

EXPERT VIEW

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The Changing Terrain

An Interim Assessment of the Arab Spring and its Policy Implications

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KEY POINTS

- The 'Arab Spring' uprisings will continue to reshape the very fabric of the state system in the region, with enormous repercussions for the regional strategic balance, and consequently for Western powers and Israel.
- Policy makers in the US, Britain and other Western states, as well as Israel, must now adapt to the most important developments, including:
 - the growing importance of the Arab street;
 - the rising power of political Islam;
 - the emergence of Salafists and militant Jihadists;
 - the heating up of sectarian, ethnic, religious and tribal fault lines which cross national borders;
 - the increase of fractured, weakened, dysfunctional or failed states;
 - the negative impact on non-Muslim communities.
- States which have so far survived the transformation – conservative monarchies and states deeply scarred by relatively recent internal conflicts – are fragile, as is the situation in the Palestinian Territories.
- The regional division between a 'moderate', pro-Western Arab camp and a radical anti-Western axis is changing. Sunni powers are supporting Sunni Islamist insurgents in Syria, and the Hamas government in Gaza at the expense of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank.
- The Syrian civil war, as well as being an internal conflict, is a proxy war over the future of the Iran-led radical axis comprising of Iran, Syria and Hezbollah, and is spreading instability into Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq.
- The outcome of efforts to prevent Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, which may come to a head in 2013, will have major implications for the wider struggle for regional power and vice-versa.
- For Israel, chances of war with its neighbours is reduced, but chances of border violence triggered by non-state actors has increased, and the future of its peace agreements, especially with Egypt, is overshadowed by regional turmoil.
- Whilst the regional upheaval has demonstrated the limits of Western influence, the US, UK and other Western powers still have military, economic and political leverage, which if used correctly could tilt the balance in the crises with Iran and Syria, direct Islamist governments away from undermining Western interests and help strengthen Western allies. Israel's priorities should be to prepare for contingencies whilst working to maintain its existing peace agreements, avoid escalations on its borders, put momentum back into progress with the Palestinians and normalise relations with Turkey. [For more detailed policy recommendations see p. 7-8.]

INTRODUCTION

This paper assesses the evolving challenges emerging from the Middle East as a result of the 'Arab Spring', and the policy implications for the, US, UK and other Western powers, as well as for Israel.

Two years on from the onset of the Arab Spring, four Arab leaders have been toppled – in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya – a bloody civil war is raging in Syria with no end in sight, and the status quo in other Arab states is fragile. Where does all this lead to?

It is hard to summarise an earthquake still taking place. However, precisely because the process is still dynamic, there are threats that must be met and opportunities to be seized by international actors. It is therefore worth looking at the present picture and drawing, in broad brushstrokes, interim conclusions, which can inform a set of policy guidelines.

THE MAIN EFFECTS OF THE ARAB SPRING

Empowerment of the Arab Street

For the first time in decades, the Arab masses found their voice, broke barriers of fear and made a

difference. The Arab street, amorphous and fractured as it is, came together to demand dignity and rights and is unlikely to give up on its newly-found sense of empowerment. This has increased instability in certain countries but also makes it harder for any leadership, Islamist or otherwise, to establish another dictatorship.

This phenomenon poses a challenge to Britain and other Western powers, as well as to Israel, since strong anti-Israel and anti-Western sentiments have been fostered among Arab populations for decades. These populations are relatively easy to inflame, as demonstrated by the recent violent protests against the ill-conceived YouTube film that insulted the Prophet Muhammad. These protests also exhibited a cultural gap between liberal Western and traditional Middle Eastern societies on what constitutes an unbearable offense and how to respond to it. Both the West and Israel hardly have any public dialogue with Arab world and need to develop the tools for doing so.

Rise of political Islam

Much has been written about the rise of political Islam, especially following Islamist electoral victories in Tunisia, Morocco, Kuwait and, most significantly, in Egypt.

