

The Arab Spring: Challenges, Obstacles and Dilemmas

By Graeme P. Herd*

Introduction

On the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Soviet Union, long-standing authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen have fallen, Libya is in the final stages of a civil war that toppled the forty-year rule of Muammar Gaddafi, and the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria may be tottering on the brink of implosion. Through 2011, demonstrations in Bahrain and Iran have been met with force, while Morocco, Jordan, Djibouti, Iraq, Oman, and Algeria have all reported protests. The Arab Spring has not been confined to the Middle East and North Africa; rather, its effects have gone global, with analysts drawing attention to its ripples, ramifications, and the potential of “revolutionary contagion” through the greater Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, Russia and Eurasia, as well as China and East and South East Asia. Although there is broad agreement among experts and commentators who have studied the Arab Spring itself as to the scale and importance of revolutionary change in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, its causes are contested, and there is little consensus as to its likely consequences and strategic effects. As Prince Hassan of Jordan noted, “The outcome of this tectonic realignment is not just unpredictable, but unknowable.”¹

Nevertheless, we can contend that the Arab Spring is in the process of challenging many of the attitudes, values, norms, and interests that have underpinned Russian, Eurasian, U.S. and European strategic approaches to the MENA region. These transformational events have forced fundamental questions concerning the basic tenets of international relations to the fore. How stable are authoritarian regimes, how brittle and fragile? What are the limits of humanitarian intervention? Is the set of assumptions that have governed Western strategy towards the MENA region—the balance between strategic interests, norms, and values—still relevant, or should some recalibration take place? This essay will attempt to answer some of these questions.

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¹ Cited in Ian Black, “Where the outcome of the Arab Spring will end is anyone’s guess,” *The Guardian* (U.K.) (17 June 2011).

“Arab Spring”: False Assumptions and New Realities?²

Egypt’s stability under the government of Hosni Mubarak was guaranteed by two compacts. The first was agreed between the regime and the United States: Egypt would support the peace treaty with Israel and ensure access to cheap energy; the U.S. would stay out of Egyptian internal affairs. The second compact was between the Mubarak regime and the Egyptian people: the regime would hold a monopoly on political and economic power; in exchange, societal living conditions would gradually improve. The first pact was badly damaged by the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001; the second was frayed, ready to break after a decade of 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 percent illiteracy, two-thirds of the Egyptian population are under thirty years of age, and 25 percent are unemployed), corruption, nepotism, and dignity deficits (with 40 percent of the population living on less than USD 2 a day) all served to highlight the gaps and disparities between elite regime-performance-legitimacy rhetoric and the daily realities of life in Egyptian society.³

Egypt aside, more generally the MENA region is characterized by relative deprivation—the gap between high expectations and diminishing opportunities—and uneven resource distribution (when examined through religious, ethnic, gender, or tribal prisms). A succinct list of common factors is offered by the Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mikhail Bogdanov:

The lack of change in the leadership and the political elite in general, a low level of political mobility, the belatedness or complete absence of reforms that have ripened, a high level of unemployment, corruption and other social diseases—all of these conflict-generating factors have been accumulating for many years and exploded at the beginning of this year. Moreover, one must not forget that young people prevail in the Arab countries. These are modern and educated people, who comfortably use the Internet, blogs and social networks and who saw no future for themselves in the existing framework.⁴

Authoritarian regimes in the region generated unaddressed political grievances that fed societal frustration and impotence, humiliation, and demoralization. Political systems that were long thought to be self-contained and that artificially suppressed volatility in the name of stability were capable of producing existential catalytic “black

² This section borrows heavily from Graeme P. Herd, “The Great Arab Revolution: Challenges, Dilemmas and Opportunities,” *GCSP Policy Paper* No. 11 (March 2011): 1–6.

³ Charles Kenny, “Why Recessions are Good for Freedom,” *Foreign Policy* 186 (May–June 2011): 31.

⁴ *Interfax* News Agency, Moscow (in Russian), 5 July 2011.

swan”-type events that elite-dominated regimes could not begin to recognize, let alone manage. As Nassim Taleb, the sage of the “black swan” theory, wrote, “The more constrained the volatility the bigger the jump will be.”⁵ The Arab Spring appears to demonstrate that dictatorial systems of power are inherently unstable and prone to collapse: it is not a question of *if* they will fall, but *when*.

Nonetheless, until 2011 the preexisting orthodox interpretations of stability in the MENA region argued that radical transformation was a mirage: the states were too powerful, buttressed as they were by a “deep state”—i.e., “the military-security complex and state control of the economy”⁶—and Western external support. Political opposition movements were considered too divided, and the media in authoritarian states were too easily muzzled. These national security nostrums have been turned on their head. Perceptions of the loyalty, cohesion, and resiliency of a pro-regime “securitocracy”—the security and intelligence services and the military and business elites closely connected to the ruling families—have shifted radically. The pyramid of Egyptian power, which projected a seemingly stable and enduring authoritarian equilibrium, 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 pillar of the establishment, as a would-be honest broker between the Mubarak regime and Egyptian society underscores this reality. So too does the speed at which fair-weather Western friends—France in the case of Tunisia, the United States with regard to Egypt, the U.K. and Italy in the Libyan instance—have abandoned at least the titular heads of erstwhile long-standing strategic partners in the region.⁷

Egypt’s society, which contains 80 million people, may be fragmented between secular, nationalist, and 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 deeply rooted in Egyptian society paradoxically rendered it a more powerful force. It promoted 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 mantras of deeply unpopular incumbents could not regain control of the narrative. More practically, with whom can the incumbent regimes negotiate, decapi-

⁵ Nassim Nicholas Taleb, “The Black Swan of Cairo,” *Foreign Affairs* 90:3 (May–June 2011): 6.

