

# The Arab Uprisings Two Years On: Ideology, Sectarianism and the Changing Balance of Power in the Middle East

Katerina Dalacoura\*

**ABSTRACT** *This paper traces the changes to the domestic politics of Arab states following the 2011 uprisings and places them in a continuum depending on the degree of internal conflict and contestation they have engendered. It also outlines the uprisings' effects on the three strands of Islamism—radical, Salafi and moderate—across the Middle East. The paper's main purpose is to assess the uprisings' impact on the confrontation between the Iranian-led and pro-Western camps. It argues that ideological and sectarian considerations in the post-2011 Middle East subtly interact with but tend to be trumped by the realpolitik calculations of the various players, which are defined by regime and state interests.*

**T**he fall of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia in January 2011, followed by the ousting of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt a month later, unleashed a tumultuous series of events in the Middle East and North Africa. Two years on, the region is still grappling with the impact of the Arab revolts. The wave of optimism for the region's future associated with Tahrir Square has given way to horror at the bloodbath in Syria. In countries where regimes have been replaced as a result of the uprisings, namely in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, there is hope, but also uncertainty. In Bahrain, fear and hatred reign after the suppression of the rebellion. Other parts of the region—the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Jordan, and Morocco—are still experiencing the after-effects of the uprisings.

This paper assesses the political situation in the Arab world two years after the start of the uprisings. I have suggested elsewhere that the causes of individual revolts must be sought primarily in the domestic realm of each country in which they occurred.<sup>1</sup> However, their collective impact on the broader Middle East and North African region is considerable and must be studied separately.

\* Senior Lecturer in International Relations, London School of Economics, [K.Dalacoura@lse.ac.uk](mailto:K.Dalacoura@lse.ac.uk)

It constitutes the main focus of this paper. I argue that, although ideology and sect do play a role in the developments which are unfolding at the regional level following the uprisings, they must be understood primarily in terms of the main players' changing power calculations and competing regime and national interests. This paper starts with an assessment of current political developments in the Arab world and then discusses the impact of the uprisings on radical, Salafi, and moderate Islamist groups. Focusing on the Middle East-wide confrontation between an Iran-centered and (for want of a better description) a pro-Western camp, the last section draws out the implications of those domestic political developments and the evolving role, position and strength of Islamism for regional trends and balances.

## **A Summary of Domestic Political Developments in the Arab World**

Depending on the impact of the 2011 uprisings (or lack thereof) on their domestic political situation, we can divide Arab states into three categories. Rebellions which overthrew or seriously challenged incumbent regimes occurred in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria. Beyond those six Arab countries, the uprisings also affected the internal political situation and developments in Morocco and Jordan, and the remaining GCC states. Another cluster of Arab countries—Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria, and Palestine—have been relatively unaffected by the revolts, although their stability (particularly Lebanon's) may still be challenged by them.<sup>2</sup>

Two years after the outbreak of these tumultuous events, the Arab Middle East is still in flux. The current situation may be better captured by a somewhat different typology: rather than dividing Arab states into three categories it is more accurate to situate them in a continuum. The criterion for doing so is the level of conflict—violent, political, festering or minimal—which resulted from the uprisings and still characterizes the domestic political situation in each case. According to this analysis, Syria must be placed at one end because it is experiencing a bloody civil war, and a country such as Algeria can be placed at the other end because it has been relatively unaffected by the events of 2011 and their aftermath. I will look at all the Arab states in the order they hold in this continuum, starting with Syria.

