NDC Research Report

Research Division
NATO Defense College

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Towards a Copernican revolution in the MENA region

Dr Pierre RAZOUX
Senior Research Advisor, NATO Defense College

From 21st to 24th May 2012 the NATO Defense College and Wilton Park jointly organized at Wiston House (UK) an international research seminar entitled "Impact and challenges of the Arab crisis in North Africa and the Middle East, eighteen months after the start of the democratic transition". This high-level event, run under the Chatham House Rule, brought together about sixty experts, journalists, representatives of NGOs, decision-makers, ambassadors, diplomats and former ministers, mostly from North Africa and the Middle East.

The most salient points are summarized below:

● A paradigm shift in North Africa and the Middle East

This vast region was long divided into different spheres of influence running from north to south, as a result of colonization by dominant powers (Spanish, French, Italian, British and Ottoman) and then of postcolonial and ideological rivalries related to the Cold War. Currently the region is undergoing what might be seen as a Copernican revolution, which is set to bring lasting changes to the political landscape while at the same time increasing exchanges of people, ideas, capital and trade projects. This "Arab crisis" is set to last, whatever its fluctuations and possible setbacks.

The will to embrace democratization in the region has brought a spectacular growth of the Islamic movement, which is in a majority position in most Arab countries. In the mid term, it is highly likely that there will be Islamic governments in power in most of the southern Mediterranean Arab countries (including Algeria, Jordan and Syria), except Lebanon.

This process could well mean that, in addition to the traditional pattern of north-south exchanges, cooperation will once again develop in an east-west direction (from the Dardanelles to the Strait of Gibraltar) as was the case during the centuries of Ottoman rule. The presence of Islamic governments with compatible agendas should prompt them to cooperate far more with each other than is the case among the countries of the Maghreb (where it is paradoxical that, though the various states have eminently complementary economies, they share only 3% of their international trade with each other). In the fullness of time, this enlarged community of Islamic governments could even convince the countries

concerned to resolve a certain number of outstanding disputes (as in the Western Sahara).
The ongoing Copernican revolution also indicates that the Arab populations are more than ever in pursuit of their own identity. Gone is the time when they allowed themselves to be attracted by Pan-Arabism, Arab nationalism, authoritarian socialism and political Islam as vectored by the Islamic Revolution in Iran. In their quest for a refuge, for landmarks and for solutions, they now seem to be turning towards an Islam which has none of the complexes or the negative legacy left by the colonial past.

● The growing number of Islamic governments does not necessarily mean the emergence of Islamist powers

Whether in Morocco or in Tunisia, and indeed in Turkey, the Islamic parties in power see themselves as having to work in a setting determined by secular institutions or by a head of state who keeps international policy as his preserve and guarantees that balances are maintained in order to keep radical Islamism out. In Jordan too, King Abdullah will probably be obliged to include the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in government. A similar situation still applies in Egypt, pending the handover by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to a new government based on the Muslim Brotherhood's parliamentary majority. In general, the Islamic movement is discovering that it has to embrace the rules of democracy and dialogue so as to establish a credible programme capable of convincing the electorate.

● The Islamic movement is divided

Islam should not be unduly "ideologized". Muslim societies too have their class struggles. Groups close to the Muslim Brotherhood no longer hold the hegemonic position within the Islamic movement which they had in the recent past. They are not only divided between old guard and young guard but also contested by the Salaphists, who are in turn split among three divergent factions:

- a "scientific" movement, in favour of reislamizing society without seeking political power;
- an "activist" movement, prioritizing political action and civil disobedience;
- a "djihadist" minority, advocating combat and the use of force.

According to the country concerned, the parties close to the Muslim Brotherhood consider the Salaphists as allies of convenience (Egypt, Syria, Libya, Yemen) or as political adversaries whom they strive to neutralize (Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan).
Similarly, the importance of the Shia-Sunna sectarian rivalry must be seen in context. It is of fundamental importance in the Gulf, but far less so in the Mashriq (Levant) and to an even smaller extent in the Maghreb.

