



The Arab revolts in year two

Published on openDemocracy (<http://www.opendemocracy.net>)

Volker Perthes, 09th February 2012

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The uprisings across the Arab world are becoming more complex and variable as they enter their second year. This makes it all the more important to identify their main dynamics, says Volker Perthes.

About the author

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Since the fall of Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak in the first weeks of 2011, it has become evident that the political transformation of the states of the Arab world is and will be a complex, often violent, and protracted process - and that it has only just begun.

The concept of the "Arab spring" that gripped many western observers from the early stages is in this respect much too seasonally limited, and thus guaranteed to breed impatience and disappointment rather than the deeper understanding required. This time-restricted notion also discourages Europe and the United States from thinking about their long-term strategic engagement with the region.

A larger and more long-term view - which draws on the experiences of other regions in transition - suggests that the Arab world still finds itself within "the first five minutes" of its historic hour.

In this perspective, as the Arab revolts enter year two, four factors seem especially important to watch - and for Europe and the United States to take account of in their policies.

A fourfold reality

The first factor is socio-demographic. The popular revolts in the Arab world have mainly been the work of the generation of 20-35 year-olds. This contingent is more numerous and generally better educated than any of its predecessors, but has fewer social and material opportunities. Yet so far, the fall of the old regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya has not improved its economic and social situation. Moreover, the "2011ers" among them - the political activists that triggered the revolutions - have not been among

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the winners of the first post-revolt elections. Thus it shouldn't be a surprise if this generation, which has already tasted its power, sets out to challenge the newly elected authorities as well.

Europe and the US would do well to support and encourage the transforming Arab states in efforts to provide opportunities for this young generation, both with regard to employment and to political participation. They should also realise that comparable socio-demographic developments will almost certainly occur at different times in different Arab countries. In Saudi Arabia for example, a generation akin to Tunisia's, Egypt's (or Syria's) "2011ers" is only now being educated, and will reach its full strength only in a couple of years. It is vital then to avoid complacency with regard to countries that today seem stable.

The second factor is the military. In Tunisia and Egypt, the army played a positive role in the revolts against the old regimes; in Syria and Yemen, decisions by key elements in the military will largely determine further developments. In many Arab states, the military has enjoyed more trust than governments and other institutions, and has been seen as a factor of national unity. But, as Egypt shows, it is neither a neutral nor a democratic actor; it wants above all to preserve its interests, and its leaders have no understanding of modern government or economics. The military may be needed to prevent chaos and to protect the transformation toward a new political order; but it is not prepared for the role this institution is supposed to play in democratic states.

Europe and the US should neither court nor ignore Arab military leaders. Rather, and without overestimating external influence, Nato's existing dialogue and partnership formats should be used to cautiously engage its Arab counterparts. Central and eastern European Nato member-states should have a special role here by offering to share their experiences with military reform after a political transformation.

The third factor is political Islam. It is likely that more Arab states will become both more democratic and more conservative in the coming years. In one form or another, religious conservatism has a constituency all across the region, and election results in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco also suggest that Islamist parties enjoy an "image advantage" with regard to morality - which registers highly in an era of uncertainty. At the same time, the opening and pluralisation of the political systems has opened and broadened the spectrum of political Islam itself.

This raises the question of how mainstream Islamist groups and parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood will develop in face of strong political competition from ultra-conservative Saudi-inspired Salafism. Are they going to move towards the Salafists and lose in the political centre; or will they seek pragmatic answers to their countries' social and economic problems in order to establish themselves (in a way akin to Turkey's AKP) as broad-based conservative parties?

Europe and the US should try if they can to support the latter type of development by seeking honest dialogues with mainstream Islamists, and with any new government in the region that emerges from free elections - regardless of its political colouring.

The fourth factor is regional geopolitics. The changes in some Arab countries, and the ongoing revolts in others, have an impact on regional politics. Egypt, Turkey and emerging Qatar already play a more active role than before. The Arab League, which so long has served as a club of autocrats, is being transformed into a regional organisation that no longer shies away from the "internal" affairs of member-states.

The stance of the league against the regime in Damascus, there seems little doubt, has as much to do with geopolitics as with humanitarian motives. Again, this is no surprise. What is happening is a heightened politicisation on all levels. As originally local revolts immediately attain a regional dimension and new regimes tend to review their foreign-policy approaches, the interplay between domestic politics and regional geopolitics certainly promises more turbulence. This is particularly so as neither the Israeli-Palestinian conflict nor the struggle over hegemony in the Persian Gulf has moved closer to a solution.

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Israel has become more isolated since the fall of Mubarak. Whoever comes to rule Cairo is likely to be more supportive of the Palestinians and tougher on Israel than the old regime. The two Palestinian administrations in the West Bank and the Gaza strip seem to be on a path (albeit thorny) to reunify. This is happening under popular pressure, and it is a necessary precondition to forming a government that represents the Palestinian territories in its entirety. But the support of Hamas for such a government will not make the Israeli government any more prepared to reach out to its neighbours; and frustration with the lack of progress in peace talks can easily translate into renewed violence.

The ongoing revolt in Syria, and the widely-shared expectation that the Bashar al-Assad regime is approaching its own endgame, have initiated a new regional struggle over Syria that involves (among others) Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iraq and Iran. Just as Tehran is worried about losing its main ally and foothold in the Levant, so the Saudis (as well as the US and some Europeans) regard the prospective fall of Assad primarily as an opportunity to weaken Tehran's regional position. The uprising in Syria is thus being directly connected with the power-struggle over the Persian Gulf. This conflict will also continue to impact on the situation in Bahrain, to the detriment of those who seek peaceful change in that country; probably even on that in Yemen; and certainly in Iraq, where both domestic conflicts and competition over regional influence have begun to increase after the withdrawal of most US forces.

A threefold task

Western actors should have learned by now that simplistic models, such as the distinction between a supposedly "moderate" and a "radical" camp in the middle east - a model that guided US policy until the fall of Mubarak - do not actually aid understanding of regional politics. It is enough to observe that Iraq, still an American ally, is also the strongest Arab supporter of the Assad regime in Syria; and that Saudi Arabia, the main regional rival of Iran, is the main backer of Salafism, whose electoral successes trouble some less extreme Islamists as well as liberal and secular forces.

What is needed from the United States and from Europe is threefold: careful crisis management in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; a return to diplomacy rather than escalation with Iran; and active attempts to shape the conditions for a peaceful transition in Syria that spares the country a descent into civil war.

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