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The Great Arab Revolution: Challenges, Dilemmas and Opportunities?

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Key Points

- Long-standing authoritarian regimes (dynastic republics) in Tunisia and Egypt have fallen and Libya is in civil war. Peaceful demonstrations in Bahrain and Iran have been met with incumbent regime force, while Morocco, Yemen, Jordan, Djibouti, Iraq, Oman and Algeria all report popular protest.
- Although there is consensus as to the scale and importance of the revolutionary change in the North Africa and the Middle East (MENA) region, analysts are not agreed as to the strategic effects. Which ruling regime is next?
- Dignity deficits, the length of rule of incumbent family-based regimes and geographical contiguity are the three common factors between the events in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Few other statistical correlations are apparent, including, surprisingly, media access and revolt.
- Possible future governance models are apparent but transition traps loom. What was a virtue during the revolutionary phase of regime-change – a leaderless peaceful radicalised population – may turn into a vice during a period of negotiations and agenda setting that marks the next, favouring organised pre-existing elite and counter-elite interest groups to optimise their influence at the expense of society as a whole.
- While some states in the region accelerate/initiate regime-led reform and reaction processes, others have adopted a hedging "wait-and-see" strategy. External actors struggle to rebalance strategic calculus based on power and principle, against a backdrop of day-to-day crisis management and the possibility of armed humanitarian intervention.

Beyond noting the fluidity, ambiguity and ambivalence associated with the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, there is little consensus on causes and likely consequences. Do these geopolitical earthquakes constitute an "Arab Spring" leading to transition democratization, akin to 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe? Or should we look to 1979 in Iran, and the prospect of Sunni rather than Shia theocracy taking hold? Might the wider Muslim world – Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and Turkey – provide alternative potential governance models for the MENA region, given indigenous variants appear exhausted and no longer able to self-reproduce? What are the lessons which other MENA incumbent regimes and the international community will identify? How might those lessons be learned?

False Stability

Egypt's stability under Mubarak was guaranteed by two compacts. The first was agreed between the regime and the United States: Egypt supports the peace treaty with Israel and ensures access to cheap energy; the US would stay out of Egyptian internal affairs. The second between the Mubarak regime and the Egyptian people: the regime monopolises political and economic power; societal living conditions steadily improve.

The first pact was badly damaged by the 9/11 events; the second was frayed, ready to break after a decade-long economic stagnation, exacerbated by the socio-economic effects of the global financial crisis from 2008 onwards. Food and energy price hikes, high youth unemployment (35% illiteracy, two-thirds of the population is under 30 and 25% unemployed), corruption, nepotism and dignity deficits (with 40% of the population living on less than $2 a day) all served to highlight the gaps and disparities between elite regime performance legitimacy rhetoric and the societal daily realities.

A comparative table of statistical data (see Table 1) indicative of performance and procedural legitimacy of regimes in the MENA region provides few useful predictive correlations of unrest and revolt: the length of years in power is high in the cases of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, Bahrain provides an exception; Tunisia, Egypt and Libya are geographically contiguous, Yemen and Bahrain are clearly not; the correlation between new media use and revolt is absent. Quite apart from questioning the veracity of official statistics in this region, the limits of such data are clear. Relative deprivation – the gap between high expectations and low opportunities – is not captured, nor do we gain an understanding of how public goods and resources are distributed across different ethnic, religious, tribal or gender groups according to pre-existing animosities or allegiances. Long-standing political, social and economic grievances that may have remained unaddressed are not accounted for, though they clearly can have fed societal frustrations, impotence, humiliation and demoralization. The ruling regimes were capable of producing catalytic "Black Swan"-type events which elites could not begin to recognize, let alone manage.

Nonetheless, until 2011 the pre-existing orthodox interpretations of MENA region stability argued radical transformation was a mirage: the states were too powerful, buttressed as they were by a "deep state" and Western external legitimation; opposition too divided; the media easily muzzled. That these national security state nostrums have been turned on their head by events in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya is clear, but to what strategic effect?

Societal and elite perceptions as to the loyalty, cohesion and resiliency of a pro-regime "securitocracy" – the security and intelligence services, the military and business elites closely connected to the ruling families – have shifted radically. The pyramid of Egyptian power has proved to be a brittle facade that in reality was built on shifting sand: the Pharaoh had no clothes. The deft positioning of the Egyptian military, the central establishment pillar, as a would-be honest broker between the Mubarak regime and society underscores this reality, as does the speed at which fair-weather Western friends (France in the case of Tunisia, the United States with regards to Egypt) have abandoned at least the titular heads of erstwhile long-standing strategic partners in the region.