The uprising which broke out in Syria in spring 2011, and is still exacting a gruesome toll on its people, is currently the focal point of Middle East international politics. The uprising started in a tentative fashion, in response to small-scale and isolated grievances, but the harsh response by the Bashar al-Assad regime, and in particular the uniformly brutal tactics of its army and security forces, caused an upsurge of popular revulsion and a strong reaction from the people. Violence quickly spiraled out of control. The uprising

has degenerated into civil war and caused the de facto fragmentation of the country, with some parts of it being controlled by the government and others by the opposition. The levels of human suffering are extreme, with estimates placing the death toll (in December 2012) between 20,000 and 40,000, and the number of registered refugees in neighboring countries at 465,000. According to the Syrian Arab Red Crescent 2.5 million people are internally displaced.<sup>3</sup>

The regime has not collapsed because it enjoys external support from Russia, Iran and Hizbullah but also because it has retained the continuing loyalty of the army and security forces which, despite significant defections, have not disintegrated or turned against the regime *en masse*. However, the manner by which the regime has survived, vicious repression, has meant that it “is being reduced to its repressive apparatus”. Because it has less and less to lose, it has become more unresponsive to pressure and less likely to negotiate. Its Alawite supporters are increasingly desperate to avoid the collapse of the regime because they fear retaliation.<sup>4</sup>

For its part, the opposition to Assad’s regime has been divided, at least until recently. These divisions are ethnic (between the Kurdish and Arab components), ideological (between the Islamists and secularists, including leftists), and sectarian (between the Sunnis and those who fear their domination). There have also been tensions between the exiled and internal branches of the opposition. It contains extremist elements which create strains within it and difficulties for some of its outside supporters (not least the United States). These divisions appeared to have been overcome (although the jury is still out on this) in November 2012 with the establishment of a new unified Syrian opposition in Qatar, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which brought together internal and external forces under one umbrella organization.

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Despite these somewhat positive developments, however, the signs in Syria are ominous. The crisis is at risk of spilling over into Lebanon, where sectarian tensions linked to the Syrian conflict and a devastating terrorist attack killing a senior officer of the Internal Security Forces in October 2012 have already undermined the country’s stability.<sup>5</sup> Within Syria itself, the gulf between the constituencies supporting and battling the regime is deepening and it is difficult to see how it can be bridged. Although it is highly unlikely that the regime can survive in the long run, a military stalemate has presently developed.<sup>6</sup>



A protester shouts slogans during a protest against the government on the first anniversary of the first free Tunisian election, in Tunis.  
REUTERS/Anis Mili

If Syria is in the throes of violent conflict, Yemen, Bahrain and Libya are in states of simmering crises, each for distinct reasons. Following an agreement brokered by the GCC, Yemen's president of 33 years, Ali Abdullah Saleh, was removed from power in November 2011. He was replaced by Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi in February 2012. The prevention of civil war as a result of this controlled change of government was, arguably, an important achievement in itself.<sup>7</sup> However, the riposte to this positive interpretation of events is that only a change-over of elites has occurred in Yemen, perpetuating an unhealthy stalemate of low-level conflict on a variety of levels.<sup>8</sup>

The new president is not the "stooge" of Saleh, as had been feared. However, Saleh and his family are still present and influential. There is continuing tension between them and General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a new strong-man and beneficiary of the recent changes. The South and the Huthi areas in the north continue to be restive. The young protesters who initiated the rebellion in early 2011 have been unable to translate their activities into institutionalized political action. Meanwhile, the country's economic and social indicators, grim enough to begin with, are deteriorating even further.

The situation in Libya is profoundly problematic, albeit for different reasons. A political transition has been occurring following the overthrow of Muammar Qadhafi's regime and his violent death in October 2011. Elections took place successfully in July 2012 and resulted in a victory for the quasi-liberal National Forces Alliance, which took almost 50 percent of the vote. However, the new government and parliament do not really have the capacity to hold the



country together. Libya's traditionally weak state institutions continue to haunt it, with the central government unable to exercise real jurisdiction over the country's territory. In what has become a vicious circle, the government's failure to monopolize violence has encouraged armed groups to provide security and services for their local populations, which has in turn further undermined central government. Agreements cannot be properly enforced and, although inter-communal conflicts have not got out of hand, it has been impossible to overcome them either.<sup>9</sup> Alongside local militias, radical Islamist groups proliferate.

