Arab Revolutions, Geostrategic Balances and Interactions
Arab Revolutions and Geostrategic Balances and Interactions

Series: Policy Analysis

Policy Analysis Unit | August 2012

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the potential implications of Arab revolutions on regional and international geopolitics. It examines the impact of international geostrategic factors on the popular uprisings in the Arab world. This study is not concerned with the domestic causes and factors behind popular uprisings and revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa, nor does it tackle such issues as the structure of the Arab revolutions, or the contribution of economics and media coverage to the outbreak of these uprisings. Instead, it refutes some of the unfounded claims and preconceptions pertaining to these revolutions by analyzing the regional and international geostrategic realities that prevailed prior to the outbreak of these popular revolts.
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Introduction

Popular revolutions in the Arab world may mark the beginning of a new epoch within Arab history should they succeed in producing a genuine transition toward democracy. These revolutions present examples of popular action, in which the political and the social domains are intertwined to the extent of being almost inseparable. While the social protest nature at the beginning of the revolutions was central to their outbreak, they cannot be seen in isolation as protest movements that afflicted, in the main, the Arab “republics”. Indeed, protests have repeatedly arisen not only within the Arab countries with nominally republican governments, but also monarchies such as Bahrain, Jordan, and Morocco.

It is, therefore, important to understand that these revolutions have an important geopolitical and geostrategic dimension that is reflected in their impact on the region and, inevitably, on the international arena. It has also become clear that geostrategic considerations have had a direct impact, albeit variant from one country’s revolution to the next, on the revolutions’ progress.

This geostrategic reality was less obvious at the outset of the popular uprising in Tunisia. It became clearer, however, in the wake of the uprising in Egypt due to the country’s regional geostrategic importance. By the time the Arab revolutions spread to Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria, the importance of the alternately intersecting and diverging geostrategic interests of the world’s major players became undeniable. The popular rebellions appeared [to some] to be expressions of broader geostrategic patterns, rippling through both the regional and global levels in a region seen as an international hotspot because of its strategic location and economics.

Revolutions in the Arab world, therefore, demonstrate these dynamics, while taking into account their overlapping and divergent interests, as well as their impact on the position of the geostrategic actors and their role in a region that is regarded as a global conflict zone due to its geostrategic and geo-economic significance.

Naturally, popular revolutions in the Arab world were influenced by a changing geostrategic regional order, which, inevitably, produced significant shifts that, if assessed with the aim of forecasting their development, will have a significant impact on defining the regional and international geostrategic map. In other words, popular
revolutions in the Arab world introduced important changes to the roles and division of power between the various geostrategic actors in a manner directly proportional to the geostrategic significance of the Arab Homeland as well as the individual affected countries’ resources and ambitions.

**Geopolitics Prior to the Outbreak of the Arab Revolutions**

Following the end of the Cold War, geostrategic changes within the Arab region have generally been characterized by the permanence and importance of the global superpowers’ influence, as well as a noticeable absence of Arab states from the international arena. In other words, Arab states play a negligible role in shaping the geopolitical landscape in which they exist despite the geostrategic importance of the Arab region and its existence within the sphere of influence of competing global powers and regional actors; they have not been able to capitalize on this competition. Instead, Arab states have traditionally competed with one another in proving their importance, significance, and indispensability to the United States by protecting and expanding its interests in the region, attempting to gain esteem and credit in US decision-making circles in the process.

The waning of Iraqi influence following the Gulf War of 1990-1991, and the absence of any Arab state assuming intra-Arab leadership, especially Egypt’s voluntarily abandonment of its leading role in the Arab-Israeli conflict following its unilateral peace treaty with Tel Aviv, are some of the factors that encouraged non-Arab regional actors, as well as global superpowers, to expand their strategic goals and consolidate their positions and interests, to the detriment of any joint Arab strategic planning. Capitalizing on its strategic alliance with the West and the increasing absence of a joint Arab regional strategy, Israel immunized itself against any significant imminent security threat capable of changing the power balances in the Arab-Israeli conflict. This was further consolidated with the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

The invasion of Iraq ushered in a new era in the Arab region, in which the United States attempted to secure its new stronghold and enhance its regional hegemony, as well as the global order at large. By attempting this, the United States was embarking on its ambitious mission to build a “New Middle East,” a main goal of the US invasion of Iraq. This US endeavor, however, faced firm resistance and induced two separate patterns of reaction among Arabs, the first being represented by the national resistance in Iraq,
which occurred simultaneously with popular anger toward, and rejection of, US endeavors and goals. The second pattern of reaction was represented by the identification of authoritarian Arab regimes with the geostrategic aspects of US projects in their own region. Thus, the United States’ geostrategic plans for the region faced two contradictory reactions that seemed to emerge throughout the Arab world: the first reaction was backing the resistance, while the other is an official stance willing to succumb to the domination and hegemony of the United States.

On the regional level, the resistance in Lebanon made a significant achievement by deterring Israel’s 33-day assault on Lebanon during 2006, breaking the stream of US and Israeli victories in the region. The Lebanese resistance proved its efficiency and ability to achieve liberation and independence as it had done in 2000, without signing unilateral peace treaties with Israel. The significance of the 2006 war, however, lies in the fact that it came only three years after the Iraq war, which reinforced US hegemony in the Arab world. Nonetheless, after this war, the Lebanese resistance ceased to pose a practical challenge on the Lebanese frontier, and shifted some of its activities, instead, to Gaza in an attempt to spare Lebanon the wrath of Israeli retaliation, much as Syria had been shifting its conflicts from its own frontiers toward Lebanon decades earlier. It is important to note that Syria was an important beneficiary of the effectiveness of the resistance movements in Lebanon and Iraq insofar as it bet on disrupting the US plan in its immediate neighborhood by refusing to be subservient to US demands after the Iraq invasion. As a result, the Syrian regime benefitted from the situation by remaining in place despite increasing external pressures. Syria even managed to survive international isolation and regain its influence in Lebanon after the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005.

The Lebanese and Iraqi resistance movements, however, could not develop into a strategic pan-regional axis because their interests converged and overlapped with Syrian interests at specific phases only insofar as they shared a common enemy – the United States. Despite this, Syria, the resistance in Lebanon, and the resistance in Iraq were quasi-contradictious as they disagreed with respect to their position on Iran. While the Lebanese resistance identifies itself with Iran’s policy, the bulk of the resistance to the US presence in Iraq found Iranian foreign policy contradictory to its ultimate goal.

Resistance to the US in the Arab world gained particular importance during this period as a result of the United States’ monopoly over the leadership of the global order and
the absence of any other superpower capable of balancing US global hegemony. Russia, on the one hand, was still suffering from structural flaws caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, whereas China enjoyed considerable wealth and economic power, as well as military might, and may come to be regarded as an effective regional superpower with considerable influence on global politics. Beijing, however, continued to accumulate economic and financial power that allowed it to assume an efficient role without being engaged in conflicts beyond its immediate boundaries. As a result, China established itself as a regional superpower and created a balance of strategic power within its immediate neighborhood, including Taiwan, Korea, Burma, Japan, Pakistan, India, and, to a lesser extent, the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. In establishing this balance of power in its immediate neighborhood and beyond, China adopted a highly pragmatic policy, which served only its economic interests, a phenomenon clearly evident in Beijing’s expanding influence in sub-Saharan Africa away from the Arab world. By contrast, the United States’ direct military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan reduced its geostrategic maneuverability as the US became engaged in, and unable to control, the details and struggles of domestic politics in both countries. As a result, the United States began to change its foreign policy and regional strategy beginning in 2007, the latter part of George W. Bush’s presidency.

Global superpowers soon realized the negative repercussions of the United States’ involvement in Iraq. Russia, therefore, capitalized on this in an attempt to regain its role as an active power capable of balancing US hegemony in various geographic locales. Russia, however, no longer possesses the potential of the Soviet Union, nor does it provide an ideological alternative to the West. Instead, it developed into a global power with imperial interests much like other global powers. In this context, Moscow became a returning imperial force whose political leadership, under the administration of Russian President Vladimir Putin, sought to regain some of the country’s geostrategic legacies. This was most evident in Moscow’s military invasion of Georgia in 2008 in an attempt to limit the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Russia’s immediate strategic neighborhood; indeed, any such expansion would have serious implications for Russian national security. China, on the other hand, enhanced its economic power by benefiting from exponentially high growth rates. Scholars of international relations, national security affairs, and global and geostrategic studies forecasted China’s rise as a global superpower capable of bringing an end to the fragile US-led unipolar international order. These studies were enhanced with the development of economic interdependence between the United States and Europe, on the one hand,

The entanglement of the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, coupled with the Arab states’ involvement in their own domestic affairs – leading to the lack of an active regional geostrategic role for these states – paved the way for non-Arab regional powers and geostrategic actors to enhance their regional influence and benefit from this strategic vacuum. This is especially true in the case of Iran, whose role in Iraq became instrumental in the absence of a strategic Arab presence and the entanglement of the US administration in the domestic affairs of Iraq. In fact, in Iraq, Iran capitalized on such subsidiary tools as sectarian tensions which allowed it to establish strategic alliances and partnerships with emerging Iraqi leaders. As a result, the Iranian regime enhanced its national interests not only in Iraq and in countries of the Arab Gulf, but also in the Arab Mashreq. This was achieved by strengthening the Iranian-Syrian alliance so as to create an inseparable strategic partnership, which became the cornerstone of the so-called “Resistance Axis” in the aftermath of the 2006 war in Lebanon. This axis contradicted US foreign policy in the region and presented itself to the regional public opinion as a font of resistance, in what is called in Arabic *jabhat al mumana’a*, meaning passive resistance, an axis opposing the US-dominated regional status quo and US diktats, in contrast to those states, including some of the United States’ key regional partners, that gave themselves the appellation “moderate”. Thus, a strategic arc developed stretching from Afghanistan and Iraq to, ultimately, the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. Capitalizing on its considerable national resources and military power, Iran became the center of this arc, and expanded its regional influence in Iraq in spite of US military presence.