Egypt's society comprising 80 million people may be fragmented between secular, nationalist, Islamist factions, between the ideologically motivated forces of conservatism and modernity, between pragmatists and extremists and the apolitical or simply apathetic, but events indicate that a leaderless and disunited opposition rooted in society paradoxically renders it a more powerful force. It promotes the emergence of a hard-to-challenge key societal message delivered in demotic terms – "Game Over!" and "Bread, freedom and human dignity". The tired paternalistic mantra of deeply unpopular incumbents – "hold onto nurse for fear of something worse" in the shape of violent revolution and repressive theocracy – could not regain control of the narrative. With whom can the incumbent regimes negotiate, decapitate or co-opt if society is resilient, stubborn, united in opposition and leaderless?

The marriage of conventional media with instantaneous information communication technologies, not least social networking, has been highlighted as catalytic. Indeed, the crises in Tunisia and Egypt are characterised as the first Facebook and Twitter social revolutionary movements ("Ghandi 2.0"). Alongside satellite TV (*Al-Jazeera*), such on-line real-time technologies serve to heighten shared awareness and belonging, build and shape political solidarity, identity and cohesion around a message rather than individual. They enable peer pressure and authority operating in virtual space to coordinate and organise mass protest on the streets and squares of the capital. The state can impede but not silence the new media and plugged-in opposition: linear sclerotic state hierarchies and apparatus staffed by placemen and led by tone-deaf elite elders are outmanoeuvred by a networked, mass educated, urbanised and globalized new generation, proud of their traditions and heritage and desperate for change.

Unlike the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003) and Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), allegations that Western Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), embassies and security services are running post-modern *coup d'états* in the region are not a characteristic feature of the coverage.[1]

Table 1: Comparative Statistical Data of the MENA Region
(See explanations on p.6)

Country	Pop. (Mil)	% Age (15-24)	Unemployment Rate (%)	GDP per Capita (PPP - USD)	FHI		CPI	Democracy Index	Leader Appointed (Yr)	Years in Power	Internet Users		FaceBook Users		Gini Coefficient
					PR	CL					(Mil)	(%)	(Mil)	(%)	
Tunisia	10.63	21%	14	9,500	7	5	4.3	2.79	1987	23	3.5	33%	2.2	21%	40
Egypt	80.47	21%	9.7	6,200	2	3	3.1	3.02	1981	30	20.14	25%	5.65	7%	34.4
Libya	6.6	23%	30	13,800	7	7	2.2	1.94	1969	42	0.35	5%	0.18?	3%	36
Bahrain	1.21	15%	15	40,400	6	5	4.9	3.49	2002	9	0.42	35%	0.27	22%	36
Yemen	24.13	21%	35	2,600	6	5	2.2	2.64	1978	33	2.35	10%	0.12?	1%	37.7
Syria	22.52	23%	8.3	4,800	7	6	2.5	2.31	2000	11	4.47	20%	0.03?	0%	42
Iraq	30.4	20%	15.3	3,600	5	6	1.5	4	2005	6	0.33	1%	0.63	2%	42
Oman	3.03	21%	15	25,800	6	5	5.3	2.86	1970	41	1.47	49%	0.23	8%	32
Mauritania	3.28	N/A	30	2,100	6	5	2.3	3.86	2008	3	0.08	2%	0.03?	1%	39
Saudi Arabia	25.73	19%	10.8	24,200	7	6	4.7	1.84	2005	6	9.77	38%	3.46	13%	32
Algeria	35	23%	9.9	7,400	6	5	2.9	3.44	1999	12	4.7	13%	1.09?	3%	35.3
Jordan	6.51	20%	13.4	5,300	6	5	4.7	3.74	1999	12	1.64	25%	1.3	20%	39.7
Morocco	31.97	18%	9.8	4,900	5	4	3.4	3.79	1999	12	13.21	41%	3.01	9%	40.9
Lebanon	4.14	18%	NA	14,200	5	3	2.5	5.82	2008	3	1	24%	1.23	24%	45
United Arab Emirates	5.15	17%	2.4	40,200	6	5	6.3	2.52	2004	7	3.45	67%	2.05	30%	31
Kuwait	2.6	15%	2.2	51,700	4	5	4.5	3.88	2006	5	1.1	42%	0.68	26%	30
Qatar	0.85	14%	0.5	145,300	6	5	7.7	3.09	1995	6	0.56	66%	0.34	40%	39

