is here that assessments of what is at stake in the broader Middle East, as opposed to North Africa and the Mediterranean come into play. The Mediterranean littoral states of North Africa, including Egypt, are only partially affected by this Levantine-Gulf logic. Sunni-Shi'ia divisions, if not sectarianism in other forms, also do not apply. The immediate neighbours of Libya, while that country is still in conflict, are more affected by tides of refugees than by the regional designs of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's regime, which most assume will not survive to see the end of 2011. The prospects for different and more independent sub-regional developments are thus more promising for North Africa, as is a different kind of association with the wider Arab world. As the new Moroccan constitution approved by referendum in July 2011 outlines, being Arab corresponds to only one of several overlapping identities – African, Berber and Mediterranean in terms of lifestyle – with which North Africans associate themselves.

## Reflections for the European Union

Over the short term, the US and EU have tried to coordinate reactions to developments in MENA with each other, and with the broader international community. In seeking UN and Arab League support for the French and British-led air mission in defence of civilians in Libya, subsequently taken over by NATO, and in the G-8's response to providing funding lines for Tunisia and Egypt at the Deauville summit in May 2011, the West has been at pains to demonstrate that it has learnt from the mistakes of underestimating wider Arab opinion in recent years.

Perhaps inevitably, however, initial responses have been shaped by individual circumstances, whether this has been military intervention in Libya, a limited security response to Yemen and Bahrain, encouragement towards swifter reform in Jordan and Morocco and until latterly, Syria where sanctions have taken over, or in offering economic and political assistance where leadership changes have already occurred in Tunisia and Egypt. Faced with its own internal crises (in Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland

inter alia), the EU has been internally divided over the intervention in Libya and how to manage the upsurge in migratory pressures from North Africa into Europe, partly in deference to the domestic pressures of nationalist parties.<sup>6</sup>

None of this yet amounts to a new European strategy towards either North Africa or the MENA region as a whole. Over time, both the contradictions and costs of managing relations with the near neighbourhood states of North Africa will build. Europe will also have to come to terms with the near impossibility of erecting and maintaining 'Fortress Europe'-style barriers against the pressures for greater mobility in and across the Mediterranean. This is not in itself a zero-sum argument to suggest that attempts to prevent irregular migration into Europe will fail and thus should be abandoned. It is rather that Europe's position within the Mediterranean region should be reconsidered in terms of the mutual interests, needs and opportunities that now present themselves across the region as a whole, rather than as a set of problems and challenges to be managed from outside.

Despite welcome adjustments being made to the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy and the creation of new funding lines, more radical rethinking is now needed regarding the possibilities, as well as risks, posed to Europe by the 'Arab Awakening.' Unlike the term 'Arab Spring,' with its connotations of swift and sharp change, the role of newly 'awakened' sectors of North African society is likely to shape and condition events for some time to come. As the Middle East continues on an unsettled path, the proximity of Europe to the region, above all North Africa, may come to overshadow attempts to adapt existing policies to fit new times across the MENA region as a whole.

Even before 2011, it was clear that the EU's relations with the broader Middle East were structured along several, uncoordinated lines. From the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) of the nineties to the Union for the Mediterranean of 2008, the emergence of the European Neighbourhood Policy in-between, and the separate frameworks for Europe's relations with the GCC, Iraq and Iran, EU policy has lagged behind the growing inter-connectedness of cross-regional developments in the MENA region. Calls for grand regional strategies to link all these areas together may not, in the event, reflect what is now needed.

