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Reform and Rebirth in the Middle East

Alanoud Al Sharekh

The 'Jasmine revolution' that unfolded in Tunisia in January 2011 at first appeared to be peculiar to that country, a consequence of then President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's systematic degradation of his people, his flagrant nepotism and the exploitation of his position by members of his immediate family, particularly his second wife and his son-in-law, to amass huge fortunes.¹ Tunisia served as a back office to many of Southern Europe's industries, its cheap labour and location on the Mediterranean offering lower production costs for many European-owned factories. Yet Tunisia had suffered in the aftermath of the worldwide credit crunch: as early as 2008 the Tunisian government had to bail out French, German and Italian companies that had lost EU backing to prevent the losses of tens of thousands of jobs for Tunisian workers.

But lower growth projections, drops in the production of consumer and intermediate goods and the continued depreciation of the euro had a direct effect on the economic and political stability not just of Tunisia, but many of its neighbours. The spread of instability was compounded by two elements not unique to the Arab countries of the Mediterranean basin: rapid population growth and the allocation of government funding for basic foodstuffs. Just as they had in Tunisia, these factors soon contributed to unrest in other North African and Middle Eastern countries, including Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Bahrain. Social-networking tools and satellite television helped fan the flames of dissent even as governments attempted to stem the flow of infor-

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mation. As protesters called for reforms and even regime change, many in the United States and Israel raised the concern that current governments could be replaced by radical Islamists inspired, if not actually controlled by, Iran, al-Qaeda or the Muslim Brotherhood. (Washington, in turn, was criticised for its own role in supporting repressive regimes.)

A recipe for revolution

High fertility rates in the Arab Middle East have been a long-standing concern. It is hardly surprising that in most Arab countries, where on average at least 50% of the population is under the age of 25,² many feel alienated from a leadership that is ailing, older or simply out of touch. The Middle East's average unemployment rate, at 10%, is higher than any other region in the world, and rapid population growth is not accompanied by similar economic growth.³ Even without taking into account relatively low rates of participation by women, pressure on the labour market is likely to increase with time. Moreover, population growth is leading to a significant and steady drain on dwindling resources at a time import prices for basic foodstuffs such as rice and sugar continue to rise. Although the protests that have spread across North Africa and the Middle East have many roots, it is clear that economic stagnation and little or no growth in incomes have been essential motivators. Food prices in Tunisia soared in June 2010, and static salaries meant that consumers were unable to afford basic foodstuffs. Government subsidies covered only 13% of all food items, leaving the rest subject to price hikes.⁴ In Egypt, the much-touted 'open market' policy had done little to stop the standard of living from falling for the majority of the population, with no reform policies that could bring about real economic growth and affect actual incomes on the horizon.⁵

The trend elsewhere is similar (see Table 1). Demonstrations from Oman to Jordan to Algeria have been prompted by sharp increases in food prices, as real inflation takes its toll on national economies. Yemen, Libya and Palestine, where unemployment exceeds 30%, have seen further political upheaval as the example of Egypt and Tunisia inspires locals to continue to press for real change. In Jordan, a change of prime minister was deemed insufficient and protests continued in response to the country's inability to

Table 1. **Economic and population indicators of selected Middle Eastern and North African countries**

Country	Population (millions)	Unemployment rate (%)	Median age	Percentage of population under the poverty line
Algeria	34.6	9.9	27.1	23
Bahrain	0.7	15	30.4	–
Egypt	80.5	9.7	24	20
Jordan	6.4	13.4	21.8	14.2
Lebanon	4.1	–	29.4	28
Libya	6.4	30	24.2	33
Morocco	31.6	9.8	26.5	14
Saudi Arabia	25.7	10.8	24.9	–
Syria	22.2	8.3	21.5	11.9
Tunisia	10.6	14	29.7	3.8
West Bank and Gaza	2.5	35	29.9	45.2
Yemen	23.5	35	17.9	45.2