The big questions with respect to the rise of political Islam are: Can Islamists adopt and internalise the democratic values and rules of the game? Will they give up on power if voted out of office? Will their ideology translate into negative policies towards the West? What impact will they have on Israel?

Not all these questions can be answered now but there are some ominous signs, especially in Egypt, the most important Arab country. While there is increased openness and inclusiveness in the democratic process in Egypt since the uprising, there is also a disconcerting tendency towards illiberalism and disregard for human rights. As the ruling soft-Islamist AKP government in Turkey has been doing, the Egyptian regime is assuming gradual control over the main power centres – the military, the media and the judiciary – in order to entrench its power for years to come. It shows relatively little tolerance for criticism, and its methods include

editorial censorship, the arrest of journalists and pressure on editors.

The process of shaping a new constitution in Egypt is telling. The draft currently under discussion, which was recently presented by a designated committee dominated by Islamists, contained, for example, some positive statements on women's rights. However, this concession was predicated on not contradicting Sharia law. Moreover, in the current draft there is also vague terminology on how to guarantee press freedom, and the criminalisation of insults directed at God or the Prophet is being debated.

As for Egypt's foreign policy and relations with Israel, much remains to be seen. While Egypt under President Mohammed Mursi is careful to maintain ties with the US, safeguard essential American assistance and maintain his country's peace agreement with Israel some distancing from the US is already happening. In addition, President Mursi refrains from using the term 'Israel' and so far will not speak to Israeli officials. It is this deep uncertainty about Egypt's future strategic orientation that drove President Obama, in an interview in September, to publicly question whether Egypt remains an ally of the US.

Emergence of Salafists and militant Jihadists

The regional tumult not only unleashed mainstream Islamist bodies like the Muslim Brotherhood, allowing them to move from oppressed opposition to government, but also more extreme versions of Islamism. Ideological Salafist movements, with extremely puritanical and fundamentalist interpretations of Islam, are entering the political field for the first time, such as the Nour and Assala parties which won about 25 per cent of the parliamentary seats in Egypt. Militant Jihadist groups, ideologically or organisationally affiliated with Al Qaeda, have also taken advantage of the situation and are showing a remarkable resurgence. Both types pose a serious challenge to governments and mainstream Islamists. These groups are exploiting local grievances, new freedoms, instability and the weakening of central governments.

In Syria, militant Jihadist groups, most notably Jabhat Al-Nusra, are playing an increasingly

dominant role in the rebellion. Global Jihadi groups are also mushrooming in North Africa. One militant Jihadist group is believed to be responsible for the recent attack on the US diplomatic mission in Benghazi, which resulted in the death of the US ambassador, whilst another stormed the US embassy in Tunis. Armed Jihadist groups have also established themselves in the Sinai Peninsula and are multiplying in the Gaza Strip. These groups are closely collaborating with each other to perpetrate terror attacks against Israel, challenging both the Egyptian government and the Hamas government in Gaza.

Jordan recently thwarted a plot by Al Qaeda to carry out terror attacks on its soil. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is also very active, especially in Yemen, whilst in Iraq Al Qaeda's resurgence has almost doubled its weekly attacks since the beginning of the year. Weapons from huge unsecured stockpiles in post-war Libya, including sophisticated systems, have helped arm Al Qaeda cells in many of these theatres.

Heating up of sectarian fault-lines

The Arab Spring fanned flames along existing sectarian, ethnic, religious and tribal fault-lines, first and foremost between Sunnis and Shiites. The crisis in Syria is shaping into a civil war between the mostly Alawite regime (the Alawites are considered a distant off-shoot of Shiism and many Sunni circles regard them as heretics) and the Sunni majority. Sunni-Shiite tensions are also on the rise in Lebanon, due to Shiite Hezbollah's active support for the Syrian regime of Bashar Al-Assad.