Turkey, meanwhile, has become a prominent geostrategic actor in the Arab region since the election of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in 2002. Since then, Ankara adopted a different foreign policy that emphasizes the *multiplicity* of its alliances and strategic axes. This became evident in the AKP’s second term in office as the party grew aware of the futility of its attempts to join the European Union. This was exacerbated by the occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the fall of Saddam Hussein, which posed a serious security challenge to Turkey’s national security by exacerbating the issue of Kurdish secession across the Turkish-Iraqi frontier. In an attempt to contain this threat and minimize its repercussions, Turkey played an important role in
consecutive conferences organized by the group of “Neighboring Countries”. Nonetheless, Ankara failed to counter the expanding Iranian influence in Iraq and Tehran’s growing sway over Iraqi domestic affairs. In response to this, Turkey engaged in a rapprochement with Syria to develop their relations in an attempt to decrease Damascus’ complete dependence on its alliance with Iran, capitalizing on the Syrian leadership’s crisis and isolation since the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri.

The shift in Turkish foreign policy was exacerbated in 2005 as Turkey’s accession talks with the European Union were stalled due to opposition from key EU member states (France’s opposition to Turkish accession, for instance, has remained a cause for political tensions between the two countries). In response, Turkey sought to enhance its influence in the East while retaining its chief military and security alliances within the framework of NATO. Given the rich history of shared Turkish-Arab tradition, there was little Arab popular resentment to the increasing role for Turkey. This favorable public opinion was especially enhanced with the Israeli attack on a Turkish support mission to Gaza in mid-2010, the publicly pro-Palestinian stance of the Turkish government since the 2008-2009 Israeli attack on Gaza, and Turkey’s deteriorating relations with Israel. Moreover, the ruling political movement in Turkey developed into a role model for many in the Arab world. With the Turkish state having good relations with some of the more authoritarian Arab states, expressing admiration for the Muslim-democratic model of the AKP became a vehicle for permissible Arab protest.

Like Turkey, the Israelis have emerged as major beneficiaries of the geostrategic changes the region has witnessed since the occupation of Iraq in 2003. Firstly, the invasion eliminated a considerable Arab military power which posed, despite the blow it sustained after the 1990-1991 Gulf War, a serious security challenge to Israel. The Israelis also gained from the withdrawal of regular Syrian military forces from Lebanese territory, following UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which implicitly associated the Syrian regime with the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri on February 14, 2005, thus causing its international and international isolation. The Israelis then attempted to capitalize from an implicit US authorization to do away with the Palestinian cause by imposing their own solutions on the Palestinians. This began with the un-negotiated, unilateral withdrawal of 600 Israeli settlers and their 20,000-strong military retinue from the Gaza Strip, where they had dominated the 1.5 million population of the territory in 2005, with Gaza remaining under an Israeli-administered
economic blockade. They went on to include concerted efforts to constric the power of the Palestinian National Authority, in a bid to impose further “solutions” on the Palestinian people.

It is worth mentioning that this occurred against the backdrop of receding Arab interest in, and ability to exert influence on, the Palestinian Cause. This break was the result of the aforementioned factors, including Arab states’ exclusive involvement in their domestic affairs and the exacerbated regional polarization between the “Resistance Axis” and the “Moderation Axis”. Moreover, Egyptian-Israeli cooperation and coordination grew into a fully-fledged alliance following the 2006 electoral victory of Hamas in the Palestinian territories.

However, Israeli strategic miscalculations resulted in a number of predicaments and security challenges, including: its strategic failure in the 2006 Lebanon war; the 2009 war on Gaza; the expanding influence of Iran and the Israeli failure to curtail that country’s enrichment of Uranium; and deteriorating Turkish-Israeli relations. The 2006 and 2009 wars succeeded in ending resistance operations against the Zionist state, which can be regarded as an Israeli success, although they institutionalized the resistance movement as a defensive force to use Hezbollah’s expression. In this latter sense, the 2006 and 2009 wars were a sort of victory for the Syrian-Iranian alliance, consolidating the formation of an axis.

With resistance operations against the Israeli military stalled, the security threats against their state dissipated, and the divisions between Palestinian factions exacerbated, Israeli society consolidated the power paradigm and accelerated and intensified settlement activity. This went hand in hand with the ascent of the Israeli right and the marginalization of the center-right Kadima Party in favor of the far-right Yisrael Beite nu Party (to which present Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman belongs), which established a far-right majority that formulated the most stable far-right governments in the history of the Israeli state since the Nakba of 1948. In this context, Arab revolutions broke out against the backdrop of unprecedented Israeli superiority of arms and governmental stability, and the decline of the Palestinian cause on the regional and international scenes due to internal divisions and the recession of the resistance option. In fact, the 2009 Israeli war on Gaza was regarded a military success by the international community given the limited number of Israeli casualties in comparison to the 2006 Lebanon war.
These aforementioned changes and the recession of the “resistance” option brought an end to any Arab-Israeli military confrontation, especially on the Gaza front and the Southern borders of Lebanon, where Israel established a situation similar to the Golan Heights, whereby resistance would be confronted by a devastating war. As a result, the real difference between “resistance” and “moderation” – beyond their significant ideological differences with regards to the Arab-Israeli conflict – was for use as symbols of political and media propaganda.

President Barack Obama’s 2008 election in the United States reinforced the strategic division of powers detailed above, allowing for geostrategic changes to affect the world order, most notably the rise of China as a global superpower, the increased presence of Russian influence on the global scene, and the US’ receding unipolar influence over global politics. This is acutely evident in Obama’s commitment to avoid direct military intervention and decrease pressure on US allies to undertake political reforms, as is the case with Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Instead, the US administration increased its dependence on its reliable allies in regions of geostrategic importance for the United States in an attempt to contain its rivals, while benefitting from the desire of the leaders of those countries to maintain good relations with the United States. Thus, the United States made clear its willingness to accept the ruling regimes in Iran, Syria, and Libya while maintaining reservations with respect to their foreign policies.

The European Union followed suit and engaged in rapprochements with what had been called “rogue” states and members of the so-called “axis of evil,” capitalizing on those countries’ eagerness to engage with the West. The United States’ policy towards Syria, for instance, witnessed significant changes, especially with the appointment of Ambassador Robert Ford to Damascus in 2010. Similarly, the European Union extended economic openness with Syria by opening negotiations on a possible EU-Syrian economic partnership. EU overtures towards Syria were most evident in the invitation of Nicolas Sarkozy, then-President of France, by his Syrian counterpart, President Bashar al-Assad, to attend the official celebration of Bastille Day as well as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) talks in 2008. These initiatives constitute a French attempt to regain geostrategic influence in the region and enhance Paris’ role in the Arab-Israeli peace and normalization process, in an attempt to balance Turkey’s growing role in the Arab world.
In light of this, Libya’s late Colonel Muammar Qaddafi became an acknowledged ally of the United States and Europe, especially after reaching a settlement to the Lockerbie case, abandoning Libya’s unconventional weapons programs in response to Western directives and renouncing its support for resistance movements. Qaddafi even called for the consolidation of “moderate” forces in the region. With these developments, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair became a consultant to the Libyan regime. In the meantime, the Libyan leader had begun to groom his son, Saif al-Islam Qaddafi, to succeed to power once he was gone; it must be noted that Saif al-Islam was seen as an ally of the “moderate” Arab camp, and was closely associated with calls for a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Another significant geostrategic development is the role played by both sub-Saharan African and Western countries in the division of Sudan as witnessed by their support for the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) – also known as the Naivasha Agreement – sponsored by the United States. The agreement paved the way for the secession of what had been an integral part of an Arab country, in a move which led to the separation of a region vital to Arab interests but which was acquiesced to by the government of Omar al-Bashir in Khartoum.