Source: CIA World Factbook

solve the food-price crisis. In Yemen, President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who, like deposed Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, had been in power for over 30 years, announced that he would not run for office again when his term ended in 2013, nor allow his son to ‘inherit’ the office, but that has not stopped violent clashes with demonstrators. Bashar al-Assad, who inherited leadership of Syria from his late father Hafez in 2000, promised, in a lengthy and defensive interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, to introduce major reforms.⁶ According to some estimates, Syria spends in the vicinity of \$8 billion annually on subsidies as part of its socialist economic package.⁷ On 18 February a demonstration in Damascus turned into a pro-government rally when the minister of the interior showed up at the site, but even Syria’s tight security and state intelligence system may not be able to hold back the tide in the face of greater media scrutiny and global pressure for the release of a teenage blogger imprisoned under charges of treason. Iraq and Palestine have seen demonstrations and high-level resignations as similar demands for unity and the end of corruption sweep these countries.

Demonstrations in the Libyan city of Benghazi in early February quickly exploded into mass revolt against Muammar Gadhafi’s 41-year rule and his mismanagement of the country’s vast oil wealth. Despite Gadhafi’s grant of \$800 to each household to cover food expenses, a 150% salary increase in the public sector, and a doubling of the minimum wage, by the beginning

of March his ouster appeared likely. Algeria tried to stay ahead of the curve by first suspending its State of Emergency law that had been in effect for the past 19 years, and by reintroducing a host of food subsidies to combat runaway inflation, but angry demonstrations continued to flare up in the capital and elsewhere. Kuwait's immediate reaction to the events in Tunisia was to order the provision of foodstuffs to its citizens, a move intended to ensure that the country's middle- and low-income families felt no financial pinch from rising inflation (which reached a two-year high in December 2010⁸) until March 2012. The emir also issued a KD1,000 (\$3,600) grant for

all citizens, to coincide with the country's celebration of 50 years of independence.

*Kuwait's
immediate
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to its citizens*

Bahrain's parallel decision to dispense BD1,000 (\$2,700) to families did not prevent a wave of protests revolving around long-standing socio-economic disparities, and triggered in part by recently proposed cuts to governmental subsidies and the introduction of taxation. Even though Bahrain has the lowest official unemployment rate among members of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC), sectarian divides and broken reform

promises led to security forces attacking protesters in Manama during the week of 14 February, culminating in the deployment of tanks on the streets, seven deaths and hundreds of injuries. Following global outrage, Crown Prince Salman Al Khalifa, with King Hamad's blessing, called for dialogue with opposition groups and recalled the security forces, allowing the protesters to demonstrate freely at the Lulu roundabout. He also released some political prisoners.

After a show of support by GCC ministers at a joint press conference in Bahrain, both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia made some moves toward reform, Kuwait by releasing political prisoners and raising salaries in the security sector. This did not, however stop Kuwait's disenfranchised *bedoun* (stateless) community from demonstrating and clashing with security forces on 18 February. Against this background, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah returned to Riyadh on 23 February after a three-month, health-related absence and introduced a host of subsidies, state housing provisions, annual wage

increases across government sectors, and initiatives to create over a thousand new jobs for young Saudis. This amounted to around \$10.6bn worth of appeasement, but as of early March there was no talk of political reform. Protests were also staged in Oman, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and demonstrations continued in Bahrain. The leadership in both Oman and Bahrain made changes to their cabinets and promised tens of thousands of new jobs for youth, but the call for greater political participation, if not outright regime change, continued.

Simply toppling existing regimes, without aggressive new policies to reduce population growth and introduce real economic reforms, will do little to resolve the issues facing such countries. State-funded subsidy programmes, which cover a range of items from basic foodstuffs to utilities, have to be part of the reform equation. Most current subsidies are not viable in the long term without running the risk of bankrupting the state, and even in oil-rich GCC economies, the allocation of resources is skewed in favour of temporary fixes to stave off widespread civil unrest.

