Workshop Report

Research Division - NATO Defense College, Rome – June 2011

"Six months after the start of the Arab Spring: impact and challenges for the countries of North Africa and the Middle East and for NATO partnerships"

On 16th and 17th June 2011, the NATO Defense College organized an international research seminar entitled "Six months after the start of the Arab Spring: impact and challenges for the countries of North Africa and the Middle East and for NATO partnerships". This high-level event, run under the Chatham House Rule, brought together about fifty experts[1], political advisers, ambassadors, diplomats, military officers and journalists from NATO member states, North Africa and the Middle East. The League of Arab States was represented by its Director of International Relations. The timing of this seminar was particularly crucial bearing in mind:

- NATO's difficulty in defining a common vision of its possible strategy towards this vast region;
- The situation in Yemen and Syria, which is still extremely worrying;
- NATO's military engagement in Libya through Operation Unified Protector, undertaken to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1973.

Abstract: Certain actors see this crisis above all as a source of opportunities, others as a source of risks and tensions. It is impossible to predict its outcome. This crisis is for the moment to the advantage of the Islamist, nationalist and pan-Arab movements. In the three countries which have chosen to embark on a course of reforms (Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco), the situation seems to be moving in the right direction. The encouraging developments there (particularly in Egypt) will play a key role in redefining balances within the Arab world.

This crisis has prompted the United States to redefine its posture towards the region, forcing it into a political tug-of-war with Saudi Arabia.

*The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the official position of the NATO Defense College or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

[1] Including experts from the Center for a New American Security (Washington), the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies (Cairo), the Carnegie Middle East Center (Beirut), the Center of Mediterranean and International Studies (Tunis), the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (Berlin) and the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (Paris).

The three main beneficiaries of this crisis are Turkey, Iran and the Arab peoples, who have shown their will to take their destiny in hand without the intervention of outside powers.

NATO, the EU and the UN have everything to gain by greater cooperation in the search for appropriate solutions to propose for the challenges raised by this crisis. NATO should address the question of how it is to pursue its operation in Libya during the Ramadan period (August 2011).

Summary of main points:

☞ North Africa

The region, which has long suffered from political immobilism, has now plunged into total instability. The Maghreb dimension is being overshadowed by the rise of Islamism and Arab nationalism. The Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) seems to be dead and buried. Yet this is the very time when Maghreb solidarity would be most useful.

• Tunisia :

- The chaos is subsiding, the political situation is becoming a little more stable, but the security situation continues to be a source of concern. Mr Essebsi's interim government seems to be gradually taking the situation in hand. As in other countries which have decided to embark on a reform process, one of the main challenges is still the complete absence of economic recovery which stifles any political progress (a 75% downturn in tourism, a 100% increase in unemployment, a drastic reduction in investments, wildcat strikes in the industrial sector).
- Parliamentary elections are scheduled on 23rd October 2011. In the meantime, the interim authorities are carrying out a population census, drawing up new electoral rolls and printing personal identity documents which will enable every citizen to vote. The elected parliament will be a "constituent" assembly whose first task will be to approve a new constitution for the country. To facilitate this task, a number of constitutional drafts are now being prepared by a commission of experts. The presidential election should be held in December 2011.
- The extremely fragmented political scene (84 parties!) is to the advantage of the Islamic party (Ennahda), which is likely to establish itself as the main political force in the country. This party is thought to have the backing of about 30% of the electorate and could become the mainstay of a coalition government. This does not mean that Tunisia is moving towards the Islamist movement, but that a growing number of Tunisians see the Islamic party as the least corrupt, the most structured and thus the best suited to carry forward their demands and defend the prevailing revolutionary spirit while the other parties put their respective houses in order and acquire credibility. This is why Tunisians are asking the West not to find cause for alarm if the Islamic party wins.
- Many Tunisians are worried about the attitude of Algeria and Libya, fearing that they will take advantage of Tunisia's current weakness to strengthen their network of relations to her detriment.

- Morocco:
  - The situation has become stable. The King has just approved a new draft constitution recognizing the Berber language as the Kingdom's second official language, as well as giving the Prime Minister more powers and the Parliament greater visibility. This draft constitution, which seems to meet with widespread approval, will be voted on by popular referendum on 7th July. Parliamentary elections are scheduled in October 2011.
  - The population is now expecting the King to carry through the announced reforms (even if they prove unpopular with part of the "system"), to move ahead proactively on economic development policy, and to give up a large part of his tight control over the country's economy, with a view to breathing new life into the economy and favouring foreign investments.