As a result, Khartoum’s government hastily entered into a new relationship with the West in an attempt to avoid dealing with the International Criminal Court, which otherwise would have moved against its leadership after prodding from the West. In doing so, the Sudanese regime overlooked the fact that the military’s confrontation policies, coupled with their policies of appropriation and exclusion, have paved the way for the secession of Southern Sudan by means of Western-Israeli machinations. The repercussions of the South’s secession will have a clear impact on major Arab issues, such as Arab water security. In addition, the Sudanese leadership overlooked Israel’s adverse, and expanding, influence in the Arab geostrategic realm, especially since the potential repercussions of expanding Israeli geostrategic influence in what may create a new geostrategic space of (hostile) African countries in the vicinity of the Arab Homeland, which would include the new Southern Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Uganda, and Kenya. This becomes particularly important in light of protracted instability in Somalia, the growth of piracy, and conflicts and strife, which have transformed Somalia into a trouble spot, inevitably having negative repercussions for the Arabs.
In addition to the aforementioned geostrategic factors, the role of transnational non-state actors, such as al-Qaeda and its attempts to establish itself in Yemen and Iraq, had a negative impact on social cohesion, and were detrimental to practices of citizenship, and civic norms. These factors exacerbated divisions within the Arab Homeland, strategically weakening the Arab world. It serves well to note throughout, however, that, with the progress of the Arab revolutions, Islamist political movements are moving towards a more pragmatic discourse, in contrast to the approach of the groups mentioned above.

Uprisings in the Arab world took place at a time when even the so-called “axis of resistance” was not in direct confrontation with the West. These uprisings, therefore, took the United States and Europe by surprise, particularly since they were heavily complicit in dealings with authoritarian regimes and dictatorships throughout the region. In reality, these uprisings took place at a time when the United States had abandoned its policy of intervening in the domestic affairs of foreign countries and declared its satisfaction with the status quo, thereby abandoning such aims as “promoting democracy”. It is against this backdrop that popular revolutions took place among various Arab societies in pursuit of democracy. These revolutions not only occurred outside of the context of US foreign policy, but also in contradiction to this policy, most notably because the US administration championed the cause of the status quo and sought the stability and permanence of authoritarian regimes in the region. Moreover, Arab revolutions took place in the absence of significant resistance to Israel and the transformation of “the resistance” into a defensive force in their own countries. Efforts at Arab-Israeli normalization continued apace, and even Syria sought Turkish mediation to try and restart its negotiations – frozen since 2000 – with the Zionist state.

**Geostrategic Shifts during the Arab Revolutions**

Arab revolutions, therefore, contradicted established geostrategic trends in the Middle East and, as such, provided an opportunity for change and reform. At the time of writing, however, the possibility of analyzing the realities of and potentials for change as an effect of these rebellions remains premature. It can be said, however, that the Arabs’ popular uprisings have created a new geopolitical landscape and are very likely to have brought about geopolitical changes that will outlive the transitional periods in the affected countries, and go on to influence the medium and long terms.
The most noteworthy change that has taken place is the increased importance of Arab public opinion. While not immediately a geostrategic issue, the fuller development of public opinion in Arab countries has bridged one of the gaps between the ruling elites and the populations they govern, helping to re-define the concept of national security in a more meaningful way. This could be said to have contributed to the revival of pan-Arab bodies, and the creation of new ones, as evidenced by the Arab League re-discovered role as a unifying, regional, and cultural, pan-Arab organization.

The emergence of Arab public opinion also gave rise to new inter-Arab alliances that are attempting to reach a concrete common ground that, in principle, holds the potential of strengthening Arab governments and providing a multilateral framework to coordinate policies and avoid individual confrontation with the populations of each regime, particularly on matters of pan-Arab concern. As a result, the Arab League witnessed a noticeable expansion, that, unlike its limited role during the Libyan uprising, manifested itself in Syria, where it played a major role in suggesting political resolutions to the Syrian revolution, such as repeated ceasefire initiatives, calls for the withdrawal of the Syrian army from cities, demands for the release of arrested detainees, and the formulation of numerous political initiatives which would allow for a transition of power.

Popular uprisings in the Arab world left a lasting imprint on the regional and geopolitical landscape of the Arab world, regional actors, and global powers. In this respect, the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings may have been too short to provide a clear diagnosis of these geopolitical and strategic regional changes. Nevertheless, the two revolutions were significant insofar as they raised deep concerns in Israel and other countries because of the implications of the collapse of the Mubarak regime in Egypt.

The Egyptian revolution, for instance, was unique in its depth, geographical, and popular support, both within the country and outside, as well as its peacefulness, succeeded in overthrowing the head of the Egyptian regime, thereby eliminating such impediments to democratic change as the question of hereditary succession. In other words, the major obstacles to reform were eliminated without any foreign intervention in Egypt. Moreover, the rapidity of the uprising in Egypt prevented the development of any disagreements among major powers with respect to change and reform. The United States, for instance, quickly abandoned Mubarak, though they retained close relations with key pillars of his regime, especially the military establishment, which contributed to preventing Mubarak’s son from succeeding him and allowed for the
overthrow of Mubarak. It is, therefore, no surprise that the military establishment, represented by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces under the leadership of Field Marshall Hussein Tantawi, was charged with administering the transitional period.

In the case of the Libyan uprising, geostrategic dynamics had a more direct impact on the revolution although the general complexity of the strategic interactions and the changing nature of relationships between regional powers and international actors cannot, in and of themselves, explain the changes which took place there. Those changes were evident, for instance, in the strong division throughout the Arab world with regard to foreign intervention in revolutions. Whereas Arab public opinion was staunchly opposed to US military intervention in Iraq, despite repeated US claims that it aimed to promote democracy and human rights by invading Mesopotamia, it seemed more divided with respect to the NATO-led intervention in Libya. Sympathy within Arab societies toward the uprising in Libya contributed to a more favorable stance regarding foreign intervention. In fact, some Arab countries went as far as supporting it, most notably when the Qaddafi regime made a brutal attempt at militarily suppressing the Libyan revolution. In response to this sympathetic Arab public opinion, the Arab League reacted pro-actively to Arab public opinion calling for a UN Security Council resolution to “protect civilians,” leading to the “no-fly zone,” which constituted an important step towards the ultimate defeat of the Qaddafi regime.

The NATO-led military campaign against the Qaddafi regime was, effectively, the highlight of the geostrategic change brought about by the Libyan revolution insofar as it signaled the end of the alliance between NATO member states and their previous political and economic close ally, Qaddafi, whose regime granted them the opportunity for lucrative direct investments, concessions, and access to Libyan hydrocarbon resources. Indeed, the NATO-led operation came as an attempt by these countries to protect and preserve economic and financial privileges, or, in the case of France, to earn privileges it had been denied under Qaddafi in favor of Turkey, the United States, and Britain. The foreign intervention also allowed France to regain and expand its traditional and historic influence in Africa, which was impeded during Qaddafi’s rule.

Similarly, such Arab countries as Qatar enhanced their role on the revolutionary Arab scene by intervening in Libya. In achieving this, Qatar played a significant pioneering role in formulating the Gulf Cooperation Council’s (GCC) diplomatic initiative, encouraging French intervention, as well as providing military and technical support for
the Libyan revolutionary forces in eastern and western Libya to help them win the battle.

In addition to this, the Tunisian and, later, the Libyan revolutions served to bring the Maghreb into the pan-Arab revolutionary fervor. As a result, regimes in the Arab Maghreb embarked on addressing popular grievances utilizing a variety of different tactics, but the general theme being a tendency to embark on partial reforms. In mid-2011, for instance, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced a set of legislative and media industry reforms. Similarly, Moroccan King Mohammed VI responded to popular protests under the leadership of the February 20 Movement by suggesting constitutional amendments, which were approved by a popular referendum on July 1, 2011. In light of these constitutional reforms, legislative elections were held resulting in a landslide victory by the Justice and Development Party and a coalition government led by Prime Minister Abdel-Ilah Benkiran.

Despite the fact that these reform measures are regarded with suspicion, and regardless of the extent to which the changes they induced allow for genuine democratic change, these developments demonstrate the impact of the rise of public opinion as a vital determinant of how ruling regimes would respond to popular grievances and demands, a topic that will be discussed in more detail later in this study.

Of all of the Arab revolutions, those in Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria demonstrate the interplay of regional and international geostrategic influences most clearly. This is a result of their strategic locations and the relative broad range of influence and presence of foreign geostrategic actors with conflicting and overlapping interests.