Despots, billionaires and friends of America

The United States was criticised for its silence with regard to the demands of the protesters in Tunisia. Its position became even more awkward as the events in Egypt and Bahrain unfolded. Increasingly fervent and frequent statements from both President Barack Obama and the US State Department angered protesters, who accused Washington of not doing enough to support basic human rights, and America's allies in the region, who saw in the US failure to support a staunch ally and long-time recipient of US aid a sign that the superpower was not to be trusted. The United States has been accused of claiming it wants political reform without actually risking any change to the network of US-friendly regimes, which enjoy varying degrees of popularity within their own borders. The location of America's Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain, and Egypt's status as a key ally in securing Israeli security, made it more difficult for the Obama administration to take a firm stance. Among Western nations, the United States in particular has a history of tolerating despots in developing nations accumulating fortunes that sometimes run into billions of dollars. Ruling and royal families across the Arab states have

holdings in real estate and corporations in Europe and the United States that raise uncomfortable questions about financial ethics and fiscal responsibility in a global economy. In a surprising move, Switzerland froze the accounts of both Mubarak and Gadhafi, and growing calls for economic reform and increased transparency mean that many of those currently in power will find it increasingly difficult to maintain their status and positions.

The social-media revolution

The Internet and global satellite proliferation means that events in one place reverberate that much faster across borders, and the demonstrations in Egypt, Libya and elsewhere were watched across the globe by an audience sympathetic to the plight of those attempting to shake off the yoke of oppression. The impact of 'twittering masses' and social-networking tools on the revolution in Egypt remains a matter for debate.⁹ A young Google executive, Wael Ghunaim, was detained for 12 days before being released in response to pressure from youth protesters, who had designated him their leader in absentia. Less than a quarter of Egypt's population has Internet access, and over 30% of the population is illiterate, but the country has the highest Internet saturation of all the Arab states. Moreover, almost 80% of its people own mobile phones, perhaps a more immediate and important way of making connections than, say, Facebook, a basic version of which, to be sure, is available on Egyptian mobiles.¹⁰ Over the course of two hours on the afternoon of 27 January, Internet use in Egypt was reduced to almost zero as the government attempted to exert control over the protesters. But this did not prevent thousands from congregating in Tahrir Square. Blocking sites or hacking them to track down troublemakers is a common policy among repressive regimes, and the same tools of free expression used by protesters can be used for monitoring online activity for state security purposes. (Relatively non-repressive regimes such as Turkey and Israel have also announced plans to beef up their cyber-warfare units to take care of 'hackers and other trouble makers'.¹¹) The first public statement by the US State Department over the Tunisian protests was directed at Internet-freedom violations, a safer and more universally agreed-upon topic than actual regime change.¹²

The call for resistance has made the Internet a useful tool for the revo-

lutionaries of the 'Arab street', but home-grown satellite channels such as Qatar-owned al-Jazeera and Saudi-controlled al-Arabiya have also been important in fermenting and exporting the idea of change. Al-Jazeera's uninhibited reporting on events leading to the 'day of rage' protests in late January can perhaps be partly explained by Qatar's wealth, which may have provided the leadership a feeling of immunity from protests at home. The channel doggedly aired the most dramatic scenes from the Tunisian and Egyptian protests despite pleas by the regimes in those countries to Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim and other members of the Qatari power elite. Al-Arabiya, meanwhile, found itself in a more delicate position; in the early days of the protests King Abdullah issued public statements supporting Mubarak and condemning the 'destructive' elements seeking to bring down stable rule in Egypt.¹³ Yet both stations were instrumental in conveying developments in Libya in the face of heavy censorship of the country's own propagandist media. Along with Facebook, both were named by Gadhafi in his hour-long televised tirade on 22 February as 'foreign elements' seeking to destabilise Libya.

The spectre of the Muslim Brotherhood

While US, Israeli and Arab officials, and many analysts, expressed worries that the popular uprisings could lead to something like the 1979 Iranian Revolution or the sectarian mess in Iraq, hopeful youths and would-be political leaders looked to the Turkish model for inspiration on how a strong military presence can foster a electorally based democracy that still left room for Islamist groups to participate, even to the point of leadership. Fear of electoral victories by Islamist parties has stifled democratic progress in the Arab Middle East both domestically (for example by limiting full political participation by women), and in foreign affairs (the refusal by the United States and others to deal with democratically elected Islamist leaders in Palestine, Algeria and Sudan).