● Islamic governments will all face the same challenges: the need to reinvent a new state model, stimulate the economy, create employment, fight corruption and improve the socio-economic condition of the population

It is on these points that Islamic governments will be judged by the population and that they will stake their political future. While most experts agree that these Islamic governments will have enormous difficulty in fulfilling this ambitious agenda (not least because of the extremely negative impact created

by the collapse of the European financial systems), they have differing views on the consequences of this probable setback. Some experts think that the Islamic parties will no longer have the same aura and will lose power. Others think that, tempted by a far more radical and violently anti-Western agenda, they could cling to power and reject not only the principle of democratic elections but also the globalized market economy model.

● The Algerian regime is increasingly isolated and weakened

The Algerian regime seeks to give the impression that it is a haven of stability in the political maelstrom which has engulfed the rest of North Africa. It bases this profession of faith on three arguments: twenty years ago the Algerian people experienced a decade of civil war which administered a lasting vaccination against religious fanaticism and the use of violence; the regime's oil wealth gives it the means to buy social peace; and the government has been legitimized by the recent legislative elections held in May 2012. However, there is every indication that the elections were rigged. The actual turnout of voters is thought to have been not 42% as claimed, but more about 20%. With the exception of the Green Alliance built up around the Movement of Society for Peace (MSP), the Islamic movement - which is supported by a clear majority of the population - boycotted the elections. Many citizens with no illusions about the outcome did the same.

The Army and the security services, which are the pillars of the regime together with the National Liberation Front, seem to have convinced the party in power to reject any attempt to involve the Islamic movement more closely in politics. The military are concerned about the growing power of AQIM in the Sahel, the continuing chaos in Libya, the division of Mali, and the presence of Islamic governments in neighbouring Tunisia and Morocco, but also about the prospect of their control over the Algerian economy being contested. Against this background they seem to have opted for an intransigent posture vis-à-vis the Islamic movement, even if this means aggravating the frustration of all its supporters who have been watching its continuing growth in the countries on the southern shores of the Mediterranean. The movement's supporters, in Algeria as elsewhere in the Arab world, are looking towards Cairo to see what will happen on the political scene there. A victory of the Muslim Brotherhood would certainly create a decisive precedent in most Arab countries. In this setting, a possible resurgence of political protest leading to violence cannot be ruled out in Algeria, particularly if one bears in mind that almost half the Algerian population are too young to have experienced the civil war of the 1990s.

● Libya, between normalization and "Pakistanization"

Four factors currently threaten normalization in Libya:

- the impossibility of disarming the militia groups, whose numbers have been artificially inflated by the militias themselves to justify they role and ask for the best part of the cake (they are currently claimed to total 250,000 – instead of 80,000 during the revolution!);
- the diversity of political actors, all with contradictory agendas (the tribes, the Islamists, the nationalists, the liberals, those loyal to the former regime, the Tuareg and the Berbers, many of whom have fled to Mali);
- greed, egoism and manœuvring for control of oil wealth;

- the ambiguous game pursued by some outside actors (particularly Qatar, which has not given up trying to shape Libya in a way consistent with its own interests, even if the Libyan population is clearly not taken in and is not ready to promote a Qatar-style "emirate"). Qatari ambitions are also kept in check by the moves of other influential actors such as Turkey, the United States and the European Union.

With normalization endangered, the most likely scenario to avoid the division of the country and a relapse into civil war is "Pakistanization": a de facto alliance of Islamists and nationalists, with the tribes given considerable autonomy. This would create a system in which the armed forces together with the intelligence and security services, making up the predominant force at institutional level, would be controlled by the Islamic movement. The latter's strong political dominance is based on its status as the most credible force through which to escape both from the former Gaddafi regime and from the "postcolonial domination" which is feared by many Libyans. The Islamic movement also appears to be the only political force capable of projecting a vision of the future which is suited to the real situation of a deeply conservative country.