⁶ “Scholars posited that Arab States with oil reserves and revenues deployed this wealth to control the economy, building patronage networks, providing social services, and directing the development of dependent private sectors.” F. Gregory Gause III, “Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring,” *Foreign Affairs* 90:4 (July–August 2011): 3.

⁷ Libya was critical for Italy in energy security terms, supplying one-quarter of Italian oil imports, and 15 percent of its gas. Alberto Negri, “Recognition Is Blessing for Italian Gas and Oil,” *Il Sole-24 Ore* website (Milan, in Italian), 16 July 2011.

tate, or co-opt if the opposition movement remains resilient, stubborn, and united—and, most importantly, leaderless?

The role of instantaneous information communication technologies has been highlighted as catalytic in the events of the Arab Spring. Indeed, the crises in Tunisia and Egypt are characterized as the first Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube social media revolutionary movements (“Gandhi 2.0”). Such online, real-time technologies serve to heighten shared awareness and belonging and help build and shape political solidarity, identity, and cohesion around a message rather than a charismatic individual. They enable peer pressure and authority operating in virtual space to coordinate and organize mass protest on the streets and squares of the capital. The state can impede but not silence the new media and plugged-in opposition: sclerotic, linear state hierarchies and apparatus staffed by apparatchiks and led by tone-deaf elite elders were outmaneuvered by a networked, educated, urbanized, and globalized new generation, proud of their traditions and heritage and desperate for change. The role of the new social media was to create the dots—the daily episodes—which mainstream Arab media outlets, (e.g., *Al Arabiya*), particularly evening news and discussion programs, as well as satellite TV networks such as *Al Jazeera*—could weave into a narrative. Its role was to amplify and resonate an existing narrative, rather than determine the outcome.

Unlike the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003) and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), allegations that Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs), embassies, and security services were fomenting postmodern *coups d'état* in the region have not been characteristic features of the coverage from within the region or by reflective analysts from outside the region.⁸ This reflects in part the reality that the toppling of regimes in Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt, and Libya are clearly societal-led internal revolutions: “of Arabs, by Arabs, for Arabs.”

MENA Reactions and Responses: Alternative Modernization Pathways?

It is still too early ascertain which states or actors have emerged as strategic winners and which can be considered on balance strategic losers. However, seven months after the start of the Arab Spring, some lessons are beginning to emerge. What is harder to ascertain is how these lessons will be “learned.” Indications might include the recalibration of strategies, adjustments in policies or policy priorities, cutting or increasing the volume and direction of resource and budgetary allocations, and the

⁸ Yevgeny Primakov, “Egyptian Explosion: What next? The Center of Gravity is Shifting from Al-Tahrir Square to the Political Field,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* website (Moscow; in Russian) (9 February 2011); Vladimir Mamontov, “Egypt will wait,” *Izvestia* website (Moscow; in Russian) (7 February 2011).

elaboration of new legitimating narratives. In the immediate term, three potential alternate strategic pathways appear as models and offer road maps to the future, if not necessarily viable and sustainable governance systems. As the Arab world's largest, oldest, and deepest culture and civilization, Egypt will likely be a benchmark for the region. It is in transition, but transition to what? Interestingly, it has the potential to exemplify any of the three alternative pathways.

Option One: The Orderly Transition

First, we can posit the theoretical option of a “soft landing”—a 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 through free and fair parliamentary elections, with the promise that the constitution will be rewritten to address dignity deficits. The internal debates will focus on how far and how fast the process of reform should unfold, rather than the general strategic orientation and ultimate goal. 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 may provide a cushion to offset social, economic, and political disruptions that cause a dip in stability (the “J-curve”) as the political system shifts from one of closed authoritarianism to open democracy.⁹ The underlying rationale is not a Damascene-like conversion to democracy, but rather a basic survival instinct and political calculation that places self-preservation above all other considerations.

Over the longer term, *sustainable* political governance systems and regimes in the MENA region will *ipso facto* be heterogeneous: acceptable to elites and the broader society; appropriate to indigenous histories, socio-political cultures, traditions and narratives; and affordable—that is, aligned to the particular state's economic realities and circumstances. Interestingly, in the case of Jordan, Morocco, and Oman, rational and pragmatic monarchies have taken the lead in driving reform, and constitutional monarchies may well be the outcome. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, the head of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), argues that since the 1950s republican regimes in the MENA region have demonstrated “less respect for democracy and human rights” than monarchical regimes: “Republican regimes brought military dictatorships or the dictatorship of party ideology. The leaders are cult figures. In monarchies you have kings as well but there are traditions that are transferred from generation to generation. In monarchies you don't have a problem of succession, for instance. In republics the leader wants his son to succeed him. How can you call this

⁹ Ian Bremmer, “The J-curve hits the Middle East,” *Financial Times* (17 February 2011): 9.