This reflects two realities. First, that the toppling of regimes in Tunisia and Egypt and now Libya are clearly societal-led internal revolutions – "of Arabs, by Arabs, for Arabs". Second, in the case of Tunisia and Egypt at least, the incumbent regimes were strategically orientated towards the US and alternatives reflecting the perception of the "Arab street" almost certainly will not be, at least to the same extent with regards to Western unconditional support to Israel.

Three Scenarios?

It is still too early ascertain which lessons both ruling regimes in the region and the "international community" will identify and then learn (through changing policies, programme priorities, resource and budgetary allocations and legitimacy narratives) from the events in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. However, it can be agreed that as Egypt has the Arab world's largest, oldest and deepest culture and civilization and as such it is a benchmark for the region. It is in transition, but transition to what?

Three potential scenarios could unfold following the revolutions of 2011. First, a soft-landing managed "orderly transition" towards a reinvented democracy and the emergence of a prosperous and pluralistic state-building project over the longer-term. Here the understanding would be that the political system will be radically restructured – not just regime but political system change. Turkey – which benefited from internal and external preconditions for success being in place over several decades – is posited as a potential model.[2]

The second potential pathway lies in regime apparatus/bureaucracy, institutions and personal connections bound together by shared interests surviving phoenix-like to dominate post-revolutionary power distribution and resource allocation. This "Pyrrhic Victory" pathway derives its power from past experience and the weight of political culture and crony capitalism. Historically the Egyptian military has conflated the national interest with the interests of the military defence-industrial complex. Why would not the Supreme Military Council do the same? The Egyptian military and security services control large national projects, industries and defence contracts that account for a 15% share of GDP.[3] According to this scenario, the military takeover of the state ("a *coup d'état* indeed, by the military council") was timed and executed to pre-empt a genuine revolutionary tide that would de-legitimise authoritarian rule.[4]

Third, the ascendancy of al-Qaeda, chaos, anarchy and civil war or a 1979 Iranian-style Islamist takeover (reinforcing the notion of "Arab exceptionalism" and Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis) were widely understood

to constitute the default option if transition traps derail democratization efforts.[5] The spectre of a descent into anarchy is currently evidenced most strongly by unfolding events in Libya. By contrast, in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, incumbent official narratives are further delegitimised precisely because extremist religious ideologies have not (yet) proved to be a feature, according to many experts on this topic.[6] Indeed, while the correlation between political reform and the rise of Islamist militant groups is rejected by many studies, the one between frustration and political violence is not, "thus making democracy the only guarantee against radicalization in the Arab world".[7]

Sitting Firmly on the Fence?

Some MENA states may still be in "wait-and-see" mode, caution and deliberative discussion being the prudent choice – opting for both sticks (Bahrain's Pearl Roundabout, 17 February 2011 repression) and carrots (large-scale cash handouts and opening negotiations) as a hedging strategy. Two other strategic responses are even now possible: accelerate or initiate regime-led reform processes; accelerate or initiate regime-led reaction efforts. Both are predicated on the notion that the writing is now on the wall, change is coming and states that want to avoid 'inevitable' chaos and anarchy of a security vacuum need to get ahead of the curve. But each draw radically different conclusions from these premises.

On the one hand, enlightened reform factions within states in which economic, political and military power is monopolised by corrupt closed elites-for-life will be emboldened to conclude that "getting ahead of the curve" involves anticipating societal need for change by proactively calling for free and fair parliamentary elections, with the promise that the Constitution will be rewritten to address dignity deficits. For states that opt for this "constitutional monarchy" pathway – Jordan appears as an exemplar – the internal debates will centre on how far and how fast the process of reform unfolds, rather than the general strategic orientation and ultimate end-goal. Here the demonstration effect of the revolutions proves a powerful driver, buttressed by media reportage and raised societal expectations. For energy rich states, higher oil prices (between $110-120 per barrel) may provide a cushion to offset social, economic and political disruption which causes a dip instability ("the J-curve") as the political system shifts from closed authoritarian to open democratic.[8] The underlying rationale is not a Damascene-like conversion to democracy, but rather a basic survival instinct and political calculation that place self-preservation above all other considerations.