In Bahrain, the Shiite majority led local protests against the Sunni monarchy, bringing about military intervention from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. Saudi Arabia has seen unrest in its oil-rich eastern province, inhabited mostly by the Shiite minority. In Yemen, the Houthi uprising which began in 2004 has a strong sectarian character and expanded as a result of the regime change which followed the Arab Spring. In Iraq, independent of the Arab Spring, the Sunni minority is mulling semi-independent provinces following the Iraqi-Kurdish model. In a broader context, the regional upheaval intensified tensions between Shiite Iran and major Sunni powers

including Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt. Additionally, there are strong tensions in liberated Libya along tribal lines and in Islamised Egypt between Muslims and Copts.

Weakening of state frameworks and central governments

The tensions created by the upheaval and severe economic crises in non-oil rich countries are weakening central governments and shaking state frameworks set by colonial powers following the First World War. The result is a number of fractured, dysfunctional and failed states. Syria is torn by civil war and the government has lost control over much of its territory. The outcome is uncertain but a likely scenario is a deeply fractured and decentralised state. In other Arab countries, Egypt has lost effective control over much of the Sinai Peninsula where Jihadists are nesting, the Libyan government does not have control throughout the country, Yemen is essentially a failed state and Iraq is splintered by sectarian tensions.

An important expression of this phenomenon is the awakening of Kurdish autonomous ambitions. Under the pressure of the insurgency, the Syrian government pulled its forces out of the Kurdish areas in its north-eastern province of Hasake several months ago. This allowed local Kurds to assume control, introduce Kurdish symbols hitherto prohibited and announce their intention to follow the Kurdish-Iraqi example and establish an autonomous Kurdish region. Turkey, itself under increasing violent attacks by the militant separatist Kurdish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), has interpreted this development as a deliberate Syrian response to its support for the insurgency. The leading Syrian-Kurdish party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), is known for its affiliation with the PKK. At this stage, these Kurdish groups are demanding local autonomy rather than an independent state, but countries with a Kurdish minority (Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria) are naturally concerned.

Negative impact on non-Muslim communities

The rise of Islamism has been to the detriment of non-Muslims across the Middle East. Non-Muslim minorities are gradually declining in numbers and

influence due to persecution and fear. The most notable example is the Copts in Egypt, comprising about ten per cent of the population, which has come under attack from extreme Islamist elements. The Christian community in Iraq is another salient example.

THE VULNERABILITIES OF SURVIVING REGIMES

The Arab Spring hit most but not all Arab states with varying degrees of severity. Spared were countries that have already experienced in recent decades a bloody war - civil or other - and are deeply scarred, and monarchies, especially those with oil wealth, with the exception of Bahrain and to a limited degree Kuwait.

Algeria belongs to the first category. For a long time Lebanon could also be counted in this group, though it is increasingly affected by a spillover from war in neighbouring Syria. Iraq and Sudan have not yet stabilised following their pre-Arab Spring wars.

The monarchies - including in the Gulf states, Jordan and Morocco - enjoy a basic level of legitimacy that was not shared by the region's military dictatorships. They owe this to their long lineage (in some cases going back to the Prophet Muhammad), special connection with Islamic holy sites (the Saudi king carries the official title of 'Guardian of the Holy Places' and the kings of Jordan and Morocco have a special connection to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem) and a cloak of support from religious authorities. Added to this is the oil wealth of the Gulf monarchies, which allows them to pour money into their societies in order to appease them, and to provide some financial support to their less wealthy neighbours, like Jordan and Egypt. Morocco stands out for the success of political reforms enacted by the king, who managed to get ahead of the curve when the Arab Spring erupted.