a republic?"¹⁰ Turkey benefited from particular internal preconditions (Ataturk) and a Cold War strategic context and NATO membership to facilitate a stable and successful modernization project. Change took place incrementally over decades rather than by revolution. In the sense of process and outcome, rather than specifics (i.e., an Islamist party in power), Turkey is posited as a model for the region.¹¹ Some analysts have also highlighted the post-Suharto Indonesian experience of democratization as a relevant example for some MENA states: "Back in 1998, when widespread protests here forced Suharto to step down, ending his thirty-two-year military-backed rule—which had suppressed communists and Islamists—it left the path open for political reform and free and fair elections in the Muslim-majority nation. Egypt, a key Arab ally of the West and its cornerstone of security and stability in the Middle East, faces a similar challenge."¹²

Option Two: Bureaucratic Persistence

The second potential pathway lies in the apparatus and bureaucracy of the previous regime, its institutions and personal connections bound together by shared interests, surviving phoenix-like to dominate post-revolutionary power distribution and resource allocation. This pathway derives its power from past experience and the weight of political culture. Historically, the Egyptian military has conflated the national interest with the interests of the military defense-industrial complex. Why would the Supreme Military Council not do the same? The Egyptian military and security services control large national projects, industries, and defense contracts that account for a 15 percent share of Egypt's GDP.¹³ Safety valves that allow elites to channel public anger and frustration in exchange for maintaining and reinforcing the status quo could include greater ant-Israeli/U.S. rhetoric, ethno-tribal-nationalist mobilization, and increased militarism—all paid for courtesy of higher oil prices. Given the lukewarm support for the Mubarak regime in its hour of need from the U.S. and Europe, initiating a search among the "Authoritarian International" (particularly Russia and China) for more reliable strategic partners will become a priority for those states whose regimes feel embattled. Again, debates within incumbent regimes focus on

¹⁰ Barcin Yinanc, "Arab World Faces Long, Painful Road, Says Islamic Group Head," *Hurriyet* website (Istanbul) (16 July 2011).

¹¹ Andrey Lipskiy, "Arab Dominoes," *Novaya Gazeta* website (Moscow; in Russian) (25 February 2011); Sahin Alpay, "Why Turkey, Not Iran, Inspires," *Zaman* website (Istanbul) (21 February 2011); Asli Aydintasbas, "Is it Wrong to Say 'the First Republic Has Ended'?" *Milliyet* website (Istanbul; in Turkish) (1 August 2011).

¹² "Indonesia: A Model for Change," *The Straits Times* website (Singapore) (17 February 2011).

¹³ *Yusuf Ergen, "Milbus and Arabs," Today's Zaman (27 February 2011).*

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.

Option Three: State Chaos

The third potential pathway for states in the Middle East and North Africa in the wake of the upheavals of the Arab Spring is the ascendancy of Al Qaeda, chaos, anarchy and civil war, or a 1979 Iranian-style Islamist takeover (reinforcing the notion of “Arab exceptionalism” and Samuel Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilizations’ thesis). These scenarios were widely understood to constitute the types of default options that would emerge if transition traps derailed democratization efforts.¹⁴ The specter of a descent into anarchy is currently evidenced most strongly by unfolding events in Libya (“We will fight until the last man, until the last woman, until the last bullet”¹⁵), Yemen, and Syria, with gloomy prognosis the order of the day: “I see a river of blood and a plunge towards the abyss.”¹⁶ In Tunisia and Egypt, incumbent official narratives were further delegitimized precisely because extremist religious ideologies have not (yet) proved to be the default alternative to the status quo.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ahmed Rashid, “Cairo Needs Help to Avoid al-Qaeda’s Grip,” *Financial Times* (16 February 2011): 9.

¹⁵ “Gaddafi’s Son Warns of “Rivers of Blood” in Libya,” *Al Arabiya News Channel* (21 February 2011); available at <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/02/21/138515.html>.

¹⁶ Ghassan Shabril, “On the Way to the Abyss,” *Al-Hayat* website (London, in Arabic) (1 August 2011).

¹⁷ Scott Shane, “Al-Qaeda Left out in an Arab Sea of Change,” *International Herald Tribune* (1 March 2011): 4; Omer Taspinar, “CChange in the Arab World: Why Now?” *Zaman* website (21 February 2011). Indeed, while many studies reject the correlation between political reform and the rise of Islamist militant groups, the connection between frustration and political violence has not been debunked, “thus making democracy the only guarantee against radicalization in the Arab world.” Murad Batal al-Shishani, “Special Commentary: Popular Movements in the Middle East and the Role of al-Qaeda,” *The Jamestown Foundation*, 3 March 2011.

Spillover Effects: Arab Spring—Eurasian Fall?

Throughout 2011, the media and analysts in the former Soviet Union and beyond have debated the causes, course, and possible consequences of the Arab Spring, including the potential of the spillover of “revolutionary contagion” into Eurasia.¹⁸ Arguments here have focused on structural and systemic causal factors common to the MENA region and Eurasia, authoritarian regime-types and the extent to which they prove to be resilient and adaptable or prone to instability and upheaval. The commonalities between the Arab Spring in the MENA region and conditions on the ground in Eurasia are apparent: enduring inequalities and dignity deficits continue; longstanding authoritarian republicanism is in place; intra-regional transnational societal spillover potential is ever-present; and resource distribution and allocation is explained by pre-existing family, clan, tribal, ethnic, religious, and gender allegiances and animosities. These commonalities have little resonance in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, but are more relevant in Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan and are most striking in Central Asia. In Central Asia, authoritarian incumbents in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have held power for over twenty years. Dignity deficits are well attested: food price hikes and electricity cuts in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are ongoing, and border regimes are opaque. In its most recent “Corruption Perception Index,” Transparency International ranked Kyrgyzstan 164, Kazakhstan 105, and Tajikistan 154 out of 178 states surveyed (Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan tied for 172nd place, along with Sudan).