On the other hand, as Libya (helicopter gun-ships against the population) demonstrates, incumbent regimes may conclude that "getting ahead of the curve" involves proactively tightening the screws on society through more severe monitoring of public and virtual spaces. This embattled regime represents an extreme proponent of this unequivocal reaction: "We will fight until the last man, until the last woman, until the last bullet".[9] The orchestrated use of coercive force is a first rather than last resort, with pro-regime "pro-stability" proxy forces (thugs) waiting in the wings to use terror to break an opposition, allowing classical state structures and institutions to stand above the fray, maintain their legitimacy, and then intervene for the good of society to "restore order". Compensatory safety-valves could include greater ant-Israeli/US rhetoric, ethno-nationalist mobilization and increased militarism – all paid for courtesy of higher oil prices. Given the lukewarm incumbent regime support from the West in their hour of need, initiating a search among emergent and Great Powers within the "Authoritarian International" for more reliable strategic partners will become a priority. Again, internal incumbent regime debates focus on means rather than ends: how much force, where and when to apply it, which alternative strategic partners? Here the calculation is that autocracies are indeed adaptable: they can become even more autocratic.

External Credibility Traps: New Strategic Calculus?

While most experts did not predict transformational events in 2011, all now seek to provide policy-relevant assessments. Western public support for representative and participatory institutions, structures and processes in the region rather than elite personalities looks set to grow, whatever the reality in private. The central tension and contradiction in Western foreign policy towards MENA autocracies has become more acute: Western strategic interest – regional stability, the continuity of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, and access to the Suez Canal and Egyptian airspace – are secured through long-standing strategic partnership with US-backed autocratic security-providers; the West has sought to promote its democratic principles and values-system in the shape of accountable and transparent market-democratic states.

In January 2005 US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice characterised six decades of US policy to the Middle East as having sacrificed liberty on the altar of authoritarian stability. Six years later following the realities of January and February 2011, can there be a prudent blend of power and principle, of *realpolitik* and idealism, or do blatant double standards and hypocrisy only serve to delegitimise both? Might a new political calculus be emergent, one that recognises this compact is bankrupt? At its core is a false dichotomy to posit interests and values in opposition: Western self-interest and self-respect are aligned; interests and values are now the same.[10]

Box: Realpolitik versus Idealism?

"Foreign policy is not necessarily only based on principles but also on interests. And in that sense, our foreign policy is no different from that of all those European states which currently face the same type of foreign policy developments. It is absolutely ridiculous to wish to develop ties based on the democratic conditions of each country. If that were the case, we would not have ties with many countries with whom we have had ties for decades".

Portuguese Foreign Minister Luis Amado, *Diario de Noticias* website, Lisbon, in Portuguese, 27 February 2011.

At what point should erstwhile external strategic partners pivot to counter-elites when longstanding incumbent allies become albatrosses, while still ensuring a dignified orderly transition? Calculations here take into account first and foremost the emergency evacuation of foreign nationals

and "soft" options, such as disclosure/freezing of incumbent assets and sovereign wealth funds, elite travel bans, and redrafting bilateral military-aid conditionality clauses. Imposing no-fly zones or threatening and then deploying armed humanitarian interventions in the name of "responsibility to protect" (R2P) are much harder to coordinate.[11] How can grass-roots activists demanding regime-change be supported in Egypt without extending such support to all mass protest? How to avoid the unintended consequences that such external support is not used be incumbents, as is the case in Iran with the "Green Revolution", to delegitimize the very protest it seeks to succour?

While an Euro-Atlantic Marshall Plan to the MENA region could help buttress democratization efforts by alleviating immediate societal needs (food, health, employment), might such an effort encourage only partial political reform rather than embed long-term sustainable systemic change? Does Europe and the US have the political skill and will to act strategically? The evidence to date suggests that reactive day-to-day crisis management marks the limits of current capability.[12] Indeed, the very conceptual and normative basis European governments invoke – "regime", "state", "sovereignty" and "R2P" – appear "1990s-lite", not fit for purpose when applied to a MENA region that is globalised and increasingly interdependent. Is a coherent strategic approach to the region still possible as it self-differentiates further, or will interaction be entirely contingent and transactional? To date, NATO, the EU, G8, UN (UNSCR 1970 notwithstanding) appear strategically paralyzed, the international community fractured.