● Egypt at the crossroads

Egypte is today faced with two major crises:

First, a political crisis exacerbated by the presidential election. There are a number of fault lines running through society: Islamists against non-Islamists; conservatives against liberals; military against civilians; public opinion against the establishment; country dwellers against city dwellers. On the one hand the Egyptians aspire to greater stability and security, and wish for appeasement of the political crisis. On the other hand they aspire to dignity and justice, and do not want to have their revolution snatched from them by the leaders of the former regime. The deficit in culture and democratic values associated with the institutional vacuum (limited number of parties, trade unions and NGOs) does not facilitate dialogue and exchange of ideas but is conducive to bipolarization. This means one camp opposed to the Islamic movement and dominated by the generals (including the leaders of the former regime, part of the liberals and the minorities, particularly the Copts), in opposition to an Islamic camp which is extremely divided among a large number of tendencies. In this respect, the results of the first round of the presidential election are to say the least bizarre, and it seems reasonable to doubt whether they were really free from tampering. What possible explanation is there for the bottom-of-the-list showing by Amir Moussa, the former Secretary General of the Arab League who emerged as favourite in opinion polls, and by Abdel Monem Fotouh, who was running on a liberal Islamic ticket and won third place in the opinion polls? These two men offered a credible alternative to the dichotomy by which both the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and the Muslim Brotherhood wanted to ensure that anyone with an alternative vision to that of the military or the Islamists would be out of contention. There is thus probably a tacit power-sharing agreement between the military establishment and the Islamic movement, to the detriment of the other parts of Egyptian society. This is what explains the renewed frustration of the young Egyptians who are mounting more and more demonstrations in the countdown to the second round of the presidential election (15th-16th June). The generals preserve three main aims: to safeguard their economic interests, to avoid being brought to justice, and to ensure that there will be no military confrontation with Israel. Against this unfavourable background, it cannot be excluded that the Supreme

Council of the Armed Forces could be tempted to rig the outcome of the second round if the two candidates are quite close. Should there be a massive vote in favour of the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, there is consensus among the experts that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces could not overturn this result without immediately triggering off a second, far more radical revolution. If this were the outcome of the election the generals would prefer to let the Muslim Brotherhood take power, though they would be lying in waiting and do their utmost to make the exercise of power difficult with a view to stepping into power themselves in the short or mid term.

Second, an unprecedented economic crisis. The economic situation has worsened since the revolution and economic development remains the main challenge for Egypt. The country nevertheless has the most diversified economy in the Arab world: from energy resources to revenues generated by the Suez Canal, industry and tourism. The generals' control over the economy does not help the country's development and keeping the leaders of the former regime is surely not the way to improve the socio-economic situation. In this respect, the removal of Amir Moussa is all the more problematic in that he was probably the only leader able to mobilize massive financial resources from the coffers of the Gulf monarchies.

Overall, **the Egyptians expect the international community to**:

- support them vis-à-vis the IMF, so as to guarantee the financial assistance of which the country is so cruelly in need;
- help them create the conditions required for a return of foreign investments;
- start engaging with the Islamists in order to ensure that they assume responsibility, and to tell them that they are being scrutinized and will be judged on the basis of their actions;
- help them promote arrangements for enhancement of security in the Sinai Peninsula, in agreement with Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

● Syria is ineluctably descending into civil war

The regime, which was half financed by foreign aid, is facing enormous financial problems (it is reportedly down to reserves of no more than 6 billion dollars). Even Iran has cut down its financial assistance. The economic sanctions are effective and have to be strengthened. The economy shrank by 3% in 2011 and the unemployment rate has reached 40%. Many Syrians are practising passive resistance by no longer paying tax, settling their bills or sending their children to school. Several tribes have taken up arms on the Iraqi border. Nearly 45,000 people have reportedly joined the insurgents, including 10% who are deserters. A large number of soldiers are reported to have deserted and to have gone into hiding at their family homes, without joining the rebellion. Society is increasingly divided. Many Syrians now see the confrontation as a fight to the death with the regime, without any prospect of reconciliation. The collapse of the state and of public services, which are no longer working in a large part of the country, is likely to accelerate this drift towards civil war. The lack of security and the disorganized state of the distribution networks have led to food shortages in many regions. The opposition, however, remains fundamentally divided. The influence of the Islamists among their ranks is increasing because of anti-Alawite feeling. On the ground, the status quo remains because neither camp is strong enough to win. In this impasse, the strategy of the opposition is to pressurize the international community so as to obtain weapons, funds and the setting up of secure border areas patrolled by international forces, making it possible for the opposition to regroup and reinforce itself. Many observers consider that Bachar el-Assad is looking for an honourable way out

and a golden exile which would allow him to live out his days in comfort far from Syria, in any place other than Iran, Russia or Saudi Arabia. It is interesting to note that Iran, anticipating the fall or at least the severe weakening of the Syrian regime, is transferring its assets from Syria into Iraq.