However, important differences between conditions in the Middle East/North Africa and Central Asia can also be identified. First, the post-Soviet authoritarian equilibrium differs from that in the Arab world. The ruling elites in Central Asia—the “selectocracies”—are centered on the presidential family, business elites, and cronies, but by contrast to the MENA region they have a much lighter investment in military and security services. The symbolic role that the army enjoys in Egypt, possessing status as the core institution of the modern state the primary guardian of the Egyptian people, being simultaneously above politics and the embodiment of the state itself (despite the fact that it supplies presidents), has no analog in Central Asia, or anywhere in the post-Soviet space. In Egypt, the military as a classical state structure and institution was able to stand above the fray, maintain its legitimacy, and then intervene for the good of society to “restore order.” The role and function of elite military units in state structures in Central Asia is regime defense, and militaries have traditionally been socialized to accept civilian (if not democratic) control.

¹⁸ Aleksandr Rybin, “Will Kazakhstan Become Another Egypt...” and Zafar Abdulloyev (director of the Kontent centre for political analysis), “Social inequality and the ‘Libyan question’,” in *Biznes i Politika*, (Dushanbe, in Russian) (17 March 2011); Mikhail Dvoryanchikov, “Yermukhamet Yertysbayev: 3 April Will be a Great Day,” *Ekspress-K* (Almaty, in Russian) (4 March 2011). Yertysbayev is a presidential advisor in Kazakhstan.

Second, the idea is prevalent that the prospect of the spread of revolutionary “contagion” is slight due to an inbuilt immunity in Central Asia. This rests on the claim that there is a predisposition toward and preference for gradualist reform in Central Asia rather than revolution. The burden of history has inoculated these states and societies from revolution: Tajikistan is still suffering the effects of a recent civil war (1992–97); Kyrgyzstan had its own revolution in 2010 (indeed, President Roza Otunbaeva argues that the Kyrgyz revolution provided the model for the Arab Spring); for Uzbekistan, the massacre in Andizhan in 2005 demonstrates that what little discontent exists is localized rather than widespread and can remain contained; regime leadership change occurred already in Turkmenistan in 2007, when President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow took power after the death of Turkmenbashi; and President Nazerbayev of Kazakhstan opted for regime renewal with “free and fair” elections in 2011.

Finally, in contrast to the strategic approach taken by the EU, NATO and the U.S. to the MENA region, the most powerful regional actors and institutions in Eurasia—the Russian Federation/CSTO and China/SCO—cast normative shadows that support and actively uphold the status quo. This solidarity is buttressed by both the post-9/11 war on terror and the legitimizing of preexisting anti-radical Islamist narratives, and by their unified understanding of the nature of the “Color Revolutions” in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan and their commitment to oppose their “export.” China in particular has responded very forcefully to the prospect that the Arab Spring could become a Eurasian Summer, or a Chinese Winter. Throughout 2011, internal Chinese security services and state authorities have tightened their control over the media, including the systematic harassment of journalists and dissidents in a manner many long-standing China analysts characterize as massive, disproportionate, and the worst crackdown since the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. Chinese official rhetoric also stresses the fact that the Chinese themselves, through the bitter experience of history, are predisposed to accept gradualist evolutionary progress. The Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, Tiananmen in the 1980s, and uprisings and riots in Tibet in March 2008 and Xinjiang in July 2009 all demonstrate that sudden change and discontinuities bring chaos and violence. In short, the regime argues that its model of “authoritarian developmentalism,” which incorporates regime-rejuvenating measures (such as a rotating participative leadership) has proved adaptive and thus durable.¹⁹

¹⁹ Titus C. Chen, “China’s Reaction to the Colour Revolutions: Adaptive Authoritarianism in Full Swing,” *Asian Perspectives* 34:2 (2010): 5–51; Abel Polese and Donnacha Ó Beacháin, “The Color Revolution Virus and Authoritarian Antidotes: Political Protest and Regime Counterattacks on Post-Communist Spaces,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* (Spring 2011).

The fear of “contagion” has shaped the domestic public policy responses of incumbent regimes in Central Asia. These responses provide a window into elite perceptions and anxieties, as well as their ability to differentiate between symptoms and causes of upheaval. They can be characterized by what we might call a combination of “soft repression” and “symbolic reform”—a Central Asian version of sticks and carrots. An increased monitoring of Islamic religious institutions and funding from foreign religious foundations is apparent, along with more stringent filtering of new social media and the Internet. Central Asian authorities have focused on Internet access and social media subscription levels, which indicate the size and vibrancy of virtual civil societies throughout the region, and have sought to restrict flows of information in various ways. The capacity and will of these authoritarian regimes to “manage,” censor, monitor, and block new social media, the Internet, CDs, and religious literature are high, particularly in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.²⁰ Kyrgyztelecom has reported that Kazakh Telekom filters and restricts some Google services, while Uzbek authorities are reportedly asking information providers to inform the government about mass mailings of text messages that are “sensitive and suspicious,” clearly concerned about an SMS-Revolution.²¹ In Turkmenistan, “Some, if not all, of Turkmenistan’s young people studying abroad may be prevented from ever leaving again if they return home. The reason probably has to do with the wave of revolution sweeping across the Middle East.”²²