In Bahrain the situation is also precarious. The rebellion—which was not militarized and, after its initial phases, took an increasingly Shia character—was suppressed by the Sunni-dominated regime fairly quickly. This was achieved partly with the help of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates which deployed part of the GCC's joint "Peninsula Shield" force to the island in March 2011. The regime is internally divided between the supporters of reform and repression. King Hamad appointed the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) to investigate the government's response to the uprising; it reported in November 2011 but its recommendations have not been implemented and political repression has continued regardless of these recommendations. High-ranking officials have not been persecuted for rights violations. Freedoms of expression and political rights continue to be restricted.<sup>10</sup> Opposition figures are imprisoned in great numbers and some of their trials have embarrassed the regime internationally. Following the Saudi intervention, Bahrain has become in many ways even more of a satellite of its bigger and more powerful neighbor.

### **In Tunisia and Egypt rapid political change has engendered a considerable amount of political conflict**

In Tunisia and Egypt rapid political change has engendered a considerable amount of political conflict. In Egypt, the country's future is being fiercely contested. The overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011 led to a military take-over in all but name. The Muslim Brotherhood had not led the rebellion but was able to capitalize on it: the party it established, Freedom and Justice, won 47.2 percent of the vote for the People's Assembly, the parliament's lower house, and 58 percent for the Consultative Council in January 2012; its candidate, Muhammad Morsi, won the presidency in May 2012. Salafi groups also entered the political fray and were voted into the parliament. The military retreated from an overt political role: in August 2012 the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) withdrew to its barracks after the newly elected president apparently asserted his authority. Just before the presidential elections in May 2012, the Supreme Constitutional Court declared the parliament

and the constituent assembly, tasked with writing the country's new constitution, unconstitutional. Subsequently, the judiciary became locked in a power struggle with Morsi. In late November 2012, Morsi attempted to usurp new powers. This caused a strong popular reaction and may yet strengthen secularist and liberal opposition forces which, hitherto, have appeared unable to organize effectively against the Islamists.<sup>11</sup> The president rescinded his new powers but rushed to put the newly drafted constitution to referendum on December 15, 2012.

In Tunisia, there is also considerable political contestation, and a similar division between Islamist and secular forces, but the transition has been better managed than in Egypt. As was the case with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist Nahda party did not lead the uprising, but it has been its main political beneficiary. Having won the October 2011 elections with a

**The 2011 uprisings may have delegitimized radical Islamist groups because they showed that political change can come about through people power, not violence**

plurality of 37 percent of the votes, it was able to form a government in coalition with the Ettakatol and the Congress for the Republic parties. Hamadi Jebali of Nahda, a former political prisoner, became prime minister in December 2011. Moncef Marzouki, a long-standing human rights activist of secularist and leftist political leanings, assumed the presidency. Problems with security remain in Tunisia, and there are on-going questions about transitional justice and corruption, as well as socio-economic challenges. Salafi Islamist groups have become increasingly disruptive since the uprising. Despite these problems, however, the situation in Tunisia is, overall, positive and the prospects for a stable regime are good.<sup>12</sup> Despite pressure from Salafis and hard-liners within Nahda, it has been agreed that *sharia* law will not be mentioned in the new draft constitution which

is being prepared, while Islam will be the official religion. There are, however, still unresolved issues on women, minorities and freedom of conscience and expression.<sup>13</sup> Following the process of constitution-making, new elections are scheduled for June 2013.

Jordan, Morocco and the GCC countries—with the obvious exclusion of Bahrain—were affected to a lesser extent by the uprisings of 2011. Jordan witnessed a number of superficial changes at the cabinet and prime-ministerial level but there has been no reduction in the powers of King Abdullah or any other substantial reform of the system. New elections are scheduled for January 2013, which the Islamist Islamic Action Front (IAF), the country's largest opposition party which was initially established from the Muslim Brotherhood, will boycott. More worryingly for the regime, however, there are rumblings of dissatisfaction among its traditional supporters, the so-called East Jordanians. The

situation in Morocco is similar to the Jordanian one, in the sense that the king still enjoys tremendous concentration of power and ultimate control. Yet there are other important differences. Following the uprisings in the wider region, and a number of small protests within Morocco, a series of constitutional reforms were approved by referendum in July 2011; they officially recognized the Berber language, somewhat strengthened the office of the prime minister, and obliged the king to appoint the prime minister from the largest party. The Moroccan system had witnessed some alternation of political parties in government from the late 1990s. Parliamentary elections were held in November 2011 and, when the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) won a plurality of 22.8 percent of the votes and 107 seats in parliament, the king named its Secretary General, Abdelilah Benkirane, as prime minister. The PJD formed a government in coalition with an array of other parties.<sup>14</sup>

