

What Has Really Changed in the Middle East?

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Articles & Testimony

Although the Arab Spring is unlikely to fulfill the dearest hopes or darkest fears of U.S. policymakers, it is certain to change the Middle East forever, in ways we are only beginning to apprehend.

The annual melodrama in New York over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has largely overshadowed the real historic drama that is playing out in the Middle East today. The region seems turned upside-down: rebellions are taking place across the Arab world, Turkish-Israeli relations have dramatically deteriorated, and tumult seems to be the rule.

Nevertheless, trying amid the chaos to determine precisely what has changed in the region is no easy task. In some places, like Libya, the change is total -- Qadhafi is ousted, and leadership has passed to a cobbled-together group comprising both jihadists and bureaucrats. In others, like Egypt, the change is worryingly superficial -- Mubarak is gone, but the military chieftains who have succeeded him have reimposed his draconian "emergency laws" and continue to drag bloggers and activists before military tribunals. In others still, like Syria, little change at all has come -- protests grind on, and so does the regime.

For Western officials looking to protect or advance their countries' interests in the Middle East, sorting the superficial from the fundamental changes is a vital task. While the outcomes of the revolutions in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere remain far from certain, it is possible to identify three shifts in the region which are significant and likely to endure.

First, there can no longer be any question that internal politics matter in the Arab world. Before the Arab rebellions, the conventional wisdom in the West was that understanding policy in a country like Egypt meant understanding the views and intentions of essentially one person -- Hosni Mubarak. He in turn was able to impose his will on the country through a mixture of coercion and co-optation. Public opinion and the views of opposition groups were important on their own merits and for understanding the deeper dynamics of the country, but had little actual bearing on Egyptian policy. This point of view was questionable before, and is certainly wrong today. There are now a

multiplicity of political groupings and power centers, and issues such as the U.S.-Egyptian or Israeli-Egyptian relationships are political footballs important as much for their symbolism as their substance. Influencing, much less predicting policy in Egypt, Libya, or Tunisia will require diplomats and officials to do something which is second nature to them in places like Europe, but to which they have been unaccustomed in the Middle East -- cultivating relationships beyond the presidential palace and its immediate environs, and understanding the interests, motivations, and aspirations of a broad swath of society.

Second, the new governments that spring up around the Arab world will likely be more anti-Western, and anti-Israel, than those they succeeded. Fairly or not, the West and the United States in particular is strongly associated with the old regimes in the Middle East, and thus seen as accomplices in oppression. This is in part a problem of our own making -- the United States supported Arab dictators during the Cold War as foils to Soviet expansionism. When the USSR fell, however, we continued to support those dictators rather than pressing for democratic reform. Those moments, such as the mid-2000s, when the US took a different approach, were not sustained, leading raised expectations in the region to be dashed and leaving our public esteem lower than it began. Our image has not been helped by US policy during the Arab Spring, during which we have been perceived as a fair-weather friend, taking sides only when a conflict's outcome was already clear rather than acting on our pro-democracy proclamations.

The cold peace that has long prevailed between Israel and its Arab neighbors is also perceived throughout the region to have been an unsavory arrangement that worked to the benefit of repressive regimes. The blame for Israel's isolation in the region is often laid squarely at the feet of Israeli leaders for their perceived failure to make peace with the Palestinians; the reality is more complicated. Egyptian leaders, for example, studiously maintained peace with Israel and enjoyed the strategic and economic benefits accompanying it. But they never made the case to the Egyptian people for this peace. Instead, they cynically employed both anti-Semitic and anti-Israel rhetoric in the official media as a means (ineffective, it turns out) of deflecting public anger from domestic issues.

Third, and most troubling, the Middle East is likely to be a more dangerous and volatile region in the future. For the past several decades, a relatively stable regional order has prevailed, centered around Arab-Israeli peace treaties and close ties between the United States and the major Arab states and Turkey. The region was not conflict-free by any means, and Iran, Iraq, and various transnational groups sought to challenge the status quo, albeit largely unsuccessfully. Now, however, the United States appears less able or willing to exercise influence in the region, and the leaders and regimes who guarded over the regional order are gone or under pressure. Sensing either the need or opportunity to act autonomously, states like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran are increasingly bold, and all are well-armed and aspire to regional leadership. Egypt, once stabilized, may join this group. While interstate conflict is not inevitable by any means, the risk of it has increased and the potential brakes on it have deteriorated. Looming over all of this is Iran's quest for a nuclear weapon, which would shift any contest for regional primacy into overdrive.

It is likely that there are more fundamental changes in the Middle East which we have yet to detect, or that some changes will be short-circuited as events unfold. As it unfolds, the Arab Spring is unlikely to fulfill the dearest hopes of U.S. policymakers for democracy or bring to pass their darkest worries of radicalization; it is certain, however, to change the Middle East forever in ways we are only beginning to apprehend.

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