The Bahraini revolution, for instance, demonstrated the salience of the sectarian cleavage not only in Bahrain, but also throughout the countries of the GCC. In this context, Iran declared its unequivocal support for the uprising in Bahrain and, in doing so, integrated the Bahraini uprising in a traditional rivalry between Tehran and member states of the GCC, especially Saudi Arabia. The Iranian position toward Bahrain was clearly echoed by the Iraqi government of (Iranian-aligned) Prime Minister Nouri al-Maleki, as well as the Sadrist movement in Iraq confirming the suspicions many Arabs held about the true, ulterior motives behind Iran’s support for the Bahraini revolution. In contrast, GCC member states looked at the protest movements through two prisms: first, they feared the expansion of Iranian influence in the Gulf region, especially in light
of the Iraqi experience; second, they were worried that any revolutionary success in Bahrain may spark similar action against Gulf monarchies, which would undermine those states’ claims to being stable and prosperous, in contrast to the instability of Arab republics. As a result, the Saudi regime stood firmly against all forms of revolutionary movements in the Arab region even in cases where those revolutions opposed the kingdom’s rivals, for example as in Libya. In fact, Riyadh expressed its opposition to any form of change through protest and revolution and encouraged the stability of authoritarian regimes.

Saudi Arabia, primarily among Gulf monarchies, argued that revolutions are a phenomenon characteristic only of the Arab republics, in the regimes which lacked the traditional and historical legitimacy needed to withstand the winds of change. These claims were reinforced by value judgments, stressing that monarchies are more flexible and capable of withstanding revolutionary change by containing it, co-opting opposition, and invoking historical legitimations, such as the case in Jordan and Morocco. These propositions, however, are inaccurate and faulty for two reasons.

First, since the 1990s, a conflict over how to divide Arab regimes along constitutional lines has emerged. This necessity occurred due to the rise of the so-called “dynastic republics,” whereby ostensible republics govern through ruling families surrounded by security apparatuses that are no longer confined to their supposed functions, but also engage in the political and economic domains to an extent that guarantees their interests, which are based, in turn, on the stability and continuity of the prevailing regime. Second, this aspect of dynastic republics is evident in the phenomenon of hereditary succession, which took place in Syria and would have taken place in Egypt, Yemen, and Libya (and maybe Tunisia as well where the president would have been succeeded by a member of the ruling family in complete contradiction to even Plato’s principles). In other words, revolutions took place in republics that defied the concepts of republicanism and were, in fact, governed by ruling families and hereditary presidencies.

Sociopolitical analysis, then, leads us to believe that monarchies do indeed have a relative, comparative advantage over republican dictatorships insofar as the former possess religious and traditional kinship-based legitimacies, which preserve the unity and coherence of the regime and state, keeping it immune from revolutionary change, though a similar approach also highlights the ills of poverty, corruption, and a deficit of
freedoms that can be seen in these dynastic republics. There is also the question of constitutional monarchies, a type of limited, constitutional monarchy that, when operating in Arab countries, faced popular revolutions and coup d’états throughout the 1950s and 1960s, repeating a European pattern dating back to the French Revolution in which monarchies made way for modern nation-states.

This thinking led the members of the GCC to adopt a unified joint approach toward revolutionary change in Bahrain, where the revolution was interpreted as having a sectarian undertone, the geostrategic result of which would be a confrontation to thwart supposed Iranian influence. Additionally, Iran found an opportunity to expand and promote its sphere of influence inside the Arab Gulf states in the Bahrain uprising, capitalizing on shared sectarian affiliations with the Bahraini opposition at the forefront of the popular uprising. Iran calculated that the success of the revolution in Bahrain would allow their country to expand its geostrategic influence in the GCC states. Viewed this way, one can see that the GCC states’ deployment in Bahrain of the military formation, which came to be called the Peninsula Shield, was a response to a perceived Iranian threat. This same conflict was also felt in other Arab Spring countries, such as in Yemen and Syria.

Although the Yemeni revolution demonstrated clarity in terms of its political and economic demands, its importance to regional geopolitics was no less felt than its counterpart revolution in Bahrain. In the Yemeni case, Saudi Arabia was adamant about preserving its influence in the country, which is geographically contiguous with the GCC, in an attempt to limit the influence of other regional actors. Therefore, the GCC, with the exception of Qatar, adopted a unified and proactive response to the Yemeni uprising as demonstrated by the GCC Initiative, the political initiative aimed at providing a peaceful transition rather than the more chaotic and less peaceful potential scenarios, which may have occurred as a result of the country’s tribal makeup and other demographic specificities. Responses to Yemen’s uprising occurred against the backdrop of an implicit geopolitical strategic competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which embarked on expanding its influence in Yemen shortly before the uprising, with the Houthi rebellion, though neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran supported the Yemeni revolution.

Essentially, the revolutionary fervor in the region necessitated cooperation and collaboration among GCC member states. The GCC Initiative, therefore, allowed these states to counter the geostrategic expansion of the Iranian influence in the Gulf of Aden.
and Red Sea regions as a result of Tehran’s alliance with the Houthi rebels and, more recently, with more radical actors in the South Yemen insurgency. Also in Yemen, the GCC succeeded in preempting the nascent influence of Turkey, which capitalized on the difficulties faced by the GCC member states in implementing the Initiative.

Coupled with the GCC’s role in encouraging the Arab League to adopt a stringent position toward the Qaddafi regime in Libya, the GCC’s Yemen Initiative demonstrates the prospective strength of GCC influence and diplomacy in the pan-Arab arena. The GCC’s regional influence expanded at a time when Egypt was entangled in its difficult post-revolutionary transition and Syria’s role in the region was receding as the popular uprising expanded both geographically and socially, with the regime’s military response to the uprising proved futile.

**Geostrategy: The Case of the Syrian Revolution**

The popular uprising in Syria took place against the backdrop of a complicated geopolitical reality. The Syrian leadership, which capitalized on its foreign policy and regional alliances as a means to confer a sense of political legitimacy on the ruling regime in Damascus, had engaged in a rapprochement with the West and the United States in an attempt to eliminate tensions. In this vein, the Syrian leadership looked for shared interests on different geopolitical scenes, particularly in Iraq prior to the United States’ withdrawal. Simultaneously, the Syrian regime consolidated its alliance with Iran, particularly regarding security and military domains. Moreover, Damascus sought to establish stronger ties with Turkey – a relationship regarded as strategic by the Syrian leadership – focusing primarily on economic aspects that benefited Turkey and allowed Damascus to break the international isolation imposed upon Syria from 2005 until Barack Obama’s election in 2008.

Perhaps, the Syrian regime, convinced as it was of its own stereotypes of the Syrian people, failed to appreciate the dynamics of its society and its ability to revolt. The Syrian leadership, in this way, failed to predict the popular uprising as it capitalized on its popular foreign policy choices to confer legitimacy on the regime. The Syrian regime understood the popular uprising in Egypt, for instance, as a result of that country’s unpopular foreign policy and, ultimately, failed to grasp the instrumental, domestic drivers of that uprising, including human rights, as well as the political and economic demands of the revolutionaries.
Initially, the demands of the Syrian revolution were unclear, being merely confined to calls for reforms and demands for democratic change under the leadership of the current regime. Similarly, international responses were limited to the condemnation of the regime’s military crackdown and calls for the beginning of a reform process. Crucially, regional and international governments feared an Iraqi scenario in Syria, delaying the development of enthusiastic support for the Syrian uprising. In addition, the overlapping of regional issues with Syria’s strategic geographic position, as well as its Arab and regional role, postponed any international position with regards to this rebellion. Global powers, whose efforts were consumed with the military intervention in Libya, refrained from formulating a clear stance, which may have been regarded as inflammatory, regarding the violent and suppressive measures used against the Syrian uprising in its early months.

The Syrian uprising, however, rapidly expanded geographically and quickly adopted a more radical demand – the overthrow of the Syrian regime. Moreover, the leadership in Damascus failed to adopt a suitable political response, or a positive manner of addressing, the political demands of the popular uprising, which is especially evident in the regime’s reductionist rhetoric and the claims that the uprising was part of a conspiracy and a Zionist attempt to undermine Syria through foreign intervention. Foreign intervention played, and continues to play, a minimal role in the Syrian revolution in comparison to other popular uprisings in the region despite the protracted nature of the Syrian revolution, the extent of repression, and the number of civilian casualties thus far.

In light of the regime’s heavy handed military response to the uprising and the Syrian people’s insistence on pursuing revolutionary change, the international community began to engage with the Syrian uprising and contradictions between global powers and regional actors began to emerge. It was Arab public opinion, with sympathy for the aims of the Syrian revolution, and the regional revolutionary fervor that initially drove the Arab League to mediate in Syria and call for reform.

With the expanding Arab League role in Syria, on behalf of the Syrian masses and Arabs more generally, Western countries adopted an increasingly radical rhetoric toward Bashar al-Assad’s regime, demanding his resignation. Turkey, on the other hand, escalated its position on the regime in Damascus, which unavoidably ended its six-year-
old strategic alliance with Syria. Within this new geopolitical reality, Iran unequivocally supported the Syrian regime politically and logistically, which exacerbated its strategic standoff with key regional actors, especially the GCC states and Turkey, the most prominent actor in the region. Additionally, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maleki’s support for the Syrian regime enhanced the negative outlook of the nature of the alliance that surrounds the Syrian regime, given al-Maleki’s lack of credibility amongst the Arabs as he is the product of foreign military intervention.