Nevertheless, the status quo in some of these countries is fragile. Tensions are brewing in Algeria, which has been plagued by social unrest, a terror campaign by Al Qaeda in the Land of the Maghreb (AQLIM) and ethnic tensions with the Berber community. Violence is on the rise in Lebanon, which is torn between pro and anti-Assad camps, as demonstrated in October by the assassination of the

dominant anti-Syrian head of internal security by a car bomb in Beirut. If Assad is toppled, denying Hezbollah a critical source of backing, anti-Hezbollah elements in Lebanon may challenge the dominant Shiite movement. In Saudi Arabia, Shiite unrest in the eastern province could further escalate.

Jordan deserves special attention. There is growing unrest in the kingdom driven by a serious economic crisis, corruption and the quest for reform. Jordan's financial problems are exacerbated by the war in Syria which has pushed close to two hundred thousand refugees into Jordan and denied the kingdom a key route for its external trade. This simmering unrest has created a rare case of protests combining both Jordanian-Palestinians and East-Bank Jordanians (the latter traditionally the backbone of the regime) notwithstanding the deep differences between these groups. Additionally, Jordanian Jihadists have entered Syria to participate in the conflict and may worsen the situation for the kingdom upon returning. The destabilisation of Jordan - a country with a pro-Western orientation, a strategically important location, and a long peaceful border with Israel - would present the West and Israel with a very significant challenge.

The Palestinian Authority is in a category of its own. Not only is it not a state, but it is split between two entities: the PA in the West Bank dominated by the secular nationalist Fatah movement and the Islamist Hamas authority in Gaza. The Arab Spring did not yet translate into a 'Palestinian Spring' but the PA's own dire economic situation recently sparked protests in the West Bank directed at Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and President Mahmoud Abbas. In time, these protests could become a popular upheaval which could destabilise the PA or be redirected at Israel against the background of the political impasse between Israel and the Palestinians. The imminent Palestinian bid to gain the status of a non-member state at the UN may spark a crisis with Israel with serious consequences for both sides.

CHANGING REGIONAL DYNAMICS

The traditional model which divides the Middle East between the moderate Arab camp - Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the PA etc. - with pro-American and

pro-peace orientations, and a radical axis comprising Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas, requires adjustment. This is particularly apparent in light of the civil war in Syria and the rise of Islamists to power in Egypt.

The conflict in Syria is not only a civil war but also a proxy war over the regional balance of power. At its core lies the future of the Iran-led axis of which Syria is a linchpin. This war is the big divider of the Middle East. Iran and Hezbollah, along with Russia, are actively striving to save Assad whilst all the major Sunni powers are bent on toppling him. This division is driving a deep wedge between Turkey, whose policy of 'zero problems' with their neighbours has collapsed, and Iran, Iraq and Russia. It is also driving a wedge between Hamas and Iran. Hamas lost its base in Syria as it could not support Assad, and moved closer to Egypt, Qatar and Turkey.

These major Sunni powers – Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey – whilst all in some important respects partners of the West, are characterised by varying degrees of Islamism. This is driving them to actively support Islamist groups in the Syrian opposition as well as the Hamas government in Gaza. In the case of Gaza, this support has included huge sums pledged by Qatar, whose ruler was recently the first to visit Hamas-ruled Gaza, and by Turkey, whose prime minister may follow. This may turn Hamas for the first time into a more successful model than its Fatah-dominated rival in the West Bank, now on the verge of economic collapse for lack of outside assistance. This whole phenomenon complicates policy options for Britain, the US and other Western powers.

The war in Syria is destabilising Iraq by feeding into its existing sectarian tensions and sending tens of thousands of refugees over its borders. It is also breeding potential conflict with both Turkey and Israel, which may be realised if friction increases along their respective borders with Syria, and if either is forced to intervene militarily. Clearly the outcome of the war in Syria will have a major impact on the regional balance of power. Assad's fall will deal a major blow to Iran, Hezbollah and the Iran-led axis as a whole.

No less important is the outcome of the showdown over the Iranian nuclear programme. If Iran succeeds in defying the international community and developing nuclear weapons capability, it will significantly boost its capacity to support its allies and destabilise its enemies, including the pro-Western Arab Gulf monarchies. It would also spark a nuclear arms race with Sunni Islamist governments which would further destabilise the situation. Applying the military option may ultimately be the only way to stop the programme, yet this would almost certainly lead to an armed conflict in the region.