<sup>6</sup> See Daniel KORSKI, *Club Med and the migrants: Europe's response to the 'Arab Spring'* European Council on Foreign Relations comment, 10 May 2011. [http://ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary\\_club\\_med\\_and\\_the\\_migrants\\_europes\\_response\\_to\\_the\\_arab\\_spring](http://ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary_club_med_and_the_migrants_europes_response_to_the_arab_spring)

The Mediterranean is both a natural hinterland and extension of the dilemmas Europe now faces itself: of how to generate jobs and new growth potential in economies that have been stagnating behind the dynamism of Asian and Latin American growth rates for some time. The banking crisis unleashed in 2007-08, compounded by the Eurozone crisis of 2011, has served to highlight the need for fundamentally different ways of doing business in Europe, politically as much as economically. Yet the debate about Europe's future remains inward-looking and ill-prepared to imagine North Africa in terms other than a potential security threat if its transitions are not managed well. If Europe were to conceive of the challenges posed by the Mediterranean through a different lens, however, some of the more cooperative ambitions of the original Euro-Mediterranean Partnership initiative of 1995 might be revisited in more imaginative ways. Joint ventures between near neighbours, above all Spain and Morocco which are only 14 kilometres apart, could start from assessing the natural and competitive advantages offered by each side of the Mediterranean in sectors such as agro-business, fishing, manufacturing and transshipment enterprises, where previously the two countries cited have been in unproductive competition with each other. Where this kind of investment already exists, it now needs to be seen in a much more strategic fashion, as a means of addressing Spain's own youth unemployment through sector specialisation, rather than as a net drain on European and Spanish resources to narrow income gaps north and south of the Mediterranean. Start-up businesses should also be conceived as a way of maximising value-added contributions from both sides of the Mediterranean, through combining the best skills, component and labour costs across a broader regional range than has been envisaged hitherto. The aim would be to reinvigorate Europe's own competitive edge in an increasingly globalised world, as well as enhancing North Africa's integration into a wider set of global markets.

In the current climate, the timing for such rethinking could not be worse, above all in relation to migration and the integration of migrants, especially those of Muslim origin, within individual European societies. The rise of ultra-right-wing nationalist movements across Europe has come painfully to the fore in the

wake of the Norwegian massacres of July 2011. It is also the case, historically, that periods of recession breed introspection and protectionist attitudes until the economic climate improves sufficiently to open minds to new, and often externally-generated opportunities.

Unless Europe's leaders start planning for the longer term, there is nevertheless a danger that old mind-sets and methods of working with North Africa will reassert themselves, at the expense of the positive energies that the Arab awakening has generated. There are undoubtedly many risks ahead, but also a critical number of Egyptians and Tunisians who are already keen to forge their own paths and develop their own ideas, above all in restructuring their economies. If successful, they would provide role models for their neighbours in Libya, Algeria and Morocco. The much-sought after regional integration of the Maghreb countries (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Mauritania – and now Egypt) could, as a result, take place more quickly at the virtual (on-line) and social level than at the governmental and intra-state level where previous efforts have been concentrated. Europe too will need to move away from its reliance on inter-governmental relations to promote change, in favour of making and facilitating links between the next generation of entrepreneurs on both sides of the Mediterranean. Above all Europeans need to listen and learn from new actors and revisit the EU's own Euro-Mediterranean vision, to create 'a common area of peace and stability' and 'an area of shared prosperity',<sup>7</sup> on a more equitable basis than previously. Achieving this will need more than technical assistance, professional training and renewed funding lines, important though these are. The real revolution in thinking about North Africa and the geopolitical potential for the Mediterranean needs to take place in the minds of Europeans themselves. It is not yet clear whether the leadership exists in European capitals and Brussels to exchange one set of assumptions about the region for another. When that time comes, however, it should above all resituate North Africa's demography as an asset rather than a burden to Europe's aging populations, and one that Europe would do well to seize upon to ensure its own place in an increasingly globalised and competitive world.

<sup>7</sup> European Union 'Barcelona Declaration and Euro-Mediterranean partnership' (updated) 26 July 2005 [http://europa.eu/legislation\\_summaries/external\\_relations/relations\\_with\\_third\\_countries/mediterranean\\_partner\\_countries/r15001\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/external_relations/relations_with_third_countries/mediterranean_partner_countries/r15001_en.htm)

