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The uprisings that have swept across the Middle East and North Africa region have unleashed new or reenergized existing movements expressing deep dissatisfaction with the status quo. Popular demands for change have ranged from the clearly political to the strictly economic. Economic crises, unreformed security sectors, and corruption—still largely unaddressed by the new or transitional regimes—continue periodically to draw people into the streets to reassert the power that forced initial regime changes two years ago.

The political developments of the post-2010 period are unprecedented in their depth and breadth, although it is important to remember the 1987-89 period, when the region also witnessed a series of dramatic episodes—the first Palestinian intifada, the Algerian uprising of October 1988, and the Jordanian riots of 1989—which also triggered significant political restructuring. Today, however, in addition to the reintroduction of mass, if not always democratic, politics into the mix, the leaderships are operating under a different set of constraints and opportunities. The United States is the only remaining superpower, but Russia continues to seek regional influence within the context of the costly, damaging, and drawn-out U.S. involvements in Afghanistan and Iraq. On the economic front, neoliberal orthodoxy has shown its limits, but no new approach has been formulated to address the results of decades of corruption and economic distress. Perhaps most important for analyzing the changing security environment is understanding that the simultaneous occurrence of multiple revolts has introduced an unprecedented degree of uncertainty into a region whose alliance structures or power balances had already been shaken by the overthrow of the Ba'ath regime in Iraq in 2003 and the resultant rise in Iranian power.

New leadership, mass politics, and extended transitions

While youth and members of long-suppressed labor unions were the most important foot soldiers in the Tunisian and Egyptian cases, those who started the revolutions have not been the ones to lead them forward. The lack of recognized or charismatic leadership is striking and has contributed to fractionalization after the initial revolutionary drive. In some cases, the revolutionaries eschewed efforts at political institutionalization; in others, they were outmaneuvered by better-organized competitors. As a result, the new leaders are not young idealists with fresh perspectives; instead, they are men who were in exile, suppressed, or coopted by the previous regimes, none of whom can claim revolutionary legitimacy.

The first parliamentary elections in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya witnessed significant turnouts. However, in Egypt, subsequent rounds of voting have demonstrated a decline in levels of popular participation, including opposition calls for boycotts of the December 2012 referendum and the spring 2013 parliamentary elections. In all of the countries touched by the Arab awakening, periodic renewals of demonstrations and violence indicate a growing gap between the new leadership and “the people.” Mass politics in the region continues to be a complex and sometimes volatile mix of elections and demonstrations, both peaceful and violent, in the context of leaders experienced in opposition but not governance.

As for the relationship between mass politics and foreign policy, although slogans of pan-Arab solidarity figured into many of the initial demonstrations, subsequent mobilizations have focused on economic demands and divisions regarding the role of the state. On key foreign policy issues, there has been significant continuity, although some critical shifts in regional political alignments have occurred. Two cases on opposite ends of the spectrum of “Arab spring” mass politics—Egypt and Jordan—are examined below to explore how greater involvement of peoples of the region in elections, demonstrations, and protests has affected state-level regional behavior.

Egypt

The demise of the Hosni Mubarak regime augured for a marked shift in Egypt’s relationships with Gaza, Hamas, and the Palestinian Authority (PA). Mubarak’s Egypt was a key part of the U.S.-Israel-Jordan-PA axis, a fierce opponent of Hamas and an enforcer of the U.S.-Israeli sponsored siege of Gaza. When the June 2012 elections brought the Muslim Brotherhood’s (MB) Muhammad Morsi to the presidency, speculation quickly emerged about possible changes in Egyptian foreign policy based on past anti-Israel positions taken by the Brotherhood. However, Morsi quickly reassured the United States that Cairo would uphold its international commitments, including its peace treaty with Israel. Egypt’s economic crisis and Morsi’s struggle to consolidate power in the context of ongoing protests explain this continuity. Most important has been a sometimes uncomfortable marriage of convenience with the military—manifest in several articles in the controversial new constitution which protect key military prerogatives at the expense of the greater transparency sought by political activists. Given the military’s close relationship with the United States—most notably the \$1.3 billion in annual aid—as well as the key role the United States plays in the IMF—from which Morsi is seeking loans to address Egypt’s serious economic crisis—the Egyptian president cannot risk alienating Washington, regardless of what his popular constituency may prefer.