Eurasian leaders (or their advisors, at any rate) appear to have read Alexis de Tocqueville: “the most dangerous moment for a bad government is when it begins to reform.”²³ Symbolic reform designed to preempt an Arab Spring comes in the shape of increased elite-initiated discussions and debates on the need for political reform and renewal, though with little practical outcome. In the spring of 2011, Uzbek president Islam Karimov and his Tajik counterpart Emmamali Rahmon led debates on political modernization and structural reforms, including the idea of increasing the authority of the government and parliament. The Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev most notably organized a snap presidential election on 3 April 2011 and invited foreign observers to monitor the process, while also raising the issue of power redis-

²⁰ Farangis Najibullah, “Is Kazakhstan Under Threat of Radical Islamization?” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (30 March 2011); available at http://www.rferl.org/content/chaikhana_kazakhstan_islamization_threat/3542185.html.

²¹ Anuradha Chenoy, “Can the Events in West Asia be replicated in Central Asia?,” NewsClick Production, 1 April 2011; available at <http://newslick.in/node/2102>.

²² Muhammad Tahir, “New Dilemma for Turkmen Students Abroad,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (7 April 2011); available at http://www.rferl.org/content/dilemma_turkmen_students_abroad/3550259.html.

²³ Graeme Robertson, “Arab Autocrats May be Tottering, but the World’s Tyrants Aren’t All Quaking in their Steel Toed Boots,” *Foreign Policy* 186 (May–June 2011): 36–39.

tribution, strengthening the judiciary's independence, and ensuring greater freedoms for civil society.

Recalibrating Russian and Euro-Atlantic Strategic Frameworks?

For Russia, the U.S., and Europe, the reality of armed humanitarian intervention in Libya and growing pressure for external intervention in Syria, as well as regime changes and revolt throughout the region, have focused thinking on crisis management and operational issues: the emergency evacuation of foreign nationals; disclosure/freezing of incumbent assets and sovereign wealth funds; elite travel bans; the recalling of ambassadors; the redrafting of bilateral military-aid conditionality clauses; the imposition of no-fly zones; and the threat and then deployment of armed humanitarian interventions in the name of the "responsibility to protect."²⁴ However, the Arab Spring has also implicitly questioned the viability of existing Russian and Euro-Atlantic strategic approaches to the MENA region, especially the assumptions upon which these approaches rested.

In January 2005, then-U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice characterized six decades of U.S. policy towards the Middle East as having sacrificed liberty on the altar of authoritarian stability but gained neither. On the one hand, Western strategic interests (regional stability, the continuity of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, and access to the Suez Canal and Egyptian airspace) were secured through long-standing strategic partnerships with autocratic security-providers. On the other hand, Western market-democratic states promoted democratic principles and values of accountability and transparency. Six years later in 2011, the question was urgent: can there be a prudent blend of power and interests with principle and values, of *realpolitik* and idealism, or do blatant double standards and hypocrisy only serve to delegitimize both? Might a new political calculus be emerging, one that recognizes that this compact is bankrupt? At its core, it is a false dichotomy to posit interests and values in opposition to each other. Western self-interest and self-respect are aligned; interests and values are now the same.²⁵

This rebalancing has its critics, not least Portuguese Foreign Minister Luis Amado: "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 that 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

²⁴ Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury and Yang Razali Kassim, "Libya and the UN: Whose Responsibility to Protect?" *RSIS Commentaries* 34/2011 (4 March 2011); available at <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/publications/Perspective/RSIS0342011.pdf>.

²⁵ Charlemagne, "No Time for Doubters," *The Economist* (26 February 2011).

country. If that were the case, we would not have ties with many countries with whom we have had ties for decades.”²⁶ Fareed Zakaria has also noted,

There are vast differences between the circumstances in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Saudi Arabia; American interests in those countries; and our capacity to influence events there. ... Were the administration to start clamoring for regime change in Riyadh, and were that to encourage large-scale protests (and thus instability) in the kingdom, the price of oil would skyrocket. The United States and much of the developed world would almost certainly drop into a second recession. Meanwhile, the Saudi regime, which has legitimacy, power and lots of cash that it is spending, would likely endure—only now it would be enraged at Washington. What exactly would a more “consistent” Middle Eastern policy achieve?²⁷

The extent of strategic uncertainty is underscored by the following questions that remain unanswered seven months into the Arab Spring. Will Arab states undergoing democratization projects have the capacity to contain Iran, keep the peace with Israel, and enable 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 custodianship, guardianship, and stabilizing role in the Middle East increase?²⁸ Where does this leave Iran and Saudi Arabia?²⁹ Is then the real choice between having stable MENA states with independent foreign and security policies or weak, fragile authoritarian Western puppet regimes?

