NATO OTAN

Research Report

Research Division - NATO Defense College, Rome – February 2011

What to think of the political crisis in North Africa and the Middle East?

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The chaos in Egypt and the "Jasmine Revolution", during which the Tunisian people have recently ousted President Ben Ali, have meant a new lease of life for domino theory, very much in vogue over the last few days throughout the Arab world. In Europe and the United States, everyone is wondering what will be the consequences of the events still running their course. This is salutary because, when history accelerates, the wishful thinking approach is a bad counsellor. Trusting in destiny to prevent the current political crisis leading to a situation which jeopardizes the balance of the whole region, at least as imagined by Western governments, would be a mistake. It would be equally wrong to imagine that the new governments emerging from these revolutions will be automatically pro-Western. Given the rising social tensions and the persistent stall in the Israeli-Palestinian question, it is not inconceivable that a new fracture line based on resistance to the West is forming across the entire Arab world.

The situation under control in the Maghreb for the moment

There is every indication that localized revolts and demonstrations in opposition to existing regimes will continue in North Africa, given the endemic unemployment and growing frustration of a young population with no real prospects

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for the future. It is nevertheless unlikely that the example of Tunisia, at least in the short or mid term, will lead to the fall of other Maghreb leaders.

The situation in Algeria certainly remains highly volatile, but the government can count on three safety valves: relative freedom of expression, albeit within certain limits; gas and oil revenues allowing it to make some concessions; and total collusion between the army and the ruling party. In Morocco, the situation is just as worrying, but the King can count on his status as Commander of the Faithful, on albeit timid extension of the right of expression, on modest reforms of society and on promising economic investments. In Libya, the society's tribal organization, the small size of the population and the revenues from oil are guarantees of social peace. The situation in Mauritania is different, far closer to that of the crisis-ridden states in sub-Saharan Africa than that of the Arab states.

A more contrasting scenario in the Middle East

In Jordan, the still popular monarchy continues to guarantee national unity and the place of the minorities who have to reckon with a growing Palestinian majority. Though the main challenge is still economic, were the situation to flare up it is conceivable that the West and the oil monarchies would step up their financial aid and help the king quench the blaze. The fall of the government, which is accused of negligence and corruption, will not affect the monarchy.

In Syria the regime rules with an iron fist, availing itself of the army and the services. It has managed to emerge from its isolation and score points on the regional scene. Above all, it can count on the support of Russia.

In Lebanon, popular protest is of a completely different kind. The cause is not the nature of power, but certain mechanisms used in the constitutional power-sharing system, as well as the need to restore balances between the different communities. The new Prime Minister Nagib Mikati is first and foremost a Sunni multi-millionaire, with the support of a mixed coalition (Shia, Christian and Druze), brought to the fore as Hezbollah's favoured candidate. If the Hariri clan proves so hostile to his nomination, apart from the question of attitude to the international Tribunal, it is

perhaps because the two families have long been business rivals. Most Lebanese today seem to prioritize national stability, even if that means simply writing off the assassination of Rafic Hariri.

The situation is for the moment stable in the Gulf Cooperation Council. The oil monarchies have simply had to recognize the Tunisian revolution, but they have hastened to condemn the current revolution in Egypt and taken preventive measures to ensure that events there do not spill over to other states. Their wealth allows them to appease social protest for the moment. At the heart of the Arabian peninsula, only Yemen shows the telltale signs and the socio-economic fragility which might be the prelude to serious difficulties for the existing regime.

Iraq is already in the eye of the storm. It is unlikely that events in Tunisia and Egypt will change the scenario and modify the balance of power or, above all, the precarious respite which is developing there. In Iran, the setting is radically different and it is hard to imagine the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions proving sufficient to re-energize the reformists, who paid so heavy a price last year and seem to be banking more on the death of the Supreme Leader while awaiting the end of the current President's term of office.

Egypt and the Palestinian Authority the most threatened in the short term

Two Arab powers are directly threatened and could collapse more quickly than thought. The fall of either could hasten the end of the other. President Mubarak is the first in line, as shown by the events of the last few days. Elderly, worn out, in power for three decades, he is clinging to his power in the face of lost popular legitimacy. The economic situation is indeed catastrophic for a majority of the population, who live below the poverty threshold. The predatory regime discourages local initiative and foreign investments. The media are tightly controlled. Disillusioned young people are emigrating if they are in a position to. National wealth is not enough to buy social peace, and this situation will not be helped by the downturn in tourism and the structural rise in food prices. The Egyptian regime thus lacks the safety valves which are proving effective in other countries, unless it

envisages radical reforms which would make its downfall inevitable. History shows that a regime with its back against the wall rarely opts for greater openness.