Russia, on the other hand, reacted to the Syrian uprising exclusively through the prism of geopolitical pragmatism, although Moscow has traditionally limited its interests and strategic sphere of influence to its immediate neighborhood, especially the Central Asian republics. Nonetheless, for Russia, Syria is a country of immense geopolitical importance since it provides Moscow a strategic foothold on the Mediterranean Sea, a strategic and significant location for the Russian fleet in the Sevastopol naval base of the Black Sea. Despite this, Russia’s stance toward the Syrian uprising transcended this simplistic understanding and related directly to the United States’ commitment to refraining from direct military intervention beyond its boundaries and the opportunity this presented Russia to expand its influence at the expense of US strategic interests. For Russia, the NATO-led operation in Libya constituted a contradiction to the US’ non-intervention policy. As a result, Moscow sought to prevent this NATO-led operation from developing into a new NATO expansion, much as it had resisted NATO expansion in its immediate neighborhood in Georgia. Putin’s Russia, therefore, attempted to revive some of its regional sway beyond the country’s immediate sphere of influence.

The survival of the Syrian regime, though a weak and fragile regime, constitutes a geostrategic cornerstone of Russian foreign policy in the region. Furthermore, Moscow adopted a colonial attitude, promising to defend the rights of religious minorities should the situation in Syria develop into civil war. This, if anything, puts minorities at risk, particularly as Arab communities have persistently demonstrated their rejection of minority status protected by colonial powers or authoritarian regimes. In pursuing this policy, however, Russia decided to oppose the revolution in Syria and confront its supporters by twice using its veto right in the UN Security Council, in cooperation with China, hence preventing international condemnation of, or preemptive international measures against, the Syrian regime. This stance, analysts agree, demonstrates Russia’s expanding opposition to US interests and strategic aims on the international arena. Nonetheless, Russia remains an international power with limited presence in the
region, and, consequently, is incapable of exerting influence on the Syrian people who will ultimately be the final decision-makers.

Russia’s stance on the Syrian revolution placed it at odds with Arab public opinion; as a result, Russia engaged in a tactical redefinition of its position by seeking compromises with the Arab League and the West, as demonstrated by the Kofi Anan peace plan for Syria, which became clear as change in Syria developed into an imminent demand and the regime’s attempts to militarily suppress the revolution proved unrealistic. Russia, therefore, became a major geopolitical actor in the Syrian revolution, capable of punctuating the pace and direction of the political process in Syria, and notably so as the West, Turkey, and the Arab League remain reluctant to intervene. In contrast, the major driving force in the Syrian revolution is the Syrian people’s insistence on pursuing revolutionary change. In fact, Syrian political forces that primarily based their positions and disagreements on calling for foreign intervention and wagered on such have proven a failure, and their attempts to encourage such interventions proved futile. In other words, although the popular uprising in Syria may succeed in encouraging foreign intervention in the future, the grassroots movement itself remains the cornerstone of any solution in Syria.

Ultimately, the Syrian revolution has proven the futility and inaccuracy of conspiracy theories not only because the uprising continues in spite of the weak international response to the revolution, but also because the uprising unilaterally challenges the Syrian regime and its allies, who stand a lot to lose. Indeed, the Syrian regime’s alliances with Iran, Russia, and Iraq appear to be its main asset against the popular uprising. Nonetheless, these alliances will not guarantee the regime’s victory over the revolution without addressing its core demands. Viewing the survival of the Syrian regime as a victory of the “resistance axis” will contribute to that axis’ international isolation in the future.

Regionally, the Syrian revolution resulted in complicated and complex geopolitical dynamics as demonstrated by the competition between Turkey and Iran. The role of both countries is especially important given that the previous flexibility shown by the international system allowed for the expression of regional actors’ influence in regions that were vital to their interests, allowing these regional powers to express their political aspirations and pursue their strategic geopolitical interests directly.
During the past decade, Turkey sought to ensure and expand its economic interests in the Arab world by all means as its focus shifted away from EU accession toward enhancing its influence in the Middle East. Arab revolutions, however, problematized Turkey’s influential policies in the region, which capitalized on economic interests and a similarity in ethnic, sectarian, and demographic makeup. Moreover, the Turkish regime and its bureaucratic structure and mechanism constituted cornerstones in Turkey’s response to popular uprisings in the Arab world. This is demonstrated in Turkey’s experience with issues such as the analysis of the public opinion input, democratic electoral systems, the conservative stances of the army, and the commonality of the Kurdish question in Turkey and its neighboring Arab countries. Turkey also dealt with the Arab revolutions from the prism of its strategic interests in the region and its role as a NATO member state.

With the spread of the Arab revolutions, Turkey agreed to the installment of the US anti-missile shield on its territories, refused to take part in the second Gaza-bound Freedom Flotilla II, and resumed its security and intelligence cooperation with Israel in response to decreased cooperation with Iran and Syria and the revival of the Kurdish question.¹

Iran, on the other hand, reacted to Arab revolutions in accordance with its national interests and regional alliances, which is important given the primacy of foreign policy for the Iranian regime in the absence of a complex or democratic domestic policy. Iran, which proclaims its support for the resistance option, including its support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad, adopted a sectarian policy in its reaction to Arab revolutions. In doing so, Iran claimed to represent Shiites across the region,² despite the fact that said Shiites are, in fact, Arabs and not Iranian. This stance seeks to exploit Arab sectarian diversity, converting it into conflicting foreign allegiances.

Iran’s regional influence appeared to be dwindling in the aftermath of the Arab revolutions, especially in light of its hostile stance toward the Syrian revolution and

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Tehran’s inclination to establish regional alliances based, exclusively, on sectarian affiliations. This is most evident in Iraq where the ruling regime appears to be settled into a civilian dictatorship with a clear sectarian approach and an exclusionary attitude toward the other, both within Iraq and while interacting with the Arab regional order. Iran’s sectarian foreign policy in the region, it must be noted, expanded at the expense of Turkey’s declining regional influence and Arab states’ inability to exert influence in Iraq. This explains Nouri al-Maleki’s stance toward the Syrian revolution and the protests in Bahrain. Al-Maleki overlooked his country’s political disagreements and hostility with the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad during previous eras, and, instead, expressed his support for the regime in Damascus. Moreover, al-Maleki’s government adopted economic policies aimed at undermining European sanctions imposed on Syria and allowing Damascus to overcome the repercussions of these sanctions, especially with regards to Syria’s foreign currency reserves.

Relations between Turkey and Iran witnessed a considerable regression in light of their disagreement over the uprising in Syria. This was first evident in a statement, on July 21, 2011, by Ramin Mehmanparast, the spokesman of Iran’s Foreign Ministry in which he declared: “if we had to choose between [our alliance with] Turkey and [our alliance with] Syria, we would choose Syria without a doubt.” Tensions between the two countries became public as Ankara summoned its Ambassador to Tehran, protesting the Iranian criticism of Turkish foreign policy in the wake of the second “Friends of Syria” conference hosted in Istanbul. Moreover, protesting Turkey’s stance on the Syrian revolution, Iran proposed that Baghdad should host the P5+1 nuclear talks instead of Ankara, demonstrating the extent of the two countries’ disagreements.

In other words, the Syrian revolution resulted in discord and antagonism between the two regional powers, highlighting their interests according to their sectarian, as well as regional, differences. This divergence of interests, however, cannot be seen as an irreversible regional polarization comparable to the traditional rivalry and polarization between Iran and Saudi Arabia which took its first stance in support of the Arab revolutions, driven, in essence, in an attempt to antagonize Iran, hoping to halt the latter’s influence expansion in the Gulf and the Arab Levant at large.  

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3 Mahfoud, op. cit.

4 Saudi Arabia’s stance toward the revolution in Syria witnessed a turning point after King Abdullah’s statement on August 7, 2011, addressing the events in Syria.
International and Regional Actors

The geostrategic changes brought about by the popular uprisings in the Arab world, and international stances toward them, require a definition of the world order prevalent today in order to assess the extent to which international and regional actors can, in fact, influence the course of these revolutions. The world order structure necessitates a clear distinction between the global superpower (the US) and global actors (Russia and China, specifically) in which the latter are capable of articulating independent positions toward global policy issues and defending their national interests while ensuring their national security, in its broad military and developmental sense. These global actors aim to prevent US hegemony over their own policies and resources. They seek to limit the US’ ability to maneuver freely, whence it would expand its sphere of influence in different geographical and geostrategic regions of the world, with impunity from international law. Due to this understanding, the following structural conclusion can be made, including a set of remarks illustrating the geostrategic changes caused by Arab revolutions:

The US: Popular uprisings in the Arab world revealed the relative retrogression of the United States’ approach. Consequently, the US was forced to reexamine its foreign policy tools in the region and reassess its holistic strategy in Middle Eastern affairs, thereby emphasizing the “soft power” tools of foreign policy. The United States, therefore, avoided any direct confrontation with Arab public opinion; instead, they reacted positively to it, especially in regard to the intersections with newly elected Islamist movements in a number of Arab countries in an attempt to contain the potential outcome of their expansion. In addition to this, the United States’ pioneering role as a prominent actor in regional affairs quickly receded, though it managed to retain its influence in its traditional strongholds, particularly in the Arab Gulf and Egypt.