Strategic questions focus on long-term goals and visions for the region and its relationship with external actors, rather than processes—on ends, not means, though the two are clearly linked. At what point should erstwhile external strategic partners shift their support to counter-elites when longstanding incumbent allies become albatrosses, while still ensuring a dignified, orderly transition? How can grass-roots activists demanding regime change be supported in Egypt without extending such support to

²⁶ Luis Amado, *Diario de Noticias* website (Lisbon, in Portuguese) (27 February 2011); Fareed Zakaria, “A Doctrine We Don’t Need,” *The Washington Post* (7 July 2011): A13.

²⁷ Zakaria, “A Doctrine We Don’t Need.”

²⁸ For arguments on either side, see Soner Cagaptay, “Arab Revolt Makes Turkey a Regional Power,” *Hurriyet* website (17 February 2011); Sahin Alphay, “Does the Arab Spring Mean Turkish Fall?” *Zaman* website (16 May 2011).

²⁹ Rachel Bronson, “It Can’t Happen in Saudi Arabia. Right?” *The Washington Post* (27 February 2011): B01; Sergio Romano (former Italian Ambassador), “Winners and Losers in the North African Crises,” *Corriere della Sera* (Milan, in Italian) (2 March 2011); James Kitfield, “Saudi Arabia, Iran Reorient Foreign Policy Amid Middle East Unrest of Arab Spring,” *National Journal* (21 July 2011); Andrea Riccardi, “Europe’s Distraction,” *Corriere della Sera* website (2 August 2011); Dassa Kaye and Frederic Wehrey, “Arab Spring, Persian Winter,” *Foreign Affairs* 90:4 (July–August 2011): 183–86.

all mass protests in the region? How can we avoid the unintended consequences that such external support will be used by incumbent regimes, as was the case in Iran with the “Green Revolution,” to delegitimize the very protest it seeks to bolster? As one analyst has noted: “The Syrian psyche is shaped by memories of foreign interference, something that the Assad regime did not invent, but has exploited. In Syria, anyone who calls for outside intervention is likely to be branded a traitor; any Western threat of military action would therefore hurt the opposition more than the regime.”³⁰ How then can opposition groups in Syria be supported in their efforts to gain power while avoiding sectarian massacres or external military intervention?³¹

Does the Arab Spring signify an epitaph for an age of liberal interventionism, mirroring the U.S.’s global and regional decline? Jaswant Singh, a former Indian finance, foreign, and defense minister, has argued that “to ignore the bloodshed in Syria is to give tacit recognition to Iran’s regional influence. That lack of resolve invariably diminishes Saudi Arabia’s prestige and raises even more questions within the kingdom about the reliability of U.S. protection—hence further eroding America’s regional position. The emergence of a neo-Ottoman Turkey under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, asserting itself in the lands of the former Ottoman Empire, attests to America’s diminished regional prestige.”³² Certainly, analysts have noted that the U.S. is now determined to “lead from behind” through adopting a supportive role (mainly by providing strategic communications, munitions supplies, and intelligence). The Arab Spring demonstrates that “the U.S. will not hesitate to lead ‘wars of necessity’ in defense of European allies. But it will not take the lead in ‘wars of choice’ in or around Europe, such as Libya.”³³ In June 2011, on the eve of his retirement, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned that NATO could face “a dim if not dismal” future if military spending shortages and national caveats were not addressed, given that his generation’s “emotional and historical attachment to NATO” is “aging out.”³⁴

³⁰ Bassma Kodmani, “To Topple Assad, It Takes a Minority,” *The New York Times* (31 July 2011).

³¹ “Can the West, after intervening to prevent a bloodbath in Benghazi, continue to do nothing as massacres take place throughout the country? To let the Syrian cauldron boil is wrenching, but to intervene appears utterly impractical. Liberal interventionism, once again, seems undermined by its (perhaps inevitably) uneven application.” Jaswant Singh, “The End of Liberal Interventionism,” *The Toronto Star* (3 July 2011): A15.

³² Singh, “The End of Liberal Interventionism.”

³³ Tomas Valasek, “What Libya Says about the Future of the Transatlantic Alliance,” Centre for European Reform, July 2011, 2; available at http://www.cer.org.uk/pdf/essay_libya_july11.pdf. See also Ryan Lizza, “The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama’s Foreign Policy,” *New Yorker* (2 May 2011); available at http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa_fact_lizza.

³⁴ Robert Burns and Desmond Butler, “Gates: NATO Alliance Future could be ‘Dim, Dismal,’” *Associated Press* (10 June 2011); available at http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110610/ap_on_re_eu/eu_gates_nato_doomed.

Some were quick to argue that NATO members were no longer much interested in NATO's future. NATO was brain-dead; all that remained was to switch off the life support machine and, after a respectful silence, pronounce the eulogy: "Just look at the NATO-led war in Libya in which only six out of the twenty-eight NATO countries are participating, and only three of those actually attack Libyan targets to enforce the United Nations' mandate ... after a mere eleven weeks of conflict against Libya, the 'mightiest alliance in the world' has run out of munitions, does not have enough aircraft to conduct its missions, and seems unable to prevail against a minor military power."³⁵

The Arab Spring has highlighted a collective action problem, with splits within and between the Non-Aligned Movement, Arab League, UNSC, and EU. The EU, with its twenty-seven member national governments, is in disarray over Libya, demonstrating that a preemptive humanitarian operation is much harder to legitimize than one after the fact. The EU's Big Three—France, Germany, and the U.K.—are unable to find common cause in a high-profile foreign policy challenge. Eighteen months since the Lisbon Treaty, which led to the creation of the European External Action Agency (EEAS), it is clear that "a foreign ministry' is not a foreign policy, and there is little sign that the EU will devise one anytime soon."³⁶ It is also clear that existing EU and NATO tools and policy instruments designed as alternatives to membership have failed to bring stability and development to its southern neighborhood.