In the countries of the GCC, no degree of political reform has come about as a result of the uprisings. Beneath the surface, however, there are political tensions.<sup>15</sup> In Kuwait, the most politically lively and mature of the GCC states, the contestation between rival political forces, including Islamists, and the regime is continuing.<sup>16</sup> In the rest of the GCC, and particularly in Saudi Arabia, the flames of rebellion appear to have been preemptively and effectively doused by large doses of oil money and repression. Finally, Algeria, Iraq and Palestine are dealing with their own internal issues. In the case of the first, these are always interesting but are, at present, low key. In the case of the latter two, they are tumultuous. Yet internal developments in all three cases follow their own logic and their course has not been altered in any substantial way by the rebellions of 2011.

## The Impact of the 2011 Uprisings on Islamism

The 2011 Arab uprisings have not had a single, easily identifiable impact on the political phenomenon generically called “Islamism”. Instead, they have affected different strands of Islamism in different ways. This section briefly takes stock of the changes resulting from the rebellions, over the past two years, on the role and nature of three strands within Islamism in the Middle East: radical Islamist movements, defined as such by their preparedness to use violent methods; Salafi Islam, characterized by a puritanical, fundamentalist interpretation of Islam; and moderate Islamist groups which, although not necessarily democratic, are prepared to operate within the legal parameters of their respective polities.<sup>17</sup>

Radical Islamist movements still mostly operate within the constraints of events in the previous decade: the September 11, 2001 attacks, the war on terror, and the Iraq invasion of 2003, as well as the killing of Osama bin Laden in

May 2011. The nerve center of al Qaeda—assuming such a center still exists—is located in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Al Qaeda “franchises” are active in parts of the Middle East region, increasing their activities in an opportunistic fashion, where the terrain allows it. The 2011 uprisings may have de-legitimized radical Islamist groups because they showed that political change can come about through people power, not violence. However, at the same time the uprisings increased some of the opportunities for radical Islamist groups to be active.

In Yemen the removal of Saleh further weakened the central government in Sanaa and caused an even greater vacuum of power. This gave al Qaeda, associated with a new, hazy formation called Ansar Sharia, and other radicals forces more freedom of movement. According to the International Crisis Group:

The spread of Ansar Sharia (Partisans of Islamic Law), a murky mix of al-Qaeda militants and young local recruits, many of whom appear motivated by economic rewards more than by ideological conviction. The government, fighting alongside local popular committees, has recaptured territories in the South, but the battle with al-Qaeda is far from over.<sup>18</sup>

The second area where the 2011 events, specifically the uprising in Libya, affected radical Islamism is northern Mali. A revolt by a secular Tuareg movement there caused the collapse of Mali’s central government, based in the south, following a military coup in March 2012. Radical Islamist elements, in particular Ansar Dine—backed by the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), one of the al Qaeda “affiliates”—used the opportunity to increase their presence and impose control in the north, particularly in Timbuktu and its surroundings.<sup>19</sup> They were strengthened by the chaos caused by militants escaping the conflict in Libya around the time of the Qadhafi regime’s collapse.

In Libya, radical Islamists have also emerged from within a multitude of groups. In September 2012 the American consulate in Benghazi was attacked and the American ambassador, Chris Stevens, and three other Americans were killed, along with several Libyans. It has been argued that the violence is a sign of the militants’ isolation from the Libyan mainstream.<sup>20</sup> However, there is no doubt that the radicals have been able to find more space and opportunity for their activities following the overthrow of the Qadhafi regime, which further weakened the reach of central government, parliament and state institutions.