There are several points to be focused on in the case of Egypt. First, unlike the Tunisian populace, Egyptian society is very receptive to Islamist rhetoric as a result of the considerable influence exerted by the Muslim Brotherhood. The army, which sees itself as the mainstay of the regime, is also penetrated by Islamist influence. It could break apart were the pressure from public demonstrations to become too strong. The political scenario is further complicated by the presence of a strong Christian minority (13% of the population, meaning ten million inhabitants), which continues to support the present regime out of fear for the Muslim Brotherhood. Finally, the crucial factor is that the American administration today seems ready to abandon President Mubarak should he not go ahead immediately with reforms promoting greater political openness and increasing freedom of expression. Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have been very clear on this point. Seen in this light, the situation shows worrying similarities with the events which led up to the Islamic Revolution in Iran. At that time President Carter's Democratic administration, full of good intentions, left the Shah without support and thus discarded the West's most dependable ally in the Middle East. Abandoned by the West, the Shah found himself in much the same situation as Hosni Mubarak today. Neither the Americans nor the Europeans had fully assessed the implications of their actions or thought about what would happen next. The Iranian army, the mainstay of the regime, eventually declared its neutrality and chose to sacrifice the Shah, who was forced into exile and tried to seek haven in the United States. There was a transitional government of national unity embracing liberals, socialists and Islamists, before the clergy imposed its authority and cleared the field of all rivals. The rest is history. A new Islamic revolution in Egypt would by no means help reinforce the security and stability of the Middle East.

A strictly military regime would probably not offer a viable solution in Egypt, since the army would be faced with the determination of demonstrators intent on bringing the regime down and would have to choose between firing and not firing on the crowd. Should it fire, it would lose all popular support and international legitimacy. Should it not fire, it would no longer be a credible decision-maker and

could aspire only to a role as arbiter. This is what the Tunisian army chose to do, as did the imperial Iranian army just over thirty years ago.

The situation in the Palestinian Authority is just as worrying. The current President could become an indirect victim of the Jasmine Revolution and fail to survive the probable overthrow of Hosni Mubarak. His legitimacy, a diminishing asset, has been dented by repeated accusations of corruption and faintheartedness. Many Palestinians see him as "the man of the Egyptians, the Western powers and the Israelis", and his very presence would be an obstacle to the necessary intra-Palestinian reconciliation. The peace process leaks from Al Jazeera, pointing an accusing finger at the concessions to the Israelis, happen to have emerged at what could not have been a worse time for him. The frustration of the Palestinian people is directed not only against the Israeli government, but also against Mahmoud Abbas and his team. Here too, it is difficult to see what safety valves could be used to defuse the crisis, since the West Bank remains poor. There is thus no prospect of a way out unless the Israeli government realizes the danger and agrees to resume negotiations on a more equitable and more credible basis, but there is no sign that this is likely. Faced with this stall, is there not a risk of the Palestinian people turning, in one way or another, towards Hamas? Indeed, Hamas seems to be a fundamental actor, particularly in view of Turkey's new policy in the region.

Should Mahmoud Abbas be ousted, it is hard to see how the West, the moderate Arab regimes and the Israelis could object to a new general election in the Palestinian Authority. Given the situation there, if there were free elections Hamas would be the likely winner.

Israel increasingly isolated

For the moment, the Israeli government's only official reaction is to proclaim its wish to preserve the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan. The situation is so serious that the Israeli Prime Minister has given his ministers strict orders not to comment. By putting off any decision, fragmenting the Palestinian camp and rejecting any compromise with a view to maintaining the status quo, Israel runs the risk of putting itself in a situation where it would have to seek a deal with far less

conciliatory negotiating partners than Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah and Hosni Mubarak's government in Egypt. To the south, Egypt has no longer posed a threat to Israel for years, the military front having moved north to guard against Syria and Lebanon, but Israel must now face the prospect of having to restore full-scale defence along the Egyptian border too. It is not impossible that this scenario will oblige Israel to change its nuclear deterrence strategy, clarifying its ambiguous stance on this issue and plainly stating its readiness to use the nuclear option if necessary.

The "Turkish model": a possible option as a way out of the crisis

It might be be a source of irritation, but the fact of the matter is that public opinion in the Arab Muslim world as a whole sees the present Turkish regime as a model – a view not held by those in power in the Arab states. Turkey has established a government and a Parliament which openly support Sunni Islamism but at the same time guarantee the secular status of the country's institutions. The regime is unquestionably republican and democratic. The army, which is no longer trying to seize power, acts as an arbiter to ensure that the Islamic government does not overstep certain limits. Turkey is also open towards the world, plainly in favour of economic globalization and respect for the principles of free trade. Its economic growth is incredible, but rests on a sound and well consolidated basis. Above all, it prides itself on a balanced foreign policy, receptive to the expectations of Western states without necessarily embracing their positions. Many Arabs who refuse the Shia proselytism of Iran and the dogmatism of the Saudi Wahabites see Turkey as representing an acceptable midway position. Why could Egyptian political forces not take inspiration from the Turkish model and establish a balanced regime, open to both Islam and the West, and ready to protect the Coptic Christian community, so that Egypt could resume its traditional role as a source of inspiration for Arab communities?