

US/ME Policy Brief

A publication of the U.S./Middle East Project

18^{July}₂₀₁₁

PERSPECTIVES ON THE ARAB SPRING

A summary of observations on the Arab Spring by Middle Eastern experts at the May 26th meeting of the International Board of the U.S./Middle East Project.

The Second Tunisian Revolution: A New Model of Change for a New Generation

STEVE COLL

My recent travels in post-revolutionary Tunisia provide a “bottom-up” perspective on the Arab Spring.

During my travels, I had the opportunity to speak to sit-in organizers in Tunis. As I discovered, this younger generation shared three core characteristics: 1) a deep sense of ownership over the change they have created; 2) a feeling of connectivity that includes but is not limited to social media, and 3) a striking sense of global citizenship, itself a product of technological change and expanding networks of communication. These characteristics lead me to conclude that the younger generation is best understood not just as an Arab generation, but as a global generation. The language they use and the mechanisms of revolution they employ are better understood as global phenomena rather than as characteristics unique to the Arab world.

Traveling in the less-developed southern region of Tunisia, I conducted an amateur political science experiment, asking a few hundred people which model of government they had in mind for their country after the revolution. Rather than hoping to model their government on Turkey, as I had suspected, the only answers I received were “Britain,” “Switzerland” and “France.” These responses reflect the widely-held aspiration to develop a fully-formed constitutional system. Yet I was left wondering how a public living under Tunisia’s repressive system could have developed such globalized notions.

While social media and the attitudes toward community and collective action it engenders have certain qualities that enable dispersed people to quickly convene and demonstrate, that same media, by virtue of its “virtualness,” does not seem to generate real leadership. As is the case in Tunisia, these movements therefore entail the powerful presence of a self-conscious generation that has convened for a

single purpose, but has not had the opportunity to test leaders, create coalitions and divide responsibilities.

In this environment, there is an emergent dialectic between the virtually-connected youth public and the archaic political institutions left over from the days of the previous regime. The labor unions in Tunisia, which had been a “safety valve” for the non-threatening expression of discontent under Ben Ali (and for that reason lacked any real credibility) are today among the few organized forces in Tunisian politics. Similar forces include Islamist groups and remnants of the old regime. The leaderless younger generation will have no choice but to form pragmatic alliances with these elements.

What I witnessed could only be described as a second Tunisian revolution: the struggle to ensure that the period of transition to democracy would be long enough to allow the secular forces in society to

organize and compete with the Islamists and residual regime elements. In Tunisia, the younger generation succeeded in postponing elections in favor of a constituent assembly set for July, whereas in Egypt a coalition of the army and the Muslim Brotherhood successfully pushed for early elections. In both countries, secular parties will be forced to compete before they are ready on a political terrain where public opinion is difficult or impossible to predict given the extent of past repression, and where the appeal of Islamist groups could prove surprising.

Steve Coll is president of the New America Foundation. A former senior editor at *The Washington Post* and author of six books, Mr. Coll is the recipient of two Pulitzer Prizes and numerous other awards in the fields of journalism and international affairs.

Implications of the Arab Awakening for U.S. Policy in Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan

THOMAS R. PICKERING

The events brought about by the Arab Spring have yet to reach their denouement, making any analysis preliminary in nature. Yet U.S. policy will eventually strike an equilibrium between values and interests, hopefully providing robust economic assistance to ensure stable democratic transitions in post-revolutionary countries.

The current process of revolutionary change in the Arab world can be broken down into three distinct stages: ignition, demonstration and accommodation. Only Egypt and Tunisia have thus far moved into the accommodation stage, while countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar remain in a state of pre-ignition without much likelihood of revolt. Egypt is without doubt the regional bellwether, and in Syria the

Alawite regime seems poised and committed to crush the opposition.

In Iran, the regime is attempting to claim sponsorship of the Arab revolution while simultaneously repressing its own indigenous protest movement. Yet the Green Movement was an early inspiration for the Arab Spring. Furthermore, the protestors supported political liberalism and the rejection of authoritarian rule, focused on economic reform, and seemed to take on little or no anti-Israel or anti-U.S. slogans.

The Arab Spring and the preoccupation of Arab regimes with domestic events have brought about the fracturing of what was an inchoate Arab alliance with Israel against Iran. While Iran has been accused by certain states—notably Saudi Arabia and Bahrain,

which are concerned with restive Shia populations—of instigating revolutionary activity, these claims had little credibility in the opening stages.

The implications of the revolts for Iran are mixed: on one hand, heightened oil prices are insulating the regime from U.S./UN sanctions; on the other hand, Iran's strategic alliance with Syria is now threatened by instability in that country. Across the region, in Lebanon, Iraq, South Yemen and Bahrain, the efforts to take power by Shia communities and the spread of an Iranian-style Shia revolutionary ideology once thought to be ascendant has been frustrated, and Iran has made few inroads in the Sunni majority countries.