Similar developments have occurred in Syria. Radical elements are active among the many groups fighting the regime. The fragmentation and chaos which have engulfed the country have created a space for militant groups coming from abroad. One such entity, Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham, was placed on the State Department’s list of terrorist groups in December 2012.



## **The Muslim Brotherhood's arrival in the corridors of power in Cairo did not please Riyadh, which had a well-established *modus vivendi* with the Mubarak regime**

Within Syria, as in Libya, a fine line separates the radical Islamist from the Salafi groups.<sup>21</sup> The former are prepared to use violent means while the latter, in their recent incarnations at least, have been non-violent, despite their hard-line ideological stance. However, while they eschew the use of arms or terrorist tactics, the Salafis do not hesitate in using coercion and intimidation: for example, in Egypt and Tunisia following the overthrow of Ben Ali and Mubarak, there were a number of incidents involving Salafis smashing up “immoral” shops and establishments.

In Egypt, the uprising led to a profound transformation of Salafi groups: hitherto apolitical, they quickly rethought their approach following the fall of Mubarak and organized to enter the political process. They won an unexpected 28 percent of the vote and entered parliament in relatively large numbers. In Tunisia, Salafi groups became increasingly active after the uprising, adding a new and sometimes troubling dimension to the political contestation. They did not participate in the last elections; however, they may do so in future, as they are starting to organize into political parties.<sup>22</sup>

There is no doubt that the Arab uprisings of 2011 have had their greatest impact on moderate Islamist movements. In what appears to be an Arab-wide trend, the uprisings have caused the political empowerment of such parties. This development has occurred most starkly in Egypt and Tunisia, where the Muslim Brotherhood and Nahda did not spearhead the uprisings but won subsequent elections, as described above. In Syria, aside from Islamist radicals and Salafis, the Muslim Brotherhood is in a leading position within the opposition. In Libya, the Justice and Construction Party is the second largest party in the General National Congress (the Libyan parliament). Yemen's long-standing Islamist political party, Islah, continues to be an important player.

### **The Uprisings' Regional Implications**

The 2011 Arab uprisings have influenced the Middle East region on the levels of ideology, sect and power politics. I show in this section that these three levels subtly interact with and reinforce one other but that *realpolitik* concerns, defined by regime and national interests, tend to trump ideological and sectarian considerations. The analysis focuses on the confrontation between the

Iran-led and pro-Western camps, which I consider the most important fault line in the region. To understand how this confrontation has evolved, we need to bear in mind the ways in which the uprisings are shaping Islamist trends, as described above.

The words of the head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Saeed Jali-li, encapsulate the role of ideology in the current stand-off in the Middle East when he refers to the "axis of resistance", against Israel and the West, which is constituted by Iran, Iraq, Syria, Hizbullah<sup>23</sup> and (until recently) Hamas:

What is happening in Syria is not an internal issue, but a conflict between the axis of resistance and its enemies in the region and the world. [...] Iran will not tolerate, in any form, the breaking of the axis of resistance of which Syria is an intrinsic part.<sup>24</sup>

It is worth remembering that Iran initially welcomed the Arab uprisings in the expectation that they would be anti-Western and pro-Islamist and lead to the emergence of new ideological allies for the Islamic Republic. It soon became clear that the uprisings were not primarily animated either by "anti-Westernism" or by Islamist sympathies (even though anti-Westernism is still pervasive in the Middle East, and Islamist movements, as we saw, eventually benefited from the revolts). Iran has had to adjust to this realization. More ominously for the Islamic Republic, Syria, its Arab ally of 33 years, is facing an increasingly threatening challenge. The Syrian uprising precipitated Hamas's departure from the Syrian and Iranian orbit: Hamas leader Khaled Mishaal had left Damascus by January 2012.<sup>25</sup> Hizbullah's image has been tarnished in Lebanon, and throughout the region, because of its siding with the repressive methods of Damascus.