Russia, along with other conservative status quo regimes in Eurasia, consistently emphasizes stability and order at home, and criticizes "humanitarian interventions" abroad. The Arab Spring indirectly questions the viability of Russia's domestic authoritarian governance model and directly highlights strategic dilemmas for its foreign policy. Political transformation and adaptation in the MENA region raises questions about political transition and power distribution in Russia. How resilient is Russia's system of authoritarian power, and how sustainable are its current legitimacy narratives? The 1990s represented a lost decade for Russia, in which the decentralization of power and authority resulted in chaos and anarchy. Putin's social contract provided stability and prosperity (guaranteed by the managerial competence and patriotism of incumbents) within a "sovereign democracy" in exchange for a continuity of power in Russia.³⁷ Variants of this narrative sustained authoritarian regimes in the MENA

³⁵ Sawar Kashmeri, "NATO's Surreal World," *New Atlanticist* blog (22 June 2011); available at http://www.acus.org/new_atlanticist/natos-surreal-world; Geoffrey Wheatcroft, "Who Needs NATO?" *New York Times* (16 June 2011); available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/16/opinion/16iht-edwheatcroft16.html>.

³⁶ Giles Merritt, "Where is Europe's Foreign Policy?" *Korea Times* (31 July 2011).

³⁷ Graeme P. Herd, "Russia's Sovereign Democracy: Interests, Identity and Instrumentalisation?" in *A Resurgent Russia and the West: The European Union, NATO and Beyond*, ed. Roger E. Kanet (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Republic of Letters Press, 2009), 3–28.

region, just as is the case in Russia's partners in Eurasia today. However, just as with the MENA region, by 2011 this legitimacy narrative was under serious stress.

Procedural legitimacy deficits (no free and fair elections) are justified by performance outcomes, but a series of recent episodes have demonstrated that procedural legitimacy deficits are in and of themselves a cause of concern. The Russian lawyer Alex Navalny's campaign against corruption, the trial of Mikhail Khordokovsky, the revolt of the intellectuals, the arrest of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov are only the most obvious examples. The aftershocks of the 2008–09 global financial crisis have seriously undermined the Putin/Medvedev regime's performance, its bedrock source of legitimacy, although Russia has recovered with 4 percent GDP growth (relative to other BRICS, this is low; relative to Europe and the U.S. it is high). More importantly, the Russian economy's structural dependence on hydrocarbons was reinforced, as the crisis did not bite down deep or hard or long enough to cause major economic reform. The reality of political, economic, and military stagnation is hard to ignore, but so too is a military reform process that appears dead in its tracks. Of greater concern is the fact that the state's ability to maintain control over coercive force is questionable, which is a serious deficit for a *siloviki*-led law-and-order-based regime—the role of OMON (special police forces) in suppressing riots in Moscow in December 2010 is a leading indicator. Russia's third post-Soviet power transition will be marked with presidential elections in 2012. This election brings all sources of legitimacy and existing narratives into question. Indeed, it represents a potential “black swan” event for Russia.³⁸

The Arab Spring does not just raise questions relating to the sustainability of Russia's internal governance system and structures, but also about its role as an international actor, presenting a series of serious challenges to Russian foreign policy interests. NATO's humanitarian intervention in Libya raised a set of strategic dilemmas for Russia. Russia did not want to support and thus justify a humanitarian intervention in Libya, as this would only serve to advance U.S. and European interests, as well as reinforce dangerous precedents set in Kosovo and Iraq.³⁹ However, there was significant regional support for the resolution. In addition, the Obama Administration was willing to decide the issue of military intervention within the UNSC. This was a demonstration of multilateralism, and therefore a repudiation of Bush-era

³⁸ Pavel Baev, “The Prospect of Putin's Return Comes into Focus,” *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor* 8:147 (1 August 2011): “The distance between this passive discontent and angry protest may turn out to be far shorter than the ruling kleptocracy assume. . . .” See also Fred Weir, “Medvedev rebuffs Gorbachev's Warning of ‘Egyptian Scenario’ in Russia. Who's Right?” *Christian Science Monitor* (22 February 2011).

³⁹ David Miliband (former U.K. foreign secretary), “Whatever you do, Mr. Obama, Don't Play Safe,” *The Times* (London) (23 May 2011): 20: the Arab Spring “sets a new legitimacy bar for the exercise of power.”