But overall, the Arab Spring has not helped the U.S. contain Iran. Aside from the fractured Arab-Israel-U.S. alliance, the intervention in Libya supplies the Iranian regime with a talking point along the lines of, "Look what happens when you strike a deal with the United States to give up your country's weapons programs: they turn against you at the first opportunity."

The U.S. currently has an historic opportunity to mend ties with the "Arab street." The latter has not moved in a radically pro-Iranian direction. Iran may say the Arab Street is moving to separate itself from the U.S. rather than reforming domestically, but that vision is flawed.

The Arab Spring and U.S. Foreign Policy

PAUL R. PILLAR

The Arab Spring is a boon for U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East. The revolts embody American values and, at least in Tunisia and Egypt, have achieved significant political change through non-violent methods, striking a blow to radical ideologies that depend on violence. The opening of democratic channels for the expression of political

In Iraq, there has been a relative absence of street demonstrations, save the most recent batch of Sadrist protests, which were of a different stripe. But the Arab Spring will raise tough questions for the Shia-dominated Iraqi government about the division of power and resources among the different religious and ethnic groupings in Iraq, particularly at a time when U.S. forces are withdrawing. Higher oil prices and a weakened Syria are both beneficial to Iraq.

The Afghanistan-Pakistan theater is not fertile terrain for democratic revolution on an Arab Spring model. The issues that preoccupy the public in those countries take them outside the range of what has been referred to, negatively, as the Arab Spring's "belt of contagion." It is important for the U.S. to understand that the Arab Spring is seen more widely in the Muslim world as reflecting America's declining influence in the region, and that this perception will increase as the U.S. prepares to withdraw from Afghanistan.

Thomas R. Pickering, currently Vice Chairman at Hills and Company, holds the personal rank of Career Ambassador, the highest in the U.S. Foreign Service. In a diplomatic career spanning five decades, he has served as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations as well as ambassador to half a dozen countries.

demands will further weaken the appeal of Islamist radicalism.

Yet the Arab Spring has its limitations. In Afghanistan, for example, outside of a few elites, there will not be much of a "demonstration effect" from the Arab Spring. There already exists a civil war in Afghanistan

and it is over the distribution of power among ethnic groups and warlords—not democracy. In the short term, the cause for optimism in Afghanistan has less to do with the Arab Spring and more to do with the demise of Osama bin Laden and the impact his death might have on the Taliban's negotiating posture.

In Iraq, to the extent that the Shia-dominated government of Nouri Al-Maliki exhibits authoritarian tendencies, it remains a potential target for democratic activism. Were democracy to take hold in Egypt, there could well be a demonstration effect in Iraq—if only as a point of pride for Iraqis, who consider themselves leaders in the Arab world. But with Saddam Hussein having been ousted, the changes in question would be marginal and reformist, not revolutionary. Iraqi political culture has already been testing the limits of workable democracy, and some Iraqis have shifted their focus from democracy to economic and security concerns. From the point of view of most of Iraq's Shia, democracy is synonymous with majority rule. Given these considerations, the Obama administration should make use of the December 31, 2011 withdrawal deadline to extricate the U.S. from Iraq, rather than attempting to coax the Al-Maliki government into requesting an extension of America's commitment.

In neighboring Iran, it is important to underscore the inconsistency of the regime's respective reactions to the Egyptian and Syrian rebellions. Iran is a society ripe for revolution by the standards of the Arab Spring: corruption, repression and economic underperformance—all precursors to revolution in Tunisia and Egypt—prevail in Iran today. In North

Africa, political change was inevitable: only the timing was unpredictable. Yet in Iran, the existence of security forces fiercely loyal to the regime (the Revolutionary Guard Corps), the financial cushion of oil and the disunity of the Green Movement are all impediments to change.

While the Arab Spring has brought much needed change to a politically stagnant region, policymakers should abandon the presumption of imminent regime change in Iran, as well as the notion of an anti-Iran alliance among so-called moderate Arab states. Post-revolutionary Egypt has already begun to mend ties with Iran, while the "moderate" GCC states led by Saudi Arabia have been flexing their muscles in an attempt to roll back revolutionary activity in their neighborhood. Such complex reactions to calls for democratic reform confound any clear sense of the region as divided into obvious "good guys" and "bad guys."

Paul R. Pillar is Professor of Security Studies at Georgetown University. In 2005, he retired from a 28-year career in the U.S. intelligence community, where his last position was National Intelligence Officer for the Near East and South Asia.

The views expressed in US/ME Policy Briefs are not necessarily shared by the U.S./Middle East Project.

U.S. / Middle East Project

641 Lexington Avenue, Suite 1501, New York, N.Y. 10022 Tel: (212) 634-6378 • Fax: (212) 634-6377

E-mail: usmep@usmep.us • Henry Siegman, President • Brent Scowcroft, Chair, International Board