- Algeria :
  - For the moment, the Algerian authorities consider that they can buy social peace and keep popular discontent in check by distributing part of the country's oil revenues and making a number of token gestures (partial lifting of the state of emergency, legalization of the FIS Islamic party).
  - Substantially, no issues have been addressed and Algeria remains a powder keg. All the features of a major crisis are present, though the memory of the civil war (1988-1998) is still fresh in people's minds and seems to act as a deterrent for those over 25. Neverthless, the authorities cannot continue to ignore that the 18 million Algerians aged under 25 are increasingly frustrated and aspire to the same dignity that young people have won as a result of the uprisings in other Arab countries.

☞ The NATO military operation in Libya

- Public opinion in the Arab countries is divided as to the justification for this operation. Many Arabs support the principle of the operation and wish to see the end of the Gaddafi regime and his removal from power. But they are mistrustful of NATO, which they see as an extension of US power. From their point of view, NATO has to change the image it has of being an ally to the dictators and the Libyan intervention must remain an exception: NATO has no right to intervene in the domestic affairs of Arab countries. The Libyan crisis must not create a precedent to justify other NATO interventions in the region, for example in Syria or, in the event of a popular uprising, in Algeria.
- A certain number of Arabs highlight the political difficulties to be expected if the NATO bombings continue during the Ramadan period, which starts on 1st August this year. Should NATO continue bombing during this period, all the Arab leaders who have so far left an open verdict on NATO's role in the Libyan crisis would be unlikely to spare the Alliance from severe criticism, with the risk of further jeopardizing consensus. Qatar and the United Arab Emirates could find themselves in a delicate political situation prompting them to disengage, at least during the Ramadan period.

☞ Egypt

- Egyptian society is rediscovering the virtues of dialogue and discussion, even if this is leading to chaos on the domestic political scene.
- The political priority is to agree on a constitution defining a new type of regime (more strictly controlled presidential rule, parliamentary or mixed). There are many indications that it could be a mixed regime.
- The statement regarding religion in Article 2 of the present constitution ("Islam is a major source of inspiration for Egypt") should remain as it is and should not be weighted more heavily in favour of the Muslim community. This is the guarantee that the military have reportedly given the Coptic community to safeguard its rights within Egyptian society.
- The fight against insecurity and the revival of the economy (70% of Egyptians live below the poverty threshold) are seen as the two priorities of the transitional government and the future government.
- Parliamentary elections are scheduled in autumn 2011 (probably in September). The elected parliament will be a "constituent" assembly whose first task will be to approve the new constitution. The presidential election must be held within the following six months. Many experts see this presidential election as a tool in the hands of the military, enabling them to "correct" or "modify" the outcome of the parliamentary elections.
- The military are seen as the saviours of the nation and for the moment no one would think of questioning their status as arbiters of the political game. They have clearly stated their intention to give up power once the transition process is complete. Young officers could play an important role in this process.
- The Islamic influence, centred on the Muslim Brotherhood, is strengthening its dominant position in Egyptian political life. This sphere of influence, which comprises a number of very different trends with considerable tension between the old guard and the new, is thought to have the backing of 30% to 50% of the electorate. The Muslim Brotherhood, who have just set up a legalized party, now declare their relationship with the AKP. They could be in a position to set up a coalition government following the next elections. There is every indication that the Egyptian generals have come to an agreement with them regarding the sharing of power.
- Whatever government comes to power in Egypt, the country will respect the terms of the peace treaty with Israel, though this will not prevent it from redefining its posture towards the Israeli government. It will have no option but to strike a compromise with other Arab states (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Morocco), without trying to impose its views on them.

☞ Jordan

- Jordan is undoubtedly affected by the "Arab spring", though the situation is for the moment under control.

- There is a full-scale crisis of confidence between the people and the government, and a general feeling that changes can come only from the King.
- The King is visibly involved in the fight against corruption, but there is no guarantee that this is enough to calm popular discontent. The authorities are now preparing a new electoral law which should prove fairer and more representative (Palestinian factor). It could be adopted by the parliament in the autumn.
- Real socio-economic improvement will be the key factor in ensuring the stability of the Kingdom. In this respect, the proposal of enlarging the Gulf Cooperation Council to include Jordan has been seen as a "miracle" by many Jordanians.
- A new flare-up between Israelis and Palestinians could seriously destabilize Jordan.

☞ Syria

Despite the great concern of the Israeli government, the likelihood of an armed confrontation between Syria and Israel is very remote. Bachar el-Assad knows that a war with Israel would be fatal to him and would cost him the military strength thanks to which he is able to stay in power for the moment. By the same token, Hezbollah is unlikely to run the risk of a new confrontation with Israel simply for the sake of fulfilling the Syrian agenda.