unilateralism and implicit support for the “reset” agenda in Moscow–Washington relations. For all these reasons, a veto from Russia would have sent the wrong strategic signal. Abstention from UNSCR 1973 (to create a no-fly zone over Libya) had the strategic advantage of “placing Russia in a position to benefit from whatever political outcome.”⁴⁰ By contrast, with regard to Syria, since March Russia (alongside China and other BRICS) has strongly opposed UNSC resolutions condemning violence and proposing sanctions and foreign intervention against Syria, and has threatened to veto any such UNSC resolution.⁴¹ Unrest here is considered a purely internal affair. Syria, as Russia’s one remaining strategic partner in the region, buys virtually all its weaponry from Russia, and provides Moscow with naval bases in warm waters.⁴² However, Russia has begun to soften its stance and hedge, as the Assad regime’s crackdown on dissent has become increasingly brutal. In early August, President Medvedev warned Bashar al-Assad to open dialogue with the opposition: “If he cannot do this, he will face a sad fate and at the end of the day we will also have to take some kind of decision.”⁴³ The EU presses for sanctions targeting oil exports, which constitute one-third of all of Syria’s state revenues.⁴⁴

One other set of dilemmas centers on the notion of a dichotomy between “Southern Engagement” and “Eastern Enlargement.” It is not in Russia’s interests to see the MENA region rise in strategic importance for Europe, as this will increase Eu-

⁴⁰ Roland Dannreuther, “Russia and the Arab Revolutions,” *Russian Analytical Digest* 98 (6 July 2011): 2. See also Mark Katz, “Russia and the Arab Spring,” *Russian Analytical Digest* 98 (6 July 2011): 4–6.

⁴¹ “Russia Reiterates Rejection of Foreign Interference on Syrian Affairs,” *SANA News Agency website* (Damascus, in English) (2 August 2011).

⁴² Philippe Conde, “EU-Russia: Much Ado About Nothing?” *IPRIS Viewpoints* (July 2011): 1–3. The Syrian port of Tartus, a Soviet-era naval supply and maintenance base, is being refurbished with the aim of accommodating twelve Russian warships after 2012, giving Russia an increased strategic presence in the Mediterranean Sea, and also Red Sea through the Suez Canal, and the Atlantic through the Straits of Gibraltar. See also Stephen Blank and Carol Saivetz, “Russia Watches the Arab Spring,” *Radio Free Europe* (24 June 2011).

⁴³ *Interfax News Agency* (Moscow, in Russian) (4 August 2011). Mikhail Margelov, the Russian President’s special representative for Africa, noted that the Assad regime, through its suppression of the opposition, invites sanctions: “Through the bloody reprisals Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has made a transition to a political settlement of the situation extremely difficult and caused a justified toughening of positions against the regime and himself personally both inside and outside the country. The incumbent regime has thus branded itself a bloody regime and such regimes are doomed to end in our times if not tomorrow then in the foreseeable historic perspective.” *Interfax News Agency* (Moscow, in Russian) (5 August 2011).

⁴⁴ James M. Dorsey, “Syria’s Widening Protests: Assad Increasingly Beleaguered,” *RSIS Commentaries* 118/2011 (10 August 2011).

ropean engagement and therefore influence in the region. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, NATO's Secretary-General, has stressed the need for a "free, democratic, and stable" outcome in Libya. He argues that NATO's core values are "freedom, democracy, and human rights," and that the intensification of political dialogue and new partnerships in North Africa are distinct possible outcomes.⁴⁵ The new Secretary-General of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Lamberto Zannier has signaled that the promotion of democracy in the MENA region will become an OSCE priority, given the regions' shared interests in oil, trade, migration, and combating terrorism.⁴⁶ However, might a certain zero-sum logic become apparent within the EU? A reinvented European policy of southern engagement will, in an era of financial constraints and crisis, result in less time, attention, and resources being spent on states in Europe's common neighborhood—Russia's self-declared zone of privileged interest.

Conclusions: Transatlantic and Eurasian Strategic Convergence or Divergence?

Clearly, the outcome of the political transformations that are taking place in North Africa and the Middle East will very much determine the emphasis and stress all external actors place on advancing their stated interests and norms. A pragmatic Russia would cooperate where possible with consolidated market-democratic regimes in the MENA region, though this outcome would have a demonstration effect and impact throughout the former Soviet space, implicitly challenging the normative status quo. A market-democratic outcome would undercut the Russian notion that revolutions which allow for free and fair elections will further encourage the rise of radical Islamist regimes and spread the contagion to Eurasia. Russia's state ideology—Russia as a sovereign democracy—embraces the idea that economic modernization without political liberalization enables stability. A market-democratic MENA region would undercut this notion that democracy equals instability. Should the conservative reactionary regimes return to power in the MENA region, Western rhetorical and public support for representative and participatory institutions, structures, and processes in the region, rather than elite personalities, will grow, whatever the pragmatic reality is behind the scenes.

An analysis of the Arab Spring's reception in the former Soviet space suggests that the preexisting normative frameworks and strategic interests through which the

⁴⁵ Anders Fogh Rasmussen, "NATO and the Arab Spring," *The International Herald Tribune* (2 June 2011): 6. See also Anders Fogh Rasmussen, "NATO After Libya: The Atlantic Alliance in Austere Times," *Foreign Affairs* 90:4 (July–August 2011): 2–6.

⁴⁶ "OSCE Offers Aid for Arab Spring Democratization," *AssA-Irada* (Baku) (21 July 2011).

governing elites in the post-Soviet republics uphold and propagate their power at home and abroad have been reinforced. In Europe, the preexisting presumption of regional normative hegemony is in the process of being challenged. Strategic interests are being recalibrated, with the gap between values, norms, and interests closing. The Arab Spring's transformational impact should not be underestimated. It looks set to be a major factor in shaping strategic relations throughout both the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian zones.

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