In the margins of this picture, Iraq, under Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, is playing a troubling role. Whilst enjoying US military assistance, Iraq cooperates with Iran and quietly supports Assad. Baghdad has also recently been negotiating major arms deals with Russia, and may allow Moscow a significant foothold in developing its oil fields.

This also highlights the problematic role played by Russia. Striving to boost its regional and international standing and concerned about the rise of Islamism, Russia is constantly challenging the policies of the US, UK and other Western powers in the region. No more is this felt than in its support for Assad, while he butchers his own people.

COMPLEX CHALLENGES FOR ISRAEL

For Israel, the regional changes mean that there are slimmer chances of war with a neighbouring military power such as Syria. However, there are increased chances for violent provocations by extreme non-state Islamist actors, triggering escalation along any of its borders with Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and Sinai. Whilst the Syrian and Lebanese borders have been largely quiet until now, jihadist rebels are fighting regime forces close to Israel's border with Syria, and could turn to attacking Israel. Meanwhile there are various scenarios which could trigger conflict with Hezbollah, including any attempt to move Syrian chemical weapons into Hezbollah's hands or a strike on Iran. Jihadist groups in Gaza and Sinai also threaten to spark escalation along the Israel-Gaza-Egypt borders. Given the fragmented nature of Syria and Lebanon in the north and Israel's sensitive

relations with Egypt in the south, responding to such provocations could pose a serious challenge.

The emergence of the Arab street and of political Islam, both rife with anti-Israel sentiments, complicates Israel's hand. Any crisis with the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank or Hamas in Gaza could inflame Arab public opinion and undermine Israel's relations with Egypt. Moreover, an Israeli strike on Iran, possible in 2013, and especially a post-strike escalation, could also spark strong anti-Israel public reactions in the region, even from those who oppose the Iranian nuclear programme and may be applauding Israel's actions privately.

Israel's relations with Egypt are fragile. Mursi's Egypt has been careful not to abrogate the peace treaty with Israel but there are strong voices in his government demanding amendments. These demands are focused on opening the Military Annex which stipulates the demilitarisation of the Sinai Peninsula, so as to fully restore Egypt's sovereignty in Sinai and have a free hand in fighting Jihadists there. Israel claims that there is sufficient flexibility in the existing Annex to temporarily allow for more Egyptian forces in Sinai. However, if Egypt presses such a demand, Israel will have to weigh the potential advantages of renewed formal recognition of the treaty by an Islamist government, against the disadvantages of setting a precedent for renegotiation which could become a slippery slope.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY GUIDELINES

It is a considerable challenge to devise policies in the face of shifting tectonic plates, numerous moving parts and a high degree of uncertainty.

With the exception of the overthrow of Gaddafi, the US, UK and other Western powers have shown relatively little influence over the Arab Spring. There is a wide regional perception that Western influence is limited in the face of dynamic changes which are indigenous, and against the background of the West's economic and political difficulties. Western passivity in Syria, which contrasts with Russia supporting Assad and deepening its ties with Iraq, further strengthens this perception.

Yet it would be a mistake to dismiss the ability of Western powers, including Britain, to make a difference. The US, UK and other Western powers possess important military, economic and political cards which, if used jointly and correctly, could tilt the balance in the crises with Iran and Syria, direct Islamist governments away from undermining Western interests and towards quiet cooperation, and help strengthen Western allies.

Policy makers must keep in mind how their decisions on the Iranian nuclear issue and other regional challenges impact on one another. If diplomacy fails, a decision will have to be taken in 2013 about whether to use force against Iran's nuclear programme. The outcome of this decision will have major implications for the wider regional power struggle. A nuclear armed Iran and a regional nuclear arms race is an even more disturbing prospect in the context of Islamists coming to power in Egypt and elsewhere, yet it is not clear what impact a strike on Iran will have on the region. Conversely, the outcome of the conflict in Syria and other regional power struggles will impact on the question of how to handle Iran.

