# ТЕМАТИЧЕСКОЕ ДОСЬЕ
## Ближний Восток: геополитика, энергетика, «арабская весна»

## THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE EMERGING GLOBAL ORDER

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The article analyzes the consequences of socio-political transformation in the Arab world for the wider region of the Middle East. After a review of the historical background, the author draws conclusions for world order in the context of a new balance of power.

**Key words:** Arab Spring, political Islam, Middle East conflict, United States, Syria, socio-political transformation, decolonization, world order, balance of power.

Roughly three years after the tumultuous events in Tunisia and Egypt, the high expectations raised by Western political commentators, if not the wider international public, in connection with the developments dubbed as "Arab Spring" have proven to be based on illusions or wishful thinking. However, from the very beginning of the events, the evaluation and analysis of the developments was characterized by *double standards*, depending on each commentator's political affiliation or each country's strategic interests (as far as official positions were concerned). How else could one explain that those who enthusiastically supported the revolts in Tunisia and Libya kept silent about the violence in Bahrain, to give just one example? In actual fact, the geopolitical rift in the Middle Eastern region and the divisions between the spheres of influence among Shia Iran and Sunni countries (including Turkey) have considerably more determined the respective attitudes vis-à-vis the events of the "Arab Spring" than any commitment to principles of justice or considerations of a new order of peace in the Middle East.

### Historical context

In view of this ideological confusion and the complexity of social and political transformation in the wider region, it seems appropriate to briefly look back at the developments since the last major geopolitical realignment almost a quarter century ago. The region, and in particular the Arab world, has undergone a major process of reshaping that

was triggered by the sudden, and unexpected, collapse of the Cold War's *bipolar* order. Under the new *unipolar* constellation, the political establishments in the countries of the region found themselves in a situation in which they had lost the political space to maneuver, which they had earlier enjoyed due to the competition between the two superpowers. This greatly reduced their margin of independent action at the regional and international level.

The period of decolonization that followed World War II was characterized by the rise of an Arab national movement, largely driven by the Palestinian issue that formed the smallest common denominator among otherwise different systems and competing political élites. The national agenda set by Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt and the Arab Ba'th Socialist Party, established by the Christian Michel Aflaq, substantially influenced regional politics before and after the traumatic experience of the 1967 war between the Arabs and Israel. What still had remained of a pan-Arab position, even after Egypt's unilateral agreement with Israel and the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, eventually collapsed in the wake of the disappearance of the Socialist bloc and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the years after 1989. This process was further accelerated by the Gulf crisis of 1990/1991. The deep inter-Arab divisions after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait laid bare the superficial nature of multilateral co-operation structures in the framework of the League of Arab States, and eventually led to the almost total marginalization of what was meant to be the key regional organization and nucleus of Arab unity. The so-called "Gulf War coalition" of 1991, