

## Helpdesk Research Report: Effects of the 'Arab Spring' on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region

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**Query:** What are the effects of the Arab Spring on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region?

**Enquirer:** Egypt Programme, AusAID

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### 1. Introduction

The 'Arab Spring' is an ongoing wave of demonstrations and protests in the Arab world, which began in December 2010. Popular protests have led to the overthrow of regimes in Tunisia and Egypt; a civil war in Libya; civil uprisings in Bahrain, Syria and Yemen; major protests in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco and Oman; and minor protests in a number of other countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

The protests have been widely seen as a **'watershed' event, which has 'irrevocably changed' the region and the global political landscape** (Yacoubian 2011, Hadid & Hosseinioun cited in Hayes 2011). The primary impact of the Arab Spring has been to change the social contract governing the relationship between Arab ruling elites and their populations. Cracks in this contract emerged over the last decade, but the Arab Spring has led to a rapid and radical empowerment of Arab grassroots (Yacoubian 2011). It is important to note that although other parts of the world face similar problems of economic stagnation, corruption and burgeoning populations, the protests in the Arab world have not so far spread beyond the region. The Arab Spring therefore has demonstrated a **strong regional dynamic**: protests have spread within the Arab world because of the cultural affinity felt by Arabs (Al Yafai cited in Hayes 2011).

This report assesses the impact of the Arab Spring on the MENA region, drawing on briefings, reports and articles to identify the main issues raised by experts. Because the events analysed here have occurred very recently, much of the analysis is lacking in rigorous documentary evidence. While this report focuses on regional impacts and implications of the protests, it also considers the wider global impacts insofar as these have had a knock-on effect on the MENA region.

## 2. Political dimensions

### Future prospects for political change

**The impacts of the Arab Spring on countries across the MENA region have been varied**, reflecting the significant diversity that characterizes the region (Anderson 2011). The revolutions that occurred in Tunisia and Egypt have not been easily replicated in Libya, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. While international military forces are supporting rebels in the civil war in Libya, Saudi military support has helped the Bahrain regime to suppress protests. Nevertheless, even in states such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen, which have so far resisted revolution, the power of the state has been constrained (Adib-Moghaddam cited in Hayes 2011).

Much of the available literature on the Arab Spring is concerned with the **future prospects** of the Arab Spring and the extent to which it is likely to spread or be sustained. Many commentators argue that the fall of incumbent regimes in Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Yemen is inevitable in the long term (see Davidson cited in Hayes 2011, Gardner 2011). Most commentators agree that oil-rich Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia will remain resistant to major political change, using a combination of repression with handouts to maintain their grip on power (Shaw cited in Hayes 2011).

In a recent report, the Economist Intelligence Unit argues that the fate of the uprisings is still in the balance and that there are three main possible scenarios, with the outcome of limited democratic reform being the most likely:

- **Scenario 1: A meagre democratic harvest** (60% probability) — Reforms result in the creation of democratic structures in some countries. Most countries shift to some form of hybrid regime (somewhere between democracy and authoritarianism), with political change failing to deliver genuine accountability or popular participation in government decision-making.
- **Scenario 2: Survival of authoritarianism** (20% probability) — Efforts to build democratic institutions are derailed by internal contradictions and by counter-revolutionary forces, and the spread of the movement for democratic change is checked. Authoritarian rule remains the norm across the Arab world.
- **Scenario 3: Democratic breakthrough** (20% probability) — Successful transitions to functional democratic systems in Tunisia and Egypt provide an example of the sustainability of the revolution. Other regimes fall or are forced by popular pressure to enact meaningful reforms. Representative democracy, albeit with significant weaknesses, takes root throughout the region' (EIU 2011, p.2).

Those Arab countries that have some experience of democratic institutions (Palestinian Territories, Kuwait, Iraq and Lebanon) illustrate the **pitfalls of flawed democracy in the Arab world**. In each of these cases factional infighting has led to 'prolonged periods of political gridlock' (EIU 2011, p.5). Nevertheless it is already possible to identify a few concrete changes in governance that have resulted from the Arab Spring, particularly in relation to the role of women in politics. In Tunisia, for example, parties are now required to have equal numbers of men and women in their electoral lists (Hope-Schwoebel 2011). In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood is holding discussions about including women in their Consultative Council, although no women sat on the commission to change the constitution (*ibid.*).

### Regional power relations

Although the Arab Spring has had a profound impact on the political settlement in many countries of the MENA region, it has arguably **failed to bring about any major change in regional power structures**. This lack of change can be attributed to a number of factors: 'the oil supply is secure, Israel continues its occupation, and there are even more ways at the disposal of the US and European states to keep governments in tune with western interests than in times of US-backed dictatorships' (Oktem cited in Hayes 2011). While many commentators have made comparisons with the third wave of democratisation in Eastern Europe in 1989, US influence in the region is not crumbling in the same way that the Soviet Union's influence over Eastern Europe fell apart during that region's democratic transition (Shaw cited in Hayes 2011, Hamid 2011).

Experts have identified a number of **emerging trends in regional power relations**. Crocker (2011, no page number) argues that the Arab Spring is likely to lead to 'the re-emergence of Egypt as a leading Arab power'. Several commentators argue that developments in **Egypt** will have a significant impact on the wider region, either providing a blueprint for reform in other regions if the transition is successful, or encouraging anti-democratic opposition if the transition stalls (Yacoubian 2011, Al Yafai cited in Hayes 2011, Oxford Analytica 2011, Diamond 2011). While there are signs that the military are consolidating their position in Egypt, the decision of the government to detain the former President demonstrates the continued power of protest (Rogers 2011).

The Arab Spring is unlikely to spread to **Iran**, which is best characterised as a 'post-revolutionary' state rather than a 'pre-revolutionary' one (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, the Spring has ratcheted up **regional competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia**, with the latter becoming increasingly fearful of the threat posed by Shia rebellions in Bahrain and Yemen (Burke 2011). Saudi Arabia's recent moves to invite Morocco and Jordan to join the Gulf Cooperation Council have been seen as an attempt to constrain Iran's influence (*ibid.*). Turkey's role may also grow more important as a consequence of recent events, as it provides a critical model for democratic transition for other countries in the region (Gardner 2011). Turkish officials are becoming more strident in support of transition in Syria, where they fear a sectarian war (*ibid.*).

**Western intervention in Libya** may have a significant impact on the wider region. If the civil war is resolved relatively quickly, perhaps with the support of an African Union intervention, the damage to the West's credibility in the region may diminish. If not, the damage is likely to grow (Rogers 2011a).

**The Arab League's** isolation of Libya and backing for the UN-backed no-fly zone, together with its recent threat to suspend Syria, has increased the organisation's clout in the region at a time when it was facing irrelevance (Arrott 2011). Nevertheless the Arab League has been criticised by some for being too hesitant in the face of the Arab Spring and some have mooted that the organisation might be threatened by an increasingly assertive Gulf Cooperation Council (*ibid.*).

#### Impact on the West's approach to the region

**The West's 'stability paradigm'** – the idea that interests could be exchanged for ideals – has been seriously challenged by the developments of the Arab Spring (Hamid cited in Hayes 2011). Nevertheless, stability is likely to remain the West's primary policy objective. The 'responsibility to protect' doctrine that has been invoked in Libya will be tested in the West's handling of the uprisings in Yemen and Bahrain (Hamid cited in Hayes 2011). To date, neither the EU nor the US has fully embraced protest movements and these movements may find it difficult to survive in the long term without external support (Springborg cited in Hayes 2011).

#### Islamism

Although some Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt or al-Nahda in Tunisia have been involved in the protests, the Arab Spring has largely transcended Islamist politics (Bayat 2011). Bayat characterises the uprisings as '**post-Islamist' revolutions**, where religious rhetoric is largely absent and where the protestors' central aim is to establish a democratic government (*ibid.*).

Although these groups were marginalised from the initial uprisings, most commentators agree that existing Islamist movements, **especially the well-organised MB in Egypt, are likely to be major players in the post-uprising political landscape of the Arab world** (Colás, Kinninmont, Osman cited in Hayes 2011). Their role will vary significantly from country to country (Kinninmont cited in Hayes 2011). Islamism is best understood as a catch-all term that encompasses a range of positions, from a belief in theocracy to the idea that Islam should be a source of values (*ibid.*).

Islamist movements that have formed under authoritarian regimes will face **internal challenges and tensions may emerge from younger activists**, some of whom may support greater pluralism and openness (Kinninmont, Osman cited in Haynes 2011). Nevertheless, when state authority is radically challenged, 'power lies with those who command weapons and a disciplined organisation', and in many countries in the MENA region, Islamist organisations are the only ones that can claim ready access to both these resources (Colás cited in Hayes 2011, no page number).

**There is some debate surrounding the extent to which Islamist parties will seek to compromise their agendas to meet rising demands for democratisation.** Prof. Tariq Ramadan argues that the MB can be reconciled with secular democracy (Maxwell 2011). Others question the MB's commitment to democracy and suggest that it is likely to restrict the rights of women and minorities (Byman 2011). Hamid notes that Islamist groups such as the MB and Al-Nahda have shown in the past that when their survival has been at stake, they have been willing to compromise their ideals and make difficult compromises (Hamid 2011). He states that if they gain power, Islamist parties will be likely to rule in coalitions and are therefore likely to be satisfied with exerting their influence in narrower parts of government such as health and justice and avoiding 'more sensitive' portfolios such as defence and foreign affairs (Hamid 2011, p.43). Nevertheless, once Islamist groups have consolidated their position, they will probably begin to speak more openly about their regional ambitions, and be less tolerant of US hectoring on Israel and the peace process (Hamid 2011). The success of the MB in any forthcoming elections in Egypt will affect the prospects of MB parties in Jordan, Morocco and potentially Tunisia and Sudan (Oxford Analytica 2011).

#### Role of Youth and Civil Society

Although social media savvy youth played an important role in driving the protests in most countries, their role is likely to diminish as political transitions play out in the region. Youth movements lack leaders and policy platforms to drive their agenda (Krastev cited in Hayes 2011). The fact that formal civil and political society played such a minimal role in the protests (with the exception of Bahrain) has implications for the long-term trajectory of the Arab Spring. While the prominence of social media and young people helped to bring together diverse social and political groups, the amorphous nature of these groupings mean that they will be difficult to sustain (Springborg cited in Hayes 2011, Schwartz 2011). Youth movements will need to reach out to conservative voters in rural areas who constitute the majority of the electorate in many MENA countries (Oxford Analytica 2011). In Egypt, these new political movements stand little chance of being able to build competitive party structures in time for the planned September elections (Diamond 2011). The challenges facing Tunisia, Egypt and Libya are markedly different. While Egypt and Tunisia will focus on building political institutions (constitutions, political parties and electoral systems), Libya will need to construct a civil society from scratch (Anderson 2011).

#### Impact on Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States

As mentioned above, the Arab Spring has had a relatively limited impact on the governance and internal politics of the Gulf States, due largely to their ability to use oil money to dampen dissent (Gause 2011). The two states with the least oil money (Bahrain and Yemen) have seen the biggest protests. Saudi Arabia has seen its position in the Arab world weaken as a result of the Arab Spring, losing its most important ally in Hosni Mubarak. Some elites in Saudi Arabia see playing the sectarian card as the best way to limit what they perceive as growing Iranian influence in the region (*ibid.*). Saudi Arabia's primary goal remains maintaining the status quo and ensuring continued stability and as a result it has maintained a pragmatic stance towards its neighbours. It backed President Saleh in Yemen until his position became untenable and a threat to stability (Haykel 2011). It is now likely to try to limit the emergence of a united and more independent Yemen by provoking internal divisions within Yemeni elites (*ibid.*)

### Israel/ Palestine conflict

The Arab Spring sparked dramatic protests on the Israel's northern borders, in Gaza and the West Bank. Protests encouraged a **reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas**, the two main political parties in the Palestinian Territories, by exposing both parties to growing popular pressure for change (EIU 2011). The agreement sees a gradual end to the split within the Palestinian authority and presents vague proposals towards reform of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. If subsequent elections are conducted in a relatively orderly fashion, this could strengthen the Palestinians' position in any future peace talks with Israel (EIU 2011). To date, progress on forming a new unity government has been stalled by disagreements about who should lead it (AFP 2011).

**The agreement makes an immediate resumption of the peace process unlikely** since Israel has stated unequivocally that it will not negotiate with a government that includes Hamas (Kurtzer-Ellenbogen 2011). The agreement does, however, put the Palestinians in a stronger position to push for a United Nations vote on statehood in September (*ibid.*). The new government in Egypt opened its border with Gaza in May, although a quota of 400 passengers a day was imposed (Economist 2011a).

## **3. Security dimensions**

### Military

Government relations with the military have emerged as a critical factor in determining whether or not a regime survives popular protests (Oxford Analytica 2011). In Libya, Yemen and Syria, security forces and praetorian guards have proved better armed and resourced than the main army. They are tightly controlled by presidents or their close families and have been willing to fight hard to maintain their position (*ibid.*). Larry Diamond has argued that the military in Egypt may try to obstruct a democratic transition by turning a blind eye to crime and sectarian violence, creating an unstable environment that will encourage outsiders to back a strong hand (Diamond 2011). As such, the military remains a major obstacle to genuine democratic transition in a number of countries in the region.

### Sectarianism

When dictatorships crack, underlying social conflicts that have been repressed often come to the fore (Bobinski cited in Hayes 2011). Although sectarian discourse has been largely absent from most of the recent uprisings, the threat of sectarian conflict looms large over a number of countries, and particular those such as Bahrain and Syria which are ruled by an ethnic minority group. The Economist Intelligence Unit rates the risk of internal division as 'very high' in Yemen, Libya and Bahrain and 'high' in Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, Kuwait, the Palestinian Territories, Syria and Tunisia (EIU 2011).