● Iraq could once again become a source of problems for its neighbours

Nouri al-Maliki is behaving more and more autocratically and seems for the moment to be content with a situation which is chaotic but under control, which means a fragmentation of society and allows him to ensure that his entourage can strengthen their grip on power and on the economy. He could in time be tempted to instrumentalize old conflicts in order to reinforce Iraqi unity, as emerges from a number of recent declarations and articles on the status of the Shatt el-Arab (on the border with Iran), Kuwait (still seen as the 19th province of Iraq) and the Kurdish provinces (which work at present as an almost independent state). This is why the neighbouring states have an objective interest in Iraq remaining weak and relatively unstable, albeit without plunging into a situation of total and uncontrollable chaos which could lead to the official division of the country.

● The instinctive reactions of certain regimes confronted with the current turmoil could favour the breakup, or even disappearance of certain Arab countries

- **Libya** (if Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and Fezzan regions persist in their ancestral rivalries and continue their self-serving competition for control of oil revenues);
- **Yemen** (which could split into three or four independent entities if the Saudi regime, the Gulf monarchies and the USA do not agree on a common strategy to eradicate AQAP and promote better redistribution of wealth and power);
- **Iraq** (if the current regime continues to pursue a fragmentation of society with a view to ensuring the appetite of certain players for power, and to ostracize the Iraqi Kurds);
- **Bahrain** (if the plan for union with Saudi Arabia is taken to its conclusion);
- **Jordan** (if the monarchy should fall as a result of a hypothetical regional conflict caused by a spillover of the Syrian crisis);
- **Lebanon** (in the event of the Syrian civil war being exported and/or of a confrontation between Israel and Iran).

● A new balance of power within the Gulf Cooperation Council

Saudi Arabia is on the defensive, even if it continues to show strong activism in an attempt to control the Arab diasporas in Western countries. Relations with Washington remain tense. The ageing leadership is reluctant to hand over to a younger generation and shows indecision in the face of the growing threats to the regime:

- the spreading wind of popular revolt within the kingdom;
- the prospect of a nuclear Iran forcing the royal family to tolerate increased foreign military presence on Saudi soil;
- the changing posture of Iraq, which tends to project itself as the heart of Arab Shia (increasingly

influential role of the Iraqi Shia clergy; presence on Iraqi soil of the Shia holy cities, Nadjaf et Karbala);

- the fragmentation of Yemen, which would only further destabilize the Arabian Peninsula.

With a view to the prospect of Iran acquiring military nuclear capacity, the Saudi authorities seem for the moment to have abandoned the idea of purchasing a number of nuclear weapons from Pakistan: the Saudis find their relations with the Pakistani political authorities increasingly problematic, despite the still strong military cooperation between Riyadh and Islamabad. On the other hand, the Saudi regime is seemingly ready to accept the proposal of possible extension of the US nuclear umbrella to the Gulf region, complemented by the current regional missile shield project. In addition, the regime reportedly wishes to strengthen its relations with NATO and obtain from the Chinese government an upgrade of the CSS-2 Dongfeng-3 intermediate range ballistic missiles supplied by Beijing in the late 1980s.

Qatar, on the other hand, is very much on the offensive at all levels: political, diplomatic and economic (very active role during the Libyan revolution, massive support to the Islamic government in Tunisia and the Libyan NTC, support for the Free Syrian Army, increased number of partnerships with Turkey). Two examples illustrate this shift in the balance of power within the GCC. First, the Council's recent decision to adjourn indefinitely the Saudi proposal of extending the GCC to include the other Arab monarchies (Jordan and Morocco). Second, the recent Saudi initiative to forge a "stronger union" of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait – with a view to containing Iran and Iraq more easily and counterbalancing the bloc made up of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

A paradigm shift is in progress: the Gulf states now export most of their oil and natural gas production to Asia (77% in 2011), particularly China, while depending increasingly on the West for their security. By 2020, the United States should no longer be importing gas or oil from the Gulf. The balance of power is thus tending to swing in favour of the Western powers, which increasingly consider their military presence in the Gulf as a way of containing Iran – and also, in the future, Iraq – and indirectly controlling one of Asia's main strategic supply sources.