China: Arab revolutions had a geostrategic impact on China in that they limited the United States’ foreign policy options, thus allowing Beijing to expand its influence

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6 Ibid., p. 88.
in the region at the expense of receding US influence. This, however, may prove to be a temporary strategic gain.

Russia: Russia’s growing geopolitical role in the region appears to have become a major one that is capable of creating a power balance in opposition to the United States and other regional actors, though only in specific regions.

Turkey: Turkey’s regional influence deteriorated as a result of its incoherent stance toward popular uprisings in the Arab world due to the dynamics of Ankara’s domestic politics and partisan competition. Moreover, Turkey’s role seemed to be associated on the security level with Western countries, accordingly limiting the country’s presence and influence in the Arab world during the revolutions. Today, Turkish influence in the region hinges on its stance toward the Syrian uprising, especially given that its popularity in the region results from the appeal and credentials of its ruling regime in contrast to Arab autocratic, authoritarian regimes being challenged and overthrown by these popular uprisings.

Iran: Recent revolutions in the Arab world increased friction and tension between Iran and the Gulf, developing from the outbreak of the Syrian revolution into a more comprehensive Arab-Iranian rivalry, given the latter’s support of Bashar al-Assad’s regime. Iran’s stance toward the uprising in Syria tarnished its image in Arab public opinion, and, as a result, Iran’s regional influence transformed from a proactive attempt at expanding and enhancing the country’s geopolitical interests into a defensive strategy aimed at consolidating and defending its past gains – not from a US or Israeli threat, but from the threat of Arab revolutions.

Iraq: Within the framework of a Turkish-Iranian conflict in the region, specifically regarding the Syrian revolution, Iraq was in the Iranian camp. By supporting the Syrian regime against the revolution, despite long-standing tensions between Iraq and Syria, Iraq’s Premier Nouri al-Maleki contributed to the creation of a sectarian arc throughout the region. Iran’s alliances in the region, therefore, became limited to the Syrian regime, the Iraqi leadership, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Turkey, by contrast, embraced Syrian opposition and increased pressure on al-Assad’s regime in Damascus, aspiring to replace it with a more agreeable regime. Implicitly, however, the opposition in Syria is taking a sectarian coloring undeclared to the democratic majority, which is seen as a sectarian majority in accordance with
Turkey’s sectarian makeup. The Syrian revolution, thus, allowed for the development of consensus and geopolitical agreement between the Gulf countries and Turkey. Saudi Arabia’s support for the Syrian uprising, despite its principled stance against all Arab revolutions, only goes to confirm the sectarian and geopolitical nature of the regional polarization with regard to the Syrian revolution.

Arab public opinion has played an important role in shaping the geopolitical regional order and role of regional and international actors in the Middle East since the outbreak of popular uprisings in the Arab world. This is primarily evidenced by the revival of the proactive role of the Arab League in several fundamental regional issues such as the Syrian revolution.

**Prospective Geostrategic Shifts in the Aftermath of the Arab Revolutions**

As demonstrated above, Arab revolutions have placed Arab public opinion as one of the most important factors and determinants in the current making of the geostrategic and geopolitical changes in the region. The revitalization of Arab public opinion has led to the emergence of a nebulous Arab entity that is still being defined and developed. Undoubtedly, the emergence of such an Arab entity alongside enhanced and revived national and patriotic sentiments in individual countries of the Arab world will have an impact on the regional geopolitical landscape. On the one hand, it will lead to a redefinition of key strategic concepts in the region, and, on the other, alter regional geopolitical dynamics and influence the geostrategic decisions and inclinations of regional and international actors.

The analysis presented in this study so far, and the understanding of the Arab world and its dynamics in the aftermath of these popular uprisings, leads to a number of conclusions inductively, which, in turn, allow the exploration and forecast of the nature and prospects of regional geopolitical landscapes as well as the role of various key regional and international actors in the future geostrategic landscape of the region. The following section briefly outlines a number of these conclusions.
Moderation and Resistance Redefined

Popular uprisings in the Arab world occurred against the backdrop of changing geopolitical realities, though with previously defined concepts; one significant change these revolutions prompted was the emergence of an Arab public opinion as a new entity capable of shaping and influencing the decision-making process in the Arab region. In this new regime, the nascent Arab entity described above and expressed by what is called Arab public opinion constitutes the true “Axis of Resistance” capable of deterring the Israeli-American project in the region, and limiting its ability to dictate the policies of Arab regimes.

Such an interpretation of this emergent public opinion is borne out by a statistical analysis of the empirical data reported in the “Arab Opinion Index Report” published by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS). This report shows that 84 percent of those surveyed view the Palestinian cause as a pan-Arab cause not confined to the Palestinian people alone. Similarly, Arab public opinion has a negative view of the Israelis, with 51 percent of the survey’s respondents viewing Israel as the “greatest threat” to the collective security of Arab states as well as that of their own individual countries national interests and security while 22 percent believe that the United States, in its capacity as Israel’s biggest supporter, presents a threat to Arab national security.\(^7\)

This does not suggest that an Arab-Israeli war is imminent in the short or medium term future. These results do indicate, however, that Arab regimes’ policies will cease to be as defeatist and pro-Israeli and pro-Western as they were prior to the outbreak of popular uprisings in the Arab world. Moreover, the redefinition of Arab national security will force Arab regimes to adopt a more robust foreign policy toward Israeli aggression, inevitably isolating the Israelis limiting their regional influence, and depriving it of its ability to impose its will on its neighboring region, especially with regards to such strategically important countries as Egypt.

The Geopolitical Positioning of the Emerging Arab Entity

The changes produced by the redefinition of national security in the Arab world will

delineate the region’s new geopolitical landscape, resulting in the formulation of new geostrategic axes based on cultural similarities. The revolutions in Tunisia and Libya compelled the ruling regimes in both Algeria and Morocco to comply with the demands of their citizens, and presented the opportunity for a break with long-standing and seemingly intractable intra-Arab disputes. Additionally, ruling regimes throughout the region came to realize that questions of poverty, unemployment, income disparities, and social welfare cannot be addressed through domestic measures alone. Instead, regimes throughout the region are becoming increasingly aware that such problems must be addressed through regional cooperation and collaboration that emphasizes and promotes complementary and integrated relationships among Arab countries, collectively, in addition to the added value of their combined economic, human, and natural resources.

In light of this, and in accordance with their peoples’ fervent desire for greater integration between the states of the Arab Maghreb, the governments of those countries overcame the salience of traditional political ruptures, rivalries, and disputes, a remarkable example of this being the erstwhile persistent rivalry between Morocco and Algeria.

Undoubtedly, such integrative multilateral measures will compel other Arab countries to adopt different policy trends. It is predicted that this will be especially true around the Nile Basin in order to address questions of economic, water, food stores, and national security. The political regime in Egypt, for instance, will find itself obliged to pursue alternatives to its reliance on foreign debt and international aid, both of which undermine Egypt’s economic and political independence. In pursuit of this, Egypt will have to search for new and relatively unexplored markets and economies in which

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8 The “Arab Opinion Index Report 2011,” (Ibid., p. 75) shows that 67% of the Arab’s polled believes that intra-Arab cooperation is inadequate and must be bolstered. Three-quarters of respondents also expressed their support for more intra-Arab cooperation and the adoption of collaborative policies and strategies leading to regional pan-Arab integration.

9 Interim president of Tunisia, Moncef Marzouki, suggested during a visit to Libya in January 2012 that both countries should reconsider “integration” in an attempt to “revive the Arab Maghreb”. Refer to: “Marzouki in Tripoli calls for the revival of the Arab Maghreb Union,” Al-Khabar (Algeria), January 3, 2012, http://www.elkhabar.com/ar/monde/275929.html. It is also worth noting that Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania publically expressed their support for Marzouki’s endeavor. In fact, Marzouki’s initiative helped diffuse tensions between Libya and Algeria following the president of Libya’s Interim Transitional National Council Mustafa Abdul Jalil’s visit to Algiers in mid-April.
Egypt’s human capital and expertise may be invested. Egypt’s proximity to Libya and Sudan, therefore, may provide the country with an opportunity to invest and benefit from its human resources while at the same time using those resources to benefit other countries. Pursuing such measures of economic integration with these countries will inevitably result in political integration in the future in order to pursue and maximize mutual interests and gains.10

**The Emergence of Strategic Thinking in Policy-Making**

“Strategic thinking” (or “strategic planning”) has emerged as a component factor in the policy-making of some of the Arab countries that, as a function of the nature of their governing regimes, had not adopted strategic approaches. This can be seen particularly in the GCC states, particularly with regard to the vital state of Saudi Arabia.