This ideological perspective on events and prospects is in many ways distinct from an analysis through a sectarian lens. Much has been said about a deepening Sunni-Shia rift in the Middle East region. The aforementioned move of Hamas can be seen as a return to its religious Sunni fold. One result is that all the main actors in the Iranian camp—Syria, the Iraqi government, and Hizbullah—are Shia or of Shia origin. According to this narrative, the Shia now confronts the Sunni side, which incorporates Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

The Sunni-Shia fault line is also seen as running through societies, not just across them. In Syria, the anti-sectarian slogans of the first few months have given way to a sectarian discourse (it appears, however, although it is difficult to verify, that massacres with a specifically sectarian intent have not taken place on a large scale, at least not yet). Alawites (and Christians) dread retaliation should the regime fall. One of the reasons behind the divided nature of the

opposition is the alarm at the prospect of Sunni dominance. In the Gulf states, sectarianism is on the increase.<sup>26</sup> The fear of the minority Sunni regime in Bahrain being over-run by the Shia majority—allegedly supported by Iran—lies at the heart of the Saudi decision to intervene in March 2011. Within Saudi Arabia itself, the Shia minority is watched with much suspicion by the monarchy, particularly as they became restive in early 2011.

There is something to be said for an analysis of uprisings' regional impact based on sect, not least because, having "caught on" at a popular level, it is becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Talk of the Sunni-Shia divide however rests on a number of misconceptions. One is that the Iran-Syria alliance is based on sectarian identity, an unconvincing claim given the secular nature of the Baath regime in Damascus.<sup>27</sup> More to the point, it downplays the profound divisions and tensions within the Sunni side. The most revealing instance of these intra-Sunni divisions is the rivalry between Salafi and moderate Islamist forces (discussed in the previous section) which has intensified as a result of the 2011 uprisings. This rivalry has an ideological and political dimension but also has region-wide implications, primarily because it is linked to competing interests between Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The Muslim Brotherhood's arrival in the corridors of power in Cairo did not please Riyadh, which had a well-established *modus vivendi* with the Mubarak regime and has not forgotten, or forgiven, the Brotherhood's betrayal over Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. (Tunisia's Nahda is tarred with the same brush in the eyes of the Saudis, as are a number of other Islamist groups across the region.)<sup>28</sup> This is one explanation for Saudi Arabia's rumored support of the Salafis, in Egypt and elsewhere. Saudi Arabia may also be alarmed at the prospect of Hamas drawing closer to Egypt as a result of the Muslim Brotherhood's ascendance.

Rattled by the events of 2011, Saudi Arabia is drawing Bahrain, Oman, and possibly also Kuwait closer to its circle of influence and domination, while the United Arab Emirates are trying to stay out of the fray.<sup>29</sup> Qatar, however, is charting its own independent course as a newly emerging active player in the region. It championed and participated in the intervention in Libya. Qatar supports Muslim Brotherhood organizations



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across the region, not least through the influential al Jazeera news channel, which is based in Doha. It also supports Hamas politically and materially (the emir visited Gaza on October 23, 2012). Saudi Arabia and Qatar are alleged to be backing different anti-Assad factions in Syria.<sup>30</sup>

Turkey is a yet another major Sunni player vying for influence in the region. At present, there are no profound clashes of interest between Turkey and the other major Sunni players, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Egypt, and they all share an important common objective, Assad's downfall. However, this may change after the objective is achieved. The Arab uprisings have ushered in a more realist phase of Turkish foreign policy because of direct security threats on the country's borders. Most obviously, the spill-over effects of the Syrian crisis have stoked the flames of Turkey's internal Kurdish problem.<sup>31</sup>

Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East following the 2011 Arab uprisings has had both ideological and sectarian parameters. The former consists of the appeal of the Turkish "model" to Arab Islamist movements, buttressed by the personal popularity of its prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in the Arab world. The latter can be seen in the depiction of Erdoğan as a new "champion" of the Sunnis.<sup>32</sup> However, geopolitical realities have served as a corrective of the sectarian element in Turkish policy. A good example of this was the Turkish government's decision to privilege the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood when it hosted the anti-Assad Syrian National Council (SNC) in Istanbul in August 2011. This alienated other actors within the Syrian opposition who fear Sunni domination, increased internal tensions and—more directly relevant to Turkey—incensed Kurdish elements.<sup>33</sup> Turkey's security interests were arguably not well served by its support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