● An extremely fragile status quo on the Israeli-Palestinian front

Israeli Premier Netanyahu's unwillingness to compromise is all the greater if one considers that he has never enjoyed such political strength, having managed to attract Kadima (with its parliamentary majority) into his coalition government and convinced the United States to increase their military aid to Israel in return for his "restraint" on the question of Iran. He hopes that he will be able to continue exerting pressure on President Obama, bartering his policy of regional restraint (towards Iran, and with regard to the crisis in the Arab world) for a slackening of American pressure on the Palestinian question. The three scenarios of greatest concern to the Israeli authorities – apart from the Iranian nuclear issue – are securitization of the Syrian ballistic and chemical arsenal in the event of the Alawite regime collapsing, destabilization of the Jordanian monarchy (which would have a marked impact on the Palestinian issue), and the election of an Egyptian President from the Muslim Brotherhood. Given the uncertainty regarding these possible scenarios, the Israeli government seems to be in favour of improving its relations with Turkey.

On the ground, frustration amidst the Palestinian population is only worsening, particularly in the face of a socio-economic situation which is deteriorating after the slight improvement in 2008-2010. In the opinion of the Israelis and the Palestinians, the window of opportunity for a two-state solution is now closing.

Recent opinion polls by the Ramallah Center for Human Rights Studies show a radicalization of the Palestinan population's declared voting preference (on the West Bank: Fatah, 23%; Hamas, 16%; Islamic Djihad, 8% - in Gaza: Fatah, 22%; Hamas, 13%; Islamic Djihad, 16%). All the polls show that not only the representatives of the Palestinian Authority, but also Hamas have lost a great deal of legitimacy and credibility. The Arab crisis has created two dilemmas for Hamas. First, should it privilege an increasingly isolated Iran or the rest of the Arab world, which seems to be showing the way forward? Second, should it privilege political or sectarian Islam?

In a setting which is so deleterious and holds out no hope, there is a real risk of a new Intifada. While this cannot be on the agenda for the moment, there is the risk of its being triggered by an uncontrollable sequence of regrettable incidents. This is probably the reason why the Israeli security services have spoken of a possible unilateral Israeli withdrawal from part of the occupied territories of the West Bank. A recent opinion poll indicates that 40% of Israeli settlers would be ready to leave the occupied territories in return for major financial compensation if the government considered this vital to Israeli security.

● Turkey Gains in Regional Stature

According to some conference participants, Turkey appears to have gained in influence as a result of the Arab crisis, thanks to the power of attraction exercised by its "AKP model". Paradoxically, for the moment the Turkish authorities are more focused on the domestic reform agenda (constitutional reform, tensions with the military establishment). In the face of growing tensions with Iran[1] (nuclear issue), Iraq (rapprochement between Ankara and the Iraqi Kurds, difficult relations with Maliki), Syria (risk of the civil war spilling over), and Israel (aftermath of the flotilla affair, Leviathan offshore gas field in the eastern Mediterranean), Turkey finds itself in a challenging situation as its previous good neighbour policy is challenged by regional instability. In this increasingly uncertain context, a majority of Turks see NATO as maintaining its power of attraction and deterrence, and there is every indication that the Turkish government intends to continue working constructively within the Atlantic Alliance.

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1 Even if the Turkish authorities consider it vital to maintain good relations with Iran and will do everything possible to avoid stirring up tensions between Ankara and Tehran.

NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE

Wilton Park

Provisional programme

Impact and challenges for the Middle East and North Africa one year on from the Arab transitions

Monday 21 to Wednesday 23 May 2012 | WP1166

After the tumultuous developments in the Middle East and North Africa during 2011, the conference will provide the opportunity to take stock of what has happened, and why; examine what has been achieved; and explore what more needs to be done. It aims to help participants to reach a better understanding of developments across the Middle East and North Africa, their inter-linkages and their implications for policy formulation and practice.