Given these considerations, the US, UK and their allies should cooperate to:

- Step up pressure on Iran through sanctions while genuinely keeping all options on the table. With the US presidential elections concluded, diplomacy should be given a last chance but be limited in time.
- Play a proactive role in Syria to topple the Assad regime, dismantle the radical axis and promote more liberal elements. This should include providing weapons and other assistance to selected non-Islamist opposition groups, organising the opposition and outside assistance to it, and reaching out to Alawites in a bid to drive them away from Bashar Al-Assad.¹ Continued passivity will mean a prolonged, radicalised and bloody war which will embolden Islamists and Jihadists. Special international assistance should be afforded to neighbouring countries, Turkey

¹ See Michael Herzog, "Syria: How to advance transition to a post-Assad Future", [BICOM Expert View](#), July 2012.

and Jordan, hosting huge numbers of Syrian refugees.

- Develop a dialogue and maintain assistance to Islamist governments, first and foremost in Egypt, based on and tied to clear standards and criteria in order to influence their policies and behaviour. These should relate to: commitment to non-violence, adherence to basic values of democracy and human rights; the application of Sharia law in public life; and attitudes towards the West and Israel. In the Egyptian case it should specifically include maintaining the Egypt-Israel peace agreement which has been a pillar of regional stability for decades.² There should be no illusions about Islamist ambitions. These political movements are driven by a long-term vision dictated by an illiberal, anti-Western and anti-Israel ideology. Left to their own devices they will follow it. However, the domestic challenges currently facing these governments, especially the severe economic and social crises, as well as the convergence of interests with the West in countering Iran, its affiliates and Al Qaeda, offer an opportunity to influence them.
- Encourage and embolden liberal democratic forces and processes in the region as part of a long-term plan, including identifying these forces, fostering educational, media and social media programmes carrying the democratic message, and encouraging free and fair elections in which participation is conditioned on meeting democratic standards.
- Upgrade support and economic assistance to Jordan while encouraging the king to introduce significant reforms.
- Move to stabilise the Palestinian economy to prevent its collapse and upgrade support for Prime Minister Fayyad's institution-building plan. Arab states should be strongly encouraged not to legitimise and strengthen Hamas at the expense of the PA, but rather to provide financial assistance to the PA as well as a regional supportive envelope for a renewed peace process.

² See Michael Herzog, "Setting Standards: How the West should respond to political Islam", [BICOM Expert View](#), February 2012.

- In conjunction with the above, ways should be sought to reenergise an Israeli-Palestinian peace process.
- Seek new ways to positively influence Arab public opinion.
- Be mindful of the explosive potential of the situation along Israel's borders with Gaza and Sinai and encourage the Egyptian government to better exercise control over the Sinai Peninsula.³
- Press Sunni powers which are providing political and financial support to Hamas to use their leverage to ensure Hamas enforces a ceasefire on all armed groups in the Gaza Strip.

Israel should also seek opportunities to improve its situation through diplomatic and economic tools, including:

- Working cooperatively, but in most cases quietly, with Western powers along the above-mentioned lines.
- Preparing for contingencies, such as the leakage of Syrian chemical weapons into the wrong hands.
- Striving to maintain and foster existing peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan.
- Seeking opportunities to re-launch a peace process with the PA.
- Attempting to normalise relations with Turkey.
- Using major military tools only as a last resort.

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³ See Michael Herzog, "Powder Keg in Gaza", [Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#), 1 November 2012.

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Cover Photo: A sign showing the distances to different locations at the disused army outpost at Mt. Bental in the Israeli controlled Golan Heights, overlooking Syria. [AP Photo/Ariel Schalit]