Five alternative scenarios can, however, be envisaged:

- The present regime manages to dominate the insurgency and survive, at least in the mid term. This scenario seems the least likely, considering that the demonstrators have crossed the threshold of fear and no longer have anything to lose.
- The regime negotiates at the most basic level possible. The individuals most involved in repression are removed from office and Bachar el-Assad embarks on a prudent political and economic liberalization programme, with the help of Turkey and Saudi Arabia. But this implies that he must distance himself from Iran, which seems unlikely in the current scenario. In any case, Turkey seems to have all the assets enabling it to play a key role as a mediator with a view to a negotiated resolution of the crisis.
- An Alawite coup d'état topples Bachar el-Assad and brings to power an even more intransigent faction so as to quash the revolt. The Alawites (and hence a part of the army) after all fear that they will lose power in the event of civil war, or of negotiations with the vast Sunni majority.
- The insurgents win after the populations of Aleppo and Damascus have come over to their side, along with the Christian, Druze and Kurdish minorities and the Sunni bourgeoisie who had previously supported the regime. A more democratic Sunni government is established, leading to a weakening of Iranian influence in Syria and a new geopolitical balance within the region. This is the most welcome scenario, but not necessarily the most likely.

- The country plunges into civil war. The protest swells and the army and some security services split into a number of factions. This is currently the most credible scenario. This civil war might then come to a fairly rapid conclusion and bring about a change of regime, bearing in mind the increasing isolation of the Alawite minority. In this case, Saudi Arabia would have no option but to support the Sunnis against the Alawites. On the other hand, the civil war might draw on indefinitely and considerably increase the risk of regional destabilization.

☞ Lebanon

- The Lebanese are extremely worried about the repercussions of the Syrian crisis on the fragile balance of their institutions. A civil war in Syria would have a very negative impact on their security.
- The setting up of the government led by Najib Mikati, judged to be pro-Syrian, must be seen as a sign that the Lebanese authorities prefer to play a cautious waiting game vis-à-vis Damascus. If the Syrian regime manages to stay in power, the Mikati government can last; if the Syrian regime falls, it cannot.
- The West must not be unduly alarmed at the setting up of this government, which is seeking first and foremost to ensure the stability of Lebanon.
- Should the Syrian regime fall, Hezbollah would be likely to respond preemptively with a show of force in Beirut. The aim would be to oblige the Sunni and Christian communities to negotiate with a view to reinforcing the position of the Shia community within the dynamics of the country's institutions.

☞ The Gulf Cooperation Council

The Arab spring has affected the GCC countries in different ways: Bahrain has felt the strongest impact, Oman, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have felt it to differing degrees, while the impact on Qatar and the United Arab Emirates has been very limited. The Gulf Arabs feel that they are culturally different and that they have immense resources which allow them to buy social peace. At the same time, each of the GCC leaders knows that he is not totally safe from a renewal of popular protest. Overall, these leaders agree that the GCC has emerged the stronger as a result of this crisis, which has allowed it to gain greater prominence and credibility. However, several of them feel that the Saudi proposal of enlarging the GCC to Jordan and Morocco will not materialize in the short to mid term, since it has not met with the enthusiasm of other GCC members.

• Saudi Arabia:

- To address the crisis, the regime has used its three main assets: its vast financial resources in an attempt to buy social peace, its status as guardian of the holy places so as to appeal to the Saudis' religious feeling, and its security forces – particularly the National Guard – to deter demonstrators.

The Saudi authorities consider that the most delicate period is over, though they fear that the fall of President Saleh's regime in Yemen could create a ripple effect on the Saudi side of the border.

- The general opinion is that, while King Abdullah (who enjoys full legitimacy) stays in power, the situation should remain under control. After his death, rivalries over the succession to the throne could exacerbate popular discontent and give increased impetus to the political and socio-economic demands of an important part of the population.
- The Saudi authorities are strongly opposed to American policy in the region. They are alarmed by the attitude of the American administration and have demanded that it decide which side it is on.
- Saudi Arabia offers moderate support to Syria because it no longer wants to see even the most marginal Arab regime fall, fearing that this would create a worrying precedent for the GCC countries. It is also trying to capitalize on the ongoing rift between the Emir of Qatar and Bachar el-Assad.

• Qatar:

- The Emir of Qatar has taken advantage of the Arab spring crisis to push his own pan-Arab agenda, with the support of his immense natural gas resources and the formidable communication potential of the Al Jazeera television network.
- He has thus established himself as the challenger to Saudi Arabia within the GCC and was not afraid of engaging in Libya alongside NATO, convincing the UAE government to do the same.
- He is becoming more friendly with Turkey and maintains cordial relations with Iran, despite the Bahrain crisis.