The regimes of those countries adopted fragile policies to shield themselves from change and revolution, capitalizing on the structural differences between monarchical and republican regimes,11 yet the value dimension of a shared Arab culture suggests

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10 Tensions between Sudan and the newly-independent state of South Sudan, as well as the latter’s invasion of the disputed, oil-rich province of Heglig, was quickly diffused by Egyptian diplomacy, putting an end to the conflict, as evidenced by Foreign Minister Mohamed Amr Kamel’s initiative. The speed with which Egypt diplomatically intervened in its immediate geopolitical neighborhood to contain problems and conflicts is noteworthy and demonstrates that Cairo is adopting a more rigorous policy on issues that are directly related to its strategic national security. This is in stark contrast to Egypt’s abrogation of its role in the Nile Basin under Mubarak, whose regime had a negligible role in such critical disputes closely related to Egypt’s national security, especially in matters such as the secession of South Sudan and the Nile water dispute. For more on Kamel’s initiative, refer to: “Egyptian Foreign Minister mediates between Khartoum and Juba,” *Al-Ahram*, April 17, 2012, [http://www.ahram.org.eg/Arab%20world/News/143889.aspx](http://www.ahram.org.eg/Arab%20world/News/143889.aspx).

11 Analysts have often argued that a number of determining factors distinguish between monarchical and republican regimes insofar as protest and revolutionary change are concerned. In doing so, they emphasize the role that political systems, value systems, social symbols, and political discourse play in republican systems in encouraging protests and revolutions in contrast to the role of traditional legitimacies in monarchical regimes. This is true of Jordan, Bahrain, and Morocco, where protests called for economic and political reforms without posing a significant challenge to the political system itself. However, the structural similarities between republican regimes in which revolutions and popular uprisings took place and the political systems of monarchies make the distinction between these two forms of government difficult. These structural similarities are evidenced by the emergence of ruling families, tendencies toward hereditary rule, the crystallization of an elite with an interest in the perpetuation of the status quo, and the persistence of rentier social dynamics in all political systems in the Arab world. This, if anything, goes to prove that monarchical regimes are not immune to or shielded from the potentiality of protest movements, revolutions, or change. For more on this, refer to Azmi Bishara, *The Glorious Tunisian Revolution: The structure*
that these monarchies will be subject to the inevitable winds of change and reform, particularly as public opinion is increasingly a major determinant in policy-making. This led to a number of changes, particularly in the way these monarchies address domestic and economic issues. Moreover, with some of their regional ‘allies’ being swept away by the winds of change, these regimes have had to rethink their strategic choices and reduce their dependence on, and subservience to, global superpowers, especially in addressing questions of vital security concern.

The challenges imposed by the Arab revolutions have driven decision-makers in the Gulf to shift from defensive, short-term planning to pursue longer-term strategic planning in pursuit of the region’s key problems, capitalizing on internal and external opportunities. Because of this, Gulf countries adopted regional integrative policies and emphasized multilateral coordination on the political and economic domains as evidenced by the (putative) Gulf Monetary Union,¹² the GCC Common Customs Law, and other fiscal and monetary policies.¹³ In addition to this, Gulf states are increasingly unified against future political and security challenges imposed by regional geostrategic actors, such as Iran,¹⁴ as well as other expanding regional actors, such as India, a country which places

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¹² Interested readers may refer to a study previously published by the ACRPS, “The Monetary Union of the Gulf Cooperation Council and Structural Changes in the Global Economy,” http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/257c8191-9a81-4fb1-81bd-b737f9ce0d9c.

¹³ Popular revolutions in the Arab world have, undoubtedly, encouraged Gulf states to unite and integrate based on the assumption that their political systems are structurally similar. This rapprochement reinforced the emergence of top-level Gulf officials and decision makers calling for more integration amongst member states, as evidenced by the 32nd GCC Summit in Riyadh. During the summit, Saudi King Abdullah encouraged his counterparts to replace “Gulf cooperation” with “Gulf confederation”. Refer to: “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques calls upon the GCC ‘to move from a phase of cooperation’ and reach ‘union’ within a single entity,” Al-Sharq al-Awsat, November 20, 2011, http://aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=655144&issueno=12075. Although many of these initiatives are rhetorical rather than procedural, shared challenges in the future, security challenges in particular, are likely to bolster this integrative orientation and implement it in future planning strategies. In other words, the resurgence of strategic thinking in policy-making is not a desired or intentional choice made by GCC decision makers; rather, it is a necessary survival strategy imposed by changing regional geopolitics.

¹⁴ This became most evident during a meeting of GCC foreign ministers in Doha on April 17, 2012. The meeting was convened to discuss the GCC’s joint position with regard to the three occupied UAE islands in the aftermath of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s visit to the island of Abu Musa. GCC foreign ministers issued a strong, threatening concluding statement that condemned Iranian provocations. Please see: “The Doha Meeting: A clear message,” Al-Bayan, April 19, 2012, http://www.albayan.ae/one-world/arabs/2012-04-19-1.1633710.
the Gulf region at the core of its national security strategy. The primary obstacle toward further regional Gulf cooperation and strategic integration lies in the nature of the Gulf’s ruling regimes, and their rulers’ individual interests and fears. Common threats and challenges necessitate common and collaborative policies and tools that are different from the failed strategies of the past, which might pave the way to a broader and more comprehensive strategic cooperation among the GCC member states in such a way that would lead to a successful regional integration capable of addressing shared challenges.

The effectiveness of collaborative, multilateral strategies will automatically reduce the role of non-Arab international and regional geopolitical actors in the region. The extent to which this will take place, however, will depend on these actors’ respective power and abilities, on the one hand, and on superpowers’ relative position – progression or regression – in the global political order, on the other. Changes to the regional geopolitical landscape in light of developments in Arab revolutions are summarized in the following sections.

**The United States**

Revolutions in the Arab world occurred against the backdrop of an international order dominated by US President Barack Obama’s commitment to refrain from direct intervention in international affairs. As a result, although popular uprisings in the Arab world took the United States by surprise, the latter quickly abandoned its support for repressive and authoritarian Arab regimes and adopted a more tolerant policy toward new political actors, including Islamists. This can be attributed not only to the United States’ flexible foreign policy, but also the Islamists’ pragmatism, which in some cases seems excessive.

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15 Tolerating and dealing with Islamist political actors predates the outbreak of Arab revolutions which can be seen in the number of Washington-based think tanks advocating US overture toward Islamists. In fact, this dates back to the mid-1990s in the works of John L. Esposito, former-advisor to US President Bill Clinton’s. Esposito argued that Islamist groups are, in fact, pragmatist political movements with which the United States can reach agreements and explore common interests. The United States, therefore, was neither surprised nor concerned with the short and medium term with respect to the rise of Islamists in Egypt, Tunisia, or Morocco in the aftermath of these popular uprisings given Islamists’ readiness to pragmatically engage with the United States in an attempt to secure their grip on power.
Inevitably, the rise of a pan-Arab entity as a chief determinant and influential factor of the Arab region’s geopolitical landscape will certainly lead to a declining role of the United States as an active and direct actor in regional affairs. This is particularly true in the Palestinian cause, for instance, especially if the United States continues to prioritize Israeli security and adopt a far-right policy on such issues as Jerusalem, refugees’ right of return, and the peace process at large.

This must not be taken to mean, however, that the United States will cease to exercise influence and presence in the region as its military bases continue to dominate the military-political landscape. However, the United States is expected to only lose its ability to initiate and directly influence regional policy. Instead, the pragmatic approach of the United States’ foreign policy is expected to reflect new forms of US presence in the region, emphasizing soft power and exploring shared interests with various actors within the context of regional geopolitical axes, involving, for example, Egypt and the Arab Gulf. In other words, the United States’ declining role in the international order will be minimal and its role will not be significantly challenged. Its influence in the Middle East, however, will take on new forms whereby the United States will continue to pursue its national security, consolidate its strategic alliances in the region, and safeguard the interests of Israel, while taking into consideration popular reservations of the Arab public opinion towards the US and its influence on Arab regimes and their foreign policies.