The worry that Iran might gain influence though young, radicalised Shi'ites, or that Sunni youths might be similarly influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood in all its modern variants across and beyond the Middle East, has been raised by many commentators in the West. Yet, as the protests rolled

on and regime changes continued across the Arab Middle East, it looked as though the masses in Egypt and elsewhere felt otherwise. The young people propelling the movements represented a wide spectrum of political leanings, and as of early March stilled continued to avoid absorption into older, established political movements without rejecting any of them (other than the ousted regimes) outright. Elements of the Muslim Brotherhood (or reformed versions thereof) have, to be sure, emerged as part of the new political debate in Tunisia, where (as in Algeria, Libya and Egypt), they had been heavily suppressed. Exiled Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood figure

Elements of the Brotherhood have emerged as part of the new debate

Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi gave a speech, after a 30-year ban, to the newly liberated masses in Tahrir Square on 18 February. He was met with ecstatic applause and Egyptians rushing on stage, eager to touch him, and followed through on his new status at the heart of political matters with a 21 February appearance on al-Jazeera, during which he issued a fatwa to all Libyans to 'shoot a bullet at Gadhafi' if they could do so.¹⁴ Although many might agree with this sentiment, it does represent what both Arab moderates and Western observers fear about

the Muslim Brotherhood's political role: the ability to issue death warrants and induce an absolutist mindset fuelled by fundamentalist, intolerant manifestos.

It is thought that in the first round of Egypt's 2010 parliamentary elections Muslim Brotherhood candidates improved significantly on their 20% showing from 2005. (They declined to participate in the second round in view of the widespread fraud most observers noted in the first round, where the official results suggested they had made no gains.) The issuing of a political-party licence by an Egyptian court to the al-Wasat Party on 19 February, 15 years after it was founded as an off-shoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, may add to the Brotherhood's clout. In Bahrain, protests by members of the country's poorest, mostly Shia stratum have inspired Sunnis and led to the formation of the National Unity Party, comprised mostly of Salafists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood. This may be a harbinger of future trouble for the GCC and other Arab states, if Hizbullah and Iran

try to claim credit for or leadership of some of the protests, especially in Egypt and Bahrain.

* * *

Muslim Brotherhood parties remain the most organised, grassroots-oriented and politically flexible actors across the Arab world, so they cannot be ignored. Their representatives hold political office in most countries, and where the Brotherhood has not been permitted to form legal parties and join the establishment, it has flourished underground. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s only demonstrated the party's resilience. Members gained respect as symbols of resistance even from those who did not share their ideology. Others left Egypt for neighbouring Arab countries, where they spread their message and gained a wider support base. They have followed the same pattern in other North African Arab states, and no doubt they will try to seize the opportunities presented by the recent chaos. But this does not necessarily auger an Islamist apocalypse. Young, would-be political leaders in the Arab world could look for inspiration to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, hero of the Gaza flotilla and the Davos walk-out, whose Justice and Development Party has roots in the Muslim Brotherhood. Turkey's success in handling rapid demographic and economic growth, forging an independent foreign policy, and providing opportunities for Islamist parties within a secular democratic system makes it a potential model for an Arab political renaissance.

Notes

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 - 7 A recent article put the figure at 'close to USD\$ 8 billion': see George Saghir, 'What Does the Future Hold for Syria?', *Syria Comment*, 7 February 2011, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=8326>. In late 2007, Syria's Deputy Prime Minister Economic Affairs Abdullah Dardari estimated that subsidies would 'cost the government about US\$7 billion' in 2008: see 'Syria: Economic Reforms Threaten Social Unrest', Humanitarian News and Analysis, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 30 October 2007, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=75053>.
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