• Bahrain:

- The crisis in Bahrain has not been fully addressed. Far more than a struggle for influence between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it is symptomatic of a political tug-of-war between Riyadh and Washington.

☞ The crisis in Yemen

The crisis in Yemen is seen as an affair involving most of all Saudi Arabia (which considers Yemen as its back yard) and the United States (because of the active presence of Al-Qaeda there). It also highlights the disagreements within the GCC, and the fundamental inconsistency between the Saudis' appeal for profound change in the country and their continuing support for the regime of President Saleh.

☞ Israel, Iran and Turkey

• Israel :

- All the experts agree that the present Israeli government will do nothing to move the Israeli-Palestinian question forward from the current stalemate.

- Most Israelis have a very pessimistic interpretation of the Arab spring and fear a strong Islamist surge in the region. The association they make in this respect is with what happened when Hamas took power in the Gaza Strip in 2006.
- The three immediate fears of the Israeli government are:
    - the collapse of the Jordanian monarchy;
    - a resurgence in tension on the Golan Heights, leading to armed conflict with Syria and, indirectly, conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon;
    - a new armed confrontation with the Palestinians, which would only increase Israel's diplomatic isolation as the Palestinian Authority prepares to issue its unilateral declaration of independence.
- The multiplication of mass demonstrations against the Israeli government (along the borders or in the Palestinian territories) as a provocation to goad it into over-reaction is a scenario which is becoming more and more plausible by the day. Many Israelis expect an eruption of violence from September on.
- Egypt and the Sinai peninsula have once again become a potential military front, even if at present no one seriously envisages an armed confrontation between the Israelis and Egyptians.

• Iran :

- In the short term, the Arab spring has put Iran in a stronger position within the region:
    - by unexpectedly diverting attention from the issue of Iran's alleged clandestine nuclear programme;
    - by diverting media attention from the political troubles in Iran;
    - by causing a rise in gas and oil prices, bringing a windfall to the State treasury;
    - by eliminating from the political scene the fiercest opponents of the Iranian regime (Mubarak in Egypt and Saleh in Yemen) and putting the Saudi regime, considered the main ideological rival of Iran in the Gulf region, on the defensive;
    - by increasing Israel's international isolation;
    - by introducing new dynamics, seen as "positive", into the relations between Egypt, Turkey and Iran;
    - by giving a strong new impulse to Iranian nationalist sentiment.
- The weakening of the Syrian Alawite regime remains the one black spot on the overall scene.
- In the mid term, the protest movements which have affected the Arab world could encourage the Iranian population to rise again at the time of the next presidential elections (2013) to put an end to the domination of the clergy over Iranian political life and support an authoritarian seizure of power by the "secular" Pasdaran movement.
- In the longer term, the Arab spring could undermine Iran's regional posture since it seems likely to lose its status as the champion of pan-Islamism (in view of the probable return of an Egypt

dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood as the flagship of the "moderate" Sunni Arab world) and the champion of Shia Islam (with Iraq establishing itself as the historic figurehead for the Shia Arab communities[2]).

• Turkey:

- Domestically, the Erdogan government (AKP) expects the Arab spring to stir the important Kurdish community to increase its political demands.
- This is one of the reasons why the Turkish authorities are focusing their attention on the drafting of a new "civil" constitution which could enjoy widespread popularity with Turkish politicians.
- The Arab spring is conducive to the foreign policy towards the Middle East promoted by the AKP, based on:
    - security for all the countries in the region;
    - democracy for all peoples in the region;
    - political dialogue between all partners in the region (including non-state actors);
    - economic interdependence;
    - multiculturalism.
- Turkey considers that three States (Israel, Iran and Syria) are today preventing this Turkish vision from prevailing. Turkey's regional action must thus be such that these three countries can become convinced of the need for a drastic change of attitude.
- The "good-neighbourly" policy promoted by the AKP is a means, not an end in itself, with the aim of allowing Turkey to increase its regional influence. If a neighbouring country like Syria were to oppose this, Turkey would have no problems in temporarily discontinuing this "good-neighbourly" policy and returning to a posture based more on deterrence.
- The AKP would welcome a Turkish-Egyptian alliance to counterbalance the hypothetic recreation of an Iranian-Israeli hub of influence, which would seem to be a foregone conclusion in the long term, given the history of the region.
- Turkey has clear ambitions to play a more and more global role in future. It wants to become part of the BRIC club.
- This is the reason why Turkey intends to remain in NATO and does not entertain the slightest idea of withdrawing from an organization it sees as an instrument of influence and power.