**China**

The Chinese leadership has been concerned with establishing its influence in its immediate geopolitical neighborhood and has not engaged with developments in the Middle East from the perspectives of human rights and democracy, though they have taken an interest based on its sensitivity toward the United States’ geopolitical expansion. Any Chinese role in the Middle East will, therefore, be confined to a struggle with the United States, as China lacks any significant geopolitical interest in the region, with the exception of its attempts to block or limit any US expansion.\(^{16}\)

\(^{16}\) China has traditionally adopted an isolationist policy with little engagement in world affairs. The only significant exception to this has been Beijing’s reactions to any expansion or withdrawal of US influence. In light of this, China has also benefited from the United States’ weakness and reduced ability to intervene in the Middle East to balance the potential benefits that might accrue to the United States through the Arab Spring. An example is Sino-Russian cooperation to veto UN Security Council resolutions on Syria. This must not be understood as an attempt to revive the dynamic of the Cold War, but a consolidation of the traditional Chinese-Russian coordination in the UN Security
Moreover, the factors that determine Beijing’s foreign policy are independent of the emergence of an Arab regional entity or the crystallization of other regional integration agreements. Nonetheless, China will compete with the United States to build cooperative relationships with such pan-Arab entities, particularly in economic matters. The waning of US influence in the region will, therefore, benefit a more engaged China in the coming years, though this may entangle China with new foreign policy burdens that it has thus far not factored into its strategic decision-making process, potentially impacting its ability to affect its role in the region in the long term.

**Russia**

Moscow aspires to play a role in the international order exceeding its national resources and abilities. Russia has, therefore, seen that revolutions in the Arab world may, in fact, create a geopolitical landscape that is not conducive to its growing aspirations since the election of US President Barack Obama. As a result, Russia has taken a reserved stance and opposed revolutionary change in Libya and, to a much more significant level, Syria, making it an important actor on the Syrian scene today.

It must be noted that Russia views its influence in the Middle East through the prism of strategic security due to its geo-economic withdrawal from the region since the Cold War. Russia’s pursuit to increase its presence in the region, therefore, benefits from the withdrawal of the United States in the foreseeable future, and allows it to expand its influence and enhance its role in the Arab world without creating a sustainable and deep-rooted Russian presence in the region. This is exacerbated by Russia’s limited resources, and, thus, its ability to compete with the United States in other regions more effectively.

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Council dating back to the 1970s, and an attempt to further limit the United States’ ability to re-intervene in the region in order to salvage its image after it has been tarnished because of previous US policies.

17 China witnessed 8% of economic growth in 2011, which is significantly lower than its 10.5% growth rate in 2010. This drop in China’s economic growth rates can be attributed to a recession in its trade with the US and Europe as a result of the economic crisis in the West. This shows the extent to which China is, in fact, benefiting from the status quo in international relations and the international order.
Turkey

Prior to the outbreak of Arab revolutions, Turkey has been able to achieve an important position in the Middle East and enhance its role in the region, most significantly since the Justice and Development Party’s rise to power, due to its foreign policy. Since Turkey’s EU accession talks were stalled, Turkey shifted its focus toward the Middle East and established ties and alliances with a number of authoritarian regimes in the region in pursuit of economic cooperation.

Uprisings in Libya and Syria, therefore, embarrassed Turkey and exposed its role in the region. Turkey managed to safeguard its investments and economic presence in Libya despite the fall of the Qaddafi regime, which provided a significant introduction of Turkish influence into North Africa. In the Syrian case, on the other hand, Turkey sought to establish itself as a mediator between the rebels, whose gatherings it hosted, and the regime, with whom Ankara enjoys close ties. Nonetheless, Turkey failed to be a successful mediator in Syria, and chose instead to escalate its position vis-à-vis the Syrian regime by embracing the opposition exclusively, and attempting even to coopt that opposition, if quietly and gradually. Thus did the Turkish government begin applying diplomatic pressure on the regime in Syria and imposing sanctions on Damascus. Later on, Turkey adopted the line that the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had to step down, though Turkey stopped short of taking intervening directly in the case of Syria. Inevitably, Turkey will continue to play an important role in Syria given that it hosts the opposition, in addition to the fact that it remains the strongest and most influential country in Syria’s immediate neighborhood.

Furthermore, Turkey’s internal politics and the country’s domestic inter-partisan and election related dynamics have forced Turkey to reduce its influence in the region in the aftermath of Arab revolutions, especially in light of its intervention in the Libyan and Syrian uprisings. Inevitably, the emergence of a new geopolitical ‘Arab entity’ will

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18 Turkey continues to argue that the Syrian uprising does not directly affect its national security. Nonetheless, if the situation in Syria escalates and begins producing new conflict zones, Turkey might be forced to engage with the situation in Syria in a manner that is closely related to the revitalization of its alliances and role as a NATO power, especially given that Turkey constitutes the second largest army force in the NATO alliance after the United States. Moreover, in such a scenario, the Syrian uprising will cease to be an issue of concern for the Turkish public, and will no longer be subject to inter-partisan rivalries. Instead, the Syrian uprising would become an issue of national security of concern primarily for the Turkish National Security Council.
replace Turkey’s role in the region as an important geopolitical actor with significant popular support. This does not, however, imply that there shall be a decline of Turkish influence in the Arab region.\(^\text{19}\) In fact, the success of some of the Arab revolutions suggests that the role of those countries, namely Iran, the domestic policies of which are reliant on their foreign policies, will be limited. In the context of the Turkish-Iranian matrix of power in the Middle East, Turkey stands to gain from Iran’s loss. Moreover, Turkey’s strong economy allows it to expand its strategic influence by exploring new areas of economic cooperation and developing strategic relations with the Arab world.

**Iran**

Arguably, Iran is the second biggest loser, after the Arab regimes, in light of the popular uprisings of the Arab world in the short and medium terms. Firstly, Iran’s image in the region has been tarnished and its influence in the Middle East criticized. Moreover, regime changes in the Arab world have not resulted in the rise of regimes sympathetic to Iran or the US, as expected in countries like Egypt or Tunisia. Syria, on the other hand, is witnessing a phase of ambiguity and uncertainty, while the Iranians are continuing to wager on the Syrian revolution being defeated, insofar as the permanence of the regime or otherwise is concerned. Iran will seek, as a result, both to minimize its possible geopolitical losses in Syria and to consolidate these with gains in Lebanon and Iraq.

This situation might be temporarily beneficial in light of the need to fill the void caused by the declining roles of international powers, yet both Iraq and Lebanon remain unstable and unreliable choices for any sustainable Iranian influence, especially because of the lack of a domestic popular consensus over Iran’s role in both of these countries. Moreover, the reemergence of Egyptian influence in the region and the expansion of Saudi Arabia’s role in Syria and Yemen will have an adverse impact on Iran’s regional influence. In addition to Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Turkey’s regional role continues to be significant, most notably so after the installation of NATO missile shields in the south of Turkey in late-2011. Thus, Iran will retain a degree of maneuverability in the region that will constantly be limited by the role of other international and regional actors and their contradictory interests.

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\(^{19}\) Turkey’s influence in the Arab Middle East could suffer significantly only if the Syrian regime is capable of quelling the uprising and defeating the revolution.
Iran is particularly concerned with the situation in Syria and its geopolitical ramifications on Tehran as it allows its geostrategic rivals to gain influence and expand their role in the region at its expense. The nature of the Iranian regime, however, and its negative image within the Syrian revolutionary movement, has constricted their ability to “shift the balance” in Syria, or even to limit its own losses.

It is evident that Iran’s influence in the region will decrease significantly and will depend almost exclusively on political regimes that share the Iranians’ sectarian outlook. This, of course, cannot guarantee Iran sustainable influence in the region, especially in light of the Iranian regime’s structural domestic imbalances, and the negative influence its foreign policy failures may have on its ability to quell opposition. Instead, inspired by popular uprisings in the Middle East and aggravated by Tehran’s foreign policy failures, internal opposition in Iran may, in fact, grow.

**Israel**

The Israelis view the new political landscape produced in the aftermath of the Arab revolutions with skepticism and suspicion, especially after the fall of Israeli-allied regimes. The far-right Israeli government is expected to benefit from the preoccupation of Arab regimes with their own domestic affairs and those regimes’ attempts to achieve the goals of their revolutions or during post-revolutionary transitional periods, and to profit from heated regional and geopolitical rivalries in an attempt to side-step the Palestinian Cause by implementing a series of partial solutions and by imposing the presence of settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories as a part of the geographical and demographic status quo which will then become a determinant in any potential peace talks.

Any such Israeli gains, however, will be short-term gains. The influence of Arab public opinion as one of the most significant determinants of regional geopolitics will inevitably limit Israel’s regional influence and isolate it in its immediate neighborhood. In fact, even in the short term, Arab revolutions have had a positive impact on intra-Palestinian reconciliation and, in this way, have made it easier for representatives of Palestine in any negotiations with their Israeli counterparts to adopt more hardline stances. This is especially true in the absence of Egyptian pressure forcing the Palestinian leadership to give in to Israeli and US diktats.
Ultimately, the ability of the post-revolutionary Arab states to establish politically and economically dynamic regimes that are also robust on the security and military levels, as well as able to use their democratic credibility to be more forceful on the world stage, will be the deciding factor in determining the Israeli position. Should the post-revolutionary countries of the Arab world succeed in this endeavor, they will become role models in expressing the will of their peoples’ domestically, and conveying anti-Zionist and anti-Israeli sentiments and, thus, limit Israel’s influence in the region.