Indeed, a continuing, strong military relationship with the United States appears above question. While actions by Morsi and his government have raised concerns in Congress about whether U.S. military aid to Egypt should continue, no objections to the relationship have been raised from Cairo. Although the joint biennial military training

Operation Bright Star was cancelled in 2011 because of domestic instability, all indicators are that it will be held in 2013. Nor did the unexpected replacement of Supreme Council of the Armed Forces head Muhammad Tantawi by Abdul Fattah Al-Sisi in August 2012 lead to any change in relations. The United States has continued its military aid, it continues to have overflight rights and priority passage of U.S. ships through the Suez Canal, and Al-Sisi has praised growing U.S.-Egyptian military cooperation. Morsi has neither said nor done anything to problematize the relationship.

There have been suggestions for treaty revisions, echoed by civil society, but they have concerned Egyptian troop presence in the Sinai Peninsula. The peace treaty gave Egypt less than full sovereignty over the area, the Mubarak government did not seek to integrate it economically, and land ownership has, for security reasons, been allowed only to the military. The result has been the development of arms smuggling and other trafficking across the border with Gaza as key economic activities—along with the growing influence of radical elements, who have attacked police stations and military checkpoints and repeatedly sabotaged the pipeline carrying gas to Israel and Jordan since the revolution. The population of the area remains skeptical of both the military and the new civilian leadership, each of which seeks to tame the region, if using different policy instruments. Morsi has reached out with promises of greater economic inclusion, but the approach to the Gaza tunnels under his presidency has gradually become even tougher than Mubarak's approach despite Morsi's close relations with Hamas. Current policy toward Sinai (and, by extension, Gaza) illustrates the complex set of challenges Egypt currently faces: the uneasy relationship between an entrenched military and a weak civilian leadership; the long-standing antagonism between the military and the MB; and the increasing alienation of the non-religious oppositional forces from the political process, which mutes any negative reaction to a Gaza policy that is tough on Hamas.

It is true that during the November 2012 Israeli assault on Gaza, Morsi dispatched his prime minister to Gaza less than 48 hours after the conflict began, and Egyptian activists were allowed to enter the Strip in a show of support. Morsi also played the role of serious mediator and was credited both by the United States and Hamas with helping to broker a ceasefire. Unfortunately, the strength he felt he derived from this successful foreign policy involvement probably played a role in his decision almost immediately thereafter to assume extra constitutional powers, precipitating the greatest domestic crisis since February 2011.

Finally are the implications for broader regional alignments. Saudi Arabia had been a close ally of Mubarak's Egypt. Qatar, on the other hand, has cultivated relationships with the Muslim Brotherhood and related parties in the region. It has made promises of

financial aid and investment in Egypt and has been directly involved in Gaza, providing finances for reconstruction, with the Emir even making a visit to the Strip. Morsi's greater openness toward Iran should also be noted as a significant departure from the previous regime. This policy is less the product of mass involvement in Egyptian politics than it is an attempt by Cairo to reassert a more central and independent role in regional politics. Morsi attended the Non-Aligned Movement summit in Tehran in August 2012, although he criticized the Syrian regime in his speech. He also reportedly conferred with Ahmadinejad during the Israeli attacks on Gaza; and he met with him purportedly to discuss the Syrian civil war during the Iranian president's February 2013 visit to Egypt as part of the meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Jordan

Some of the demonstrations in Jordan since spring 2011 have been organized by the traditional opposition—the MB, pan-Arabists, and leftists—calling for regime reform or decrying corruption. An anti-normalization contingent is also periodically vocal, but calls for overturning the peace treaty have not been central to opposition demands in the past two years. Instead, what has been notable is the mobilization of new sectors, particularly among East Bankers, especially the young. Particularly worrisome to the palace is these demonstrators' increasingly direct criticisms of the king and their calls for bringing down the regime, not just the government. In addition, the so-called reform movement known as HIRAK, a largely East Banker movement, has called for full citizenship and the unity of the Jordanian people of all backgrounds—these are code words for including Jordanians of Palestinian origin (JPs). Such demands are quite important, but they concern domestic, not foreign policy.

A new electoral law issued in summer 2012 and the promise of free elections served as the centerpiece of the king's response to the demonstrations. Large registration numbers and popular turnout were needed to legitimize the elections and, by extension, the reform process; yet, with the MB and others threatening to boycott the elections, the government was forced to extend the registration deadline. In the meantime, Jordan's budget crisis intensified, and, on November 13, key subsidies were lifted. Popular anger then led to the greatest outpouring of discontent since the beginning of the regional uprisings. The government offered payments to the poorest of the poor to partially offset the economic impact of the subsidy removal, but it refused to back down in the face of mass opposition.