☞ Impact on United States policy

- President Obama is convinced that it is in the long-term interest of the United States to give unmistakable support to the aspirations of the Arab peoples to acquire greater democracy and justice, even if this means shelving certain short- and mid-term interests in the region. He not only embraces a positive world picture and considers that the Arab peoples will eventually obtain what they are

[2] The two most holy sites for the Shia community are Nadjaf and Kerbala, in Iraq.

asking for; he is also convinced that, by basing his arguments on the defence of values common to all peoples, he will contribute to maintaining the domestic cohesion of US society, which he sees as increasingly heterogeneous and in need of this basis of shared values in order to remain united and thus powerful.

- This vision comprises three key principles:
    - The United States are opposed to the use of violence, whether by demonstrators or by those in power;
    - The United States uphold universal human rights in every Arab country, including access to information;
    - The United States encourage political and economic reforms in the Arab countries as a whole.
- This is why the Obama administration is at present engaged in a political tug-of-war with Saudi Arabia, to convince the Saudi leadership to move ahead progressively, step by step and in a controlled way, with political reforms seen as indispensable. The aim is to avoid the eruption of a major crisis in Saudi Arabia, which could lead to a situation of chaos damaging to the Saudi monarchy, its GCC allies and the United States: the stability of Saudi Arabia remains one of the United States' priorities.
- If the Saudi regime's inflexibility triggered a major political crisis in Saudi Arabia, the Obama administration would not rule out the possibility of negotiating with all the parties involved, including the opposition.
- The US administration is for the moment not interested in North Africa, including Libya. Its regional priorities are in the Gulf region.
- The United States supported the military intervention in Libya because they were convinced that a bloodbath in Benghazi would halt the momentum of the Arab spring, which they saw as a source of opportunities and not of risks.
- They seem to be frustrated by the current lack of engagement of certain Allies in Libya and are questioning the usefulness of NATO.
- The US Congress will continue to provide annual military assistance worth a billion and a half dollars to Egypt. It is now voting the increase of civilian assistance budgets to promote economic development, education and the promotion of democracy in Egypt.
- Bahrain remains a vital naval base for the United States (home of the Vth Fleet), which does not prevent the United States from doing everything possible to encourage the democratic reform process there. This remains an important source of tension between Washington and Riyadh.
- The fight against Al-Qaeda and the terrorist movement in Yemen remains one of the US administration's priorities in the region.
- In Syria, the United States are counting on Turkey and Saudi Arabia to attempt a negotiated resolution of the crisis.

☞ Impact on the European Union

- Unlike the Americans, the Europeans see the Arab spring essentially as a source of risks and tensions. The situation in North Africa remains a major priority for the EU, particularly in relation to the destabilizing role of AQIM.
- The Europeans are afraid of seeing Libya become a new Somalia.
- They seem to be oriented towards developing their Neighbourhood Policy vis-à-vis Arab countries through targeted partnerships based on individual circumstances, with a view to:
    - promoting better economic governance;
    - facilitating development of south-south infrastructure between Morocco and Egypt (motorways, railways);
    - establishing transparent tax rules to favour foreign investments.

☞ Impact on NATO and its partnerships (MD-ICI)

- In its response to the Arab spring with all the uncertainty regarding the outcome, NATO is reaffirming the philosophy of the MD and ICI, prioritizing regional stability and security and the creation of a climate favourable to dialogue and trust.
- The Alliance is ready, through the MD and the ICI, to respond to the challenges and opportunities created by these events on the basis of the following principles:
    - continuity (not seeking to reinvent the wheel);
    - complementarity (with the EU, the UN and other regional organizations);
    - appropriation (each country concerned is to keep control of the process and identify its own needs);
    - flexibility (cooperation in a bilateral or " 28 + n" framework);
    - modularity (the offer of cooperation must respect the specificity of each country).
- Reform of the defence and security sectors seems to be the field in which NATO has many years of experience and can offer real added value to help the Arab countries wishing to bring in reforms.
- For NATO, defence reform involves above all the modernization of military capacities, reduction of troop numbers, improvement of civilian-military relations, transparency of military budgets, training, education, rehabilitation of veterans and their reinsertion into civilian life.
- With regard to the Libyan crisis, NATO would be well advised, once the Gaddafi regime falls, to invite Libya to join the Mediterranean Dialogue so as to offer it a tried and tested framework for cooperation.

Dr Pierre RAZOUX
Senior Research Adviser
Northern African & Middle Eastern Affairs
NATO Defense College
E-mail: **p.razoux@ndc.nato.int**