Cross cutting themes running through the conference discussions should include: security issues, in particular the triggers for conflict; managing the negative effects of change on the economy and promoting economic growth and prosperity; and the role and future prospects of Islamist groups.

In partnership with:
NATO Defense College, Rome

(Speakers invited and themes proposed, * denotes to be confirmed)

Monday 21 May

1300	Participants arrive and buffet lunch available
1500	**Welcome and introduction** **Isobelle Jaques** Programme Director, Wilton Park **Pierre Razoux** Senior Research Adviser and Head of Research Programme, NATO Defense College, Rome
1515-1630	**1. What are the key challenges for Arab countries in transition and how can these best be addressed?** ***Hassan Abou Ayoub** Ambassador of the Kingdom of Morocco to Italy, Rome
1630-1715	Photograph and tea/coffee
1715-1900	**2. What will be the impact of the outcome of recent elections in the Middle East and North Africa? What will be the role of Islamist groups?** **George Joffé** Lecturer, Centre of International Studies, University of Cambridge
1930	Reception followed by dinner

Tuesday 22 May

0800-0900	Breakfast
0900-1030	**3. Libya: a new emirate in the Mediterranean region?** **Noman Benotman** Senior Analyst, Quilliam Foundation, London **Anas el Gomati** Director, Sadeq Institute, Tripoli
1030-1100	Tea/coffee
1100-1230	**4. Egypt: still a flagship country?** **Gamal Abdel Gawad Soltan** Consultant, Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, Cairo
1245	Lunch
1430-1600	**5. Syria: future prospects?** **Ausama Monajed** Executive Director, Strategic Research and Communication Centre; Member, Syrian National Council **Sami Altaqi** General Director, Orient Research Centre, Dubai
1600-1630	Tea/coffee
1630-1800	**6 What are the perceptions and role of outside actors?** **Bernardino León** Special Representative for the Southern Mediterranean, European Union, Brussels
1900	Reception followed by Dinner

Wednesday 23 May

0800-0900	Breakfast
0900-1030	**7. A new balance of power inside the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)?** **Abdulaziz O. Sager** Chairman, Gulf Research Centre, Jeddah **Neil Partrick** Risk analyst and researcher, Partrickmideast, London
1030-1100	Tea/coffee
1100-1230	**8. Turkey: the big winner?** **Gülnur Aybet** Senior Lecturer, School of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent, Canterbury **Joshua Walker** Transatlantic Fellow, German Marshall Fund of the United States, Washington DC

1300	Lunch
1430-1600	**9. Israel and Palestine: factors of regional stability, or instability?** **Amos Harel** Defence analyst and correspondent, Ha'aretz, Tel Aviv **Iyad Barghouti** Director of the Ramallah Center for Human Right Studies, Ramallah
1600-1630	Tea/coffee
1630-1830	**10. Concluding panel: key issues and conclusions** **Gareth Stansfield** Professor, Middle East Politics; Director, Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter **Yezid Sayigh** Senior Associate, Carnegie Middle East Centre, Beirut
1845	Optional departure
1900	Reception followed by dinner

Thursday 24 May

0800-0900	Breakfast
0915	Participants depart

This is a preview programme and as such may be subject to change.

This conference is open to those with expertise to share or an interest in the theme; our aim is to have a broad spread of nationalities and institutions represented. The full cost of participation is £1460. This covers accommodation, all meals during the conference and attendance at all sessions. Special rates may be available for those from non-OECD countries and also academics and NGO representatives.

Enquiries about the programme to: Isobelle Jaques, Programme Director
Wilton Park, Wiston House, Steyning, West Sussex. BN44 3DZ
Telephone: +44 (0)1903 817781 Fax: +44 (0)1903 879231 Email: isobelle.jaques@wiltonpark.org.uk

Enquiries about participation and local travel to: Mrs Susan Linfield, Conference Delivery Manager
Wilton Park, Wiston House, Steyning, West Sussex. BN44 3DZ
Telephone: +44 (0)1903 817728 Fax: +44 (0)1903 815244 Email: susan.linfield@wiltonpark.org.uk