The parliamentary elections held in January 2013 secured a large enough turnout and seal of approval from external monitors to allow the king to proclaim this stage of reform a success. However, even with the large number of new—and, in some cases, outspoken—personalities, it is unclear that the new parliament will actually play a notable role. The highly touted new procedure for choosing a prime minister simply resulted in the reappointment of the previous prime minister. Through its traditional policy of divide and rule, cooptation, and repression, the regime appears to have forestalled any significant challenge emanating from popular mobilization.

In the foreign policy realm, one striking change of this period has been the complication of Jordan's relations with Egypt, an ally under Mubarak. With the Muslim Brotherhood as the most broadly-based opposition force in Jordan, the regime has made containment of it a priority for some time. Therefore, the rise of the MB in Egypt—which, in turn, supports an MB-allied Hamas in both Gaza and the West Bank—put Jordan—and its ally against Hamas, the PA—on the defensive and strained relations. Tensions have flared over Egypt's attempt to revise its natural gas agreement with Jordan, which Amman read as a move to pressure it domestically on the MB and Hamas. In response, Amman threatened to deport thousands of Egyptian workers, which would have been a tremendous economic blow to Morsi during a period in which the Egyptian economy is already on the brink.

Further complicating the picture, in fall 2012, Prince Hassan resurrected the idea of a confederation between Jordan and the West Bank. His goal may have been to strengthen the PA in the context of calls for Palestinian unity talks with a re-empowered Hamas. However, some argued that Hassan sought to frighten East Bankers about possible rising JP power in order to prevent the emergence of broader trans-communal mobilization against the regime.

Farther afield, the traditionally supportive Gulf states all promised significant financial assistance to address Jordan's growing budget deficit during this critical period, yet not all of their commitments have been fulfilled. Qatar was pleased with Jordan's support for its charge against Muammar Qaddafi; however, it has been displeased with Jordan's alignment with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in their suppression of the MB. Amman's hesitancy in playing a greater role in helping to overthrow the Bashar al-Assad regime also angered both the Saudis and Qataris. Consequently, in the context of the violence following the fall 2012 lifting of subsidies, it took unprecedented statements from Jordan's prime minister about Jordan's protecting Saudi Arabia from the Arab spring finally to push Riyadh to forward aid. Jordanian concerns with the security and economic impact of the Syrian civil war have driven a cautious policy, including apparent security contacts with Damascus on the one hand while allowing military training of opposition fighters on the other. Popular Jordanian sentiment is generally supportive of the Syrian opposition, but average Jordanians, like the regime, place a high value on domestic security, which is threatened by the continuation of the civil war.

There have been recent reports of a possible deal with Russia to build a major weapons production facility in Jordan, along with Russian support for a peaceful Jordanian civilian nuclear program. However, the key military relationship with the United States remains strong. May 2012 saw Operation Eager Lion—a 19-country, 11,000-troop set of exercises that was three years in the planning, itself the offshoot the annual bilateral Infinite Moonlight U.S.-Jordanian exercises that date to the 1990s. Just as important, fall 2012 saw the stationing of some 150 American troops at a base in the north of the country to deal with fallout from the Syrian civil war: border security, refugee flows, or securing chemical weapons.

Conclusions

Since the beginning of the uprisings, popular expression manifested in demonstrations and subsequently in elections has focused overwhelmingly on domestic concerns: unemployment, inflation, security, and the rule of law. In neither Egypt nor Jordan has the commitment to the peace treaty with Israel been seriously questioned, and the military and economic relationships with the United States remain strong. Egypt's current transition is deeper and, hence, more uncertain than Jordan's, but the current marriage of convenience between the military and the MB has managed to avoid the clashes in the foreign policy realm that one might have anticipated over the peace treaty and Gaza. The current Arab leaderships, whether new or old but shaken, are behaving in ways shaped not by foreign policy demands expressed on a mass level, but by the desire to (re)consolidate power given existing challenges and constraints. Economic crises and the lack of swift domestic remedies mean that while modifications in emphasis on or approach to some regional issues may appear, changes that shift long-standing military or peace treaty commitments to the United States seem highly unlikely, even in this current atmosphere of political uncertainty.

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.

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