Will Arab states undergoing transition democratization projects have the capacity to contain Iran, keep the peace with Israel and allow for uninterrupted energy flows from the Middle East? If Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Yemen do not fall primarily within the West's security system, then who fills the vacuum? Will Turkey's custodian, guardianship and stabilizing role in the Middle East increase?[13] Where does this leave Iran and Saudi Arabia in terms of internal stability, legitimizing ideologies and foreign policy interests and alignments?[14] The Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) deployment of troops to Bahrain, the GCC call for a UN-mandated no-fly zone over Libya – a call taken up by the 22-member state Arab League, are indicative of an alternative future, one in which MENA states become more subjects in rather than objects of international relations. Such assertiveness and growing self-esteem will have geostrategic implications for the future ordering of the region.

An Arab Spring?

Tunisia and Egypt's political and social evolution through 2011 constitutes an exemplar for both states in the greater Middle East region, from Casablanca to Kabul, as well as current and potential future strategic partners around the world.[15]

Sustainable political governance systems and regimes which will now emerge over the longer term in the Arab Middle East will *ipso facto* be heterogeneous – acceptable to elites and societies, appropriate to indigenous histories, socio-political cultures, traditions and narratives and affordable – that is, aligned to particular state economic realities and circumstances.

Not only is Sunni Arab leadership in question, but more importantly the sources of its legitimacy – the old post-independence narratives of defiance of the West, resistance to Israel, and autocratic nationalism appearing exhausted. The leadership of the Sunni Arab centre – Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan – looks to have lost its grip. Might the new centre of gravity in the Arab world be a civil society whose shared social capital is incubated in virtual real-time space by satellite TV channels and social media networks? Can these technologies and the educated globalised youth that use them provide the intellectual leadership and energy to construct a new narrative of pan-Arab unity, common purpose and tolerance in the second decade of the 21st century? If so, Internet access and social media subscription levels will indicate the size and vibrancy of virtual civil societies throughout the region. The capacity and will of incumbent regimes to "manage", censor and block such technology will become much more decisive in the future.

Pre-existing "authoritarian stability first" or "democratic disorder and Islamist theocratic chaos" dichotomies look set to be proved false in the coming days and weeks. The obstacles to grassroots-triggered transitional governments acceptable to the military and society appear less than were previously understood. The limits of Western influence are far greater than was supposed. The rules of the game are changing and a transformed societal-based collective consciousness sets new benchmarks, expectations, domestic and international thresholds by which to judge incumbents. This Arab winter of discontent will be made glorious summer if denial, stupidity, greed and all too human hubris does not win out: arrogance truly does diminish wisdom.

NB: The views expressed in this paper are entirely and solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the GCSP.

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Table 1 Data Explanations

1 Countries above the bold line have experienced notable protest and revolt. Countries below are ordered from most unstable to most stable, according to the "Arab League Index of Unrest", *The Economist* online, 9 February 2011: http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2011/02/arab_unrest_index

2 Data for population, unemployment rate, GDP per capita, and internet users: most recent *CIA – The World Factbook*, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/, accessed on 2 March 2011.

3 Percentage of Population between 15 and 24 (2005): *Youth in the Middle East and North Africa: Demographic Opportunity or Challenge*, Population Reference Bureau (PRB), April 2007, http://www.prb.org/pdf07/youthinMENA.pdf

4 FHI: Freedom House Index; PR: Political Rights; CL: Civil Liberties; 1 represents the most free and 7 the least free rating: *Freedom in the World 2011: The Authoritarian Challenge to Democracy*, http://www.freedomhouse.org/images/File/fiw/Tables%2C%20Graphs%2C%20etc%2C%20FIW%202011_Revised%201_11_11.pdf

5 CPI: Corruption Perceptions Index: a scale from 10 (highly clean) to 0 (highly corrupt): "Corruption Perceptions Index 2010", Transparency International, http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2010/results, accessed on 2 March 2011.

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Endnotes

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3 Yusuf Ergen, "Milbus and Arabs", *Today's Zaman*, 27 February 2011.

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