The changing position of Hamas following the 2011 Arab uprisings, already touched on at various points in the discussion above, also illustrates how *real-politik* calculations coexist with but, when push comes to shove, trump ideological considerations and sectarian loyalties. Hamas has moved away from the Syrian-Iranian axis, as we saw. Clearly there is an ideological and sectarian element in the decision to draw closer to Egypt. However, practical considerations, and primarily the imminent threat of the collapse of the Syrian regime as well as the embarrassment of being associated with its murderous practices, precipitated the shift. Hamas now benefits from a more relaxed situation at the Rafah crossing which the Cairo government has permitted. In the meantime, despite its greater closeness to the so-called "Sunni camp", Hamas continues to benefit from tacit Iranian support: it used Iranian weaponry in the November 2012 confrontation with Israel. Egypt, whose own relationship with Iran is evolving, may not be averse to Iran's continuing logistical support for Hamas in Gaza.

## Conclusion

This paper traced the changes to the domestic politics of Arab states following the 2011 uprisings and placed them in a continuum depending on the degree of internal conflict and contestation they have engendered. It also outlined the uprisings' effects on the three strands of Islamism—radical, Salafi and moderate—across the Middle East. The paper's main purpose, however, was to assess the uprisings' impact on the confrontation between the Iranian-led and pro-Western camps. I have shown that ideological and sectarian considerations subtly interact with but tend to be trumped by the *realpolitik* calculations of the various players. It is worth reminding ourselves of the bigger picture: *realpolitik* calculations are the cement that binds together Israel with Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey in the pro-Western camp, under the auspices of the United States.

The regional effects of the uprisings, thus far, have not been revolutionary. Despite momentous change, Egypt has not abandoned the pro-Western camp. The Muslim Brotherhood is an essentially conservative organization which seeks compromise and accommodation;<sup>34</sup> furthermore, it has to reckon and coexist with the Egyptian army, which will be loath to abandon its American patrons. 2011 was not 1979.

This, however, may change, to the detriment of Iran, as a consequence of the Syrian situation. Depending on the timing and manner in which the Assad regime falls, and on the composition of the new government that will emerge in Damascus, the balance of power between the Iran axis and the pro-Western camp will be severely affected. With Hamas's move away from the Syrian-Iranian orbit, Hizbullah's de-legitimation (and despite the closeness of Baghdad's new strong man, Nuri al-Maliki, to Tehran), Iran's position in the region is probably weakening. Economic sanctions are seriously affecting the Iranian economy. It is difficult to predict the future of internal Iranian politics where severe repression may not have completely extinguished the flames of opposition. Faced with all these pressures, regime change in Damascus may force the Islamic Republic to negotiate with the United States or opt irrevocably for the military nuclear option. ■

## Endnotes

\* I am grateful to Filippo Dionigi, Alexander Edwards and Spyros Economides for their help in writing this paper. All errors are mine.