### Terrorism and Al-Qaeda

**The Arab Spring has exposed Al-Qaeda's ineffectiveness as an agent for political change** (EIU 2011). Revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia have been driven by young people motivated by freedom and non-violent action, rather than defending Muslim lands from Western aggression (Byman 2011). Nevertheless, if the protests stall, Al-Qaeda could yet **take advantage of the ensuing frustration** (*ibid.*, Rogers 2011a, Byman 2011). Al-Qaeda has enjoyed greater operational freedom and has maintained tens of thousands of armed fighters (Byman 2011). Some jihadists who were jailed in Egypt were released during recent unrest. In countries where autocrats remain in power, security services will be likely to commit fewer resources to tackling jihadists, focusing their energies on supporters of democratisation (*ibid.*). Byman (2011) argues that opportunities for jihadists have been enhanced in Libya where civil war has broken out and Western powers have intervened militarily.

#### 4. Economic and development dimensions

##### Economic impacts

In the short term, **the economic consequences of the Arab Spring favour the oil-producing countries that have experienced the least instability**. Egypt and Tunisia require external support to shore up suddenly fragile fiscal and balance of payments positions (EIU 2011, Oxford Analytica 2011). This shortfall has been caused by steep short-term reductions in production, trade and services. Egypt has also suffered a 45% drop in tourist arrivals, which it has been estimated may lead to a 1.2% decline in GDP this year. These trends may be partly replicated in other major tourist destinations in the region such as Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon and Jordan (Riordan 2011).

The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) argues that a number of countries including Libya, Syria and Bahrain may suffer from a large decline in foreign investment (EIU 2011), although recent research by Grant Thornton suggests that globally only 10% of businesses say that they were now less likely to do business in the MENA region (Grant Thornton 2011).

Over the long term, the EIU and the World Bank assert that **democratisation should produce significant economic benefits**: '[a]n acceleration in economic growth under this scenario would significantly narrow, and could even eliminate, the region's gap with world average incomes by 2050' (EIU 2011, p.3, Riordan 2011). Riordan (2011) cites World Bank figures that predict GDP growth of 3.5 - 4% for the region in 2011-12, which, although reasonable is still slightly below pre-Arab Spring projections.

Although the task of **economic reform** in the MENA region is less technically challenging than that facing Eastern Europe in 1989, it may prove more politically contentious (Economist 2011). While Eastern Europe had a clear model for reform in Western Europe and the goal of EU membership, there is a less clear path to economic reform in the MENA region. In Egypt, the new government has expanded subsidies and state employment (*ibid.*). Most countries in the region are also blighted by kleptocratic monopolies, heavy regulation and massive state subsidies. Vested interests are also likely to resist change and may require further protest and violence to be changed (Colás cited in Hayes 2011). Tackling corruption will be one of the central challenges facing the region during the next phase of the transition (White 2011).

Several commentators argue that a lack of **economic reform may threaten the radical political changes** that have swept the region, particularly in Egypt where there is already talk of the need for a 'second revolution' to address economic issues (Sfakianakis 2011, White 2011). New governments in Egypt and Tunisia will need to pursue a delicate balance between tackling vested interests and corruption on the one hand, and the need to avoid capital flight and the to ensure some degree of political stability on the other (White 2011). The issue of **bread and fuel subsidies** is particularly sensitive. Although these subsidies can yield immediate political benefits to the governments that distribute them, they have negative long-term impacts on public finances and may be unfairly distributed because of corruption (Saif

2011). One of the key challenges facing policymakers in the MENA region will be the question of how to design new policies that reach targeted groups more efficiently (*ibid.*).

**Rich countries have committed substantial financial resources to supporting pro-democracy movements in North Africa.** At the end of May 2011, the G8 pledged loans and grants totalling \$40 billion. This includes over \$10 billion in direct aid to Tunisia and Egypt, a figure that will be matched by Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar (Bloomberg 2011). Saifedean Ammous has questioned the efficacy of development assistance in the MENA region, arguing that development assistance has historically been based on a discredited central planning model and may do more harm than good (Ammous 2011). Before the Arab Spring, regimes in the MENA region used support from the Bretton Woods institutions to strengthen their rule, bolstering unaccountable and kleptocratic modes of governance (*ibid.*). Ammous (2011) recommends that any further assistance should be deferred until the post-election period in Tunisia and Egypt.

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## 6. Additional Information

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### Key websites

[Chatham House](#), [The Economist](#), [Economist Intelligence Unit](#), [Financial Times](#), [Foreign Affairs](#), [New Statesman](#), [Open Democracy](#), [Oxford Analytica](#), [Oxford Research Group](#), [United States Institute of Peace](#)

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