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14. See Marina Ottaway, "Morocco: Can the Third Way Succeed?," [Carnegieendowment.org](http://www.carnegieendowment.org) (July 31, 2012), retrieved December 17, 2012, from <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2012/07/31/morocco-can-third-way-succeed/d3op>. The PJD formed a coalition government with the conservative nationalist Istiqlal, the ex-communist Parti du progrès et du socialisme (PPS) and the centrist Berber Mouvement populaire (MP).
15. Kristian Coates-Ulrichsen, "Gulf States: studious silence falls on Arab Spring," OpenDemocracy (April 25, 2011), retrieved December 17, 2012, from <http://www.opendemocracy.net/kristian-coates-ulrichsen/gulf-states-studious-silence-falls-on-arab-spring>.
16. Kristian Coates-Ulrichsen, "Kuwait's Uncertain Path," Foreign Policy (September 26, 2012), retrieved December 17, 2012, from [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/09/26/kuwait\\_s\\_uncertain\\_path](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/09/26/kuwait_s_uncertain_path).
17. I do not include the Iranian regime or Hizbullah in my discussion of Islamism.
18. International Crisis Group, "Yemen: Enduring Conflicts Threatened Transitions," p. ii.
19. Anouar Boukhars, "The Paranoid Neighbour: Algeria and the Conflict in Mali," The Carnegie Papers (October 2012).
20. Frederic Wehrey, "Desperate Salafi Attack in a Weak Libya," Financial Times, September 12, 2012, retrieved December 17, 2012, from <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/9edaf302-fc3d-11e1-ac0f-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2FM1J6j4D>.
21. In Syria the Salafi groups include Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham (The Freeman of Syria Battalions), Liwa Saqour al-Sham (Falcons of Syria Brigade), and Liwa al-Islam (Islam's Brigade). International Crisis Group, "Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition," Middle East Report, No. 131 (October 12, 2012).
22. Moataz el-Fegieri, "A Tyranny of the Majority? Islamists' Ambivalence about Human Rights," FRIDE Working Paper, No. 113 (October, 2012), p. 3.

**23.** Hizbullah supports the Assad regime against the rebellion, although it is not clear exactly in what way. International Crisis Group "A Precarious Balancing Act: Lebanon and the Syrian Conflict," Middle East Report, No. 132 (November 22, 2012).

**24.** Saeed Jalili, Head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, August 6, 2012: I am grateful to Jubin M. Goodarzi, who brought this quote to my attention. Damien Cave, "Iran Envoy Casts Syria as Part of Wider Conflict," New York Times (August 7, 2012), retrieved December 17, 2012, from [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/08/world/middleeast/fighting-grows-more-intense-in-aleppo-syria.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/08/world/middleeast/fighting-grows-more-intense-in-aleppo-syria.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

**25.** Fares Akram, " Hamas Leader Abandons Longtime Base in Damascus," New York Times, January 27, 2012, retrieved December 17, 2012, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/28/world/middleeast/khaled-meshal-the-leader-of-hamas-vacates-damascus.html>.

**26.** Kristian Coates-Ulrichsen, "The Temperature is Rising," Muftah, October 3, 2012, retrieved December 17, 2012, from <http://muftah.org/the-temperature-is-rising-sectarianism-political-reform-in-the-gulf/>.

**27.** Note, also, that there is a Shia minority in Syria as well as the Alawites and that, historically, tensions over doctrines between the Shia and Alawites have been intense.

**28.** Alain Gresh, "Gulf Cools Towards Muslim Brothers," Le Monde Diplomatique, No. 1211, November 2012.

**29.** Gilles Kepel, "Islamists in Power: Governing the Arab World," Public Lecture, London School of Economics, November 21, 2012.

**30.** Kristian Coates-Ulrichsen, Small States with a Big Role, HH Sheikh Nasser al Mohammad al Sabah Publication Series, No. 3 (October 2012), retrieved December 18, 2012, from <http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/alsabah/SmallStateswithaBigRole.pdf>.

**31.** On May 25, 2012, August 21, 2012 and September 26, 2012, fatal bomb attacks, attributed to Kurdish separatists, took place in Turkey. See the analysis by Gönül Tol, "Syria's Kurdish Challenge to Turkey," Foreign Policy (August 29 2012), retrieved December 18, 2012, from [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/08/29/syrias\\_kurdish\\_challenge\\_to\\_turkey](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/08/29/syrias_kurdish_challenge_to_turkey).

**32.** Trita Parsi, "Gaza is Testing the Limits of Iran's Mideast Ambitions," Globe and Mail, November 21, 2012, retrieved December 19, 2012, from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/commentary/gaza-is-testing-the-limits-of-irans-mideast-ambitions/article5518938/>.

**33.** Christopher Phillips, Into the Quagmire: Turkey's Frustrated Syria Policy, Chatham House Briefing Paper, December 2012, p. 7.

**34.** Alison Pargeter, The Muslim Brotherhood: the Burden of Tradition (London: Saqi Books 2010), see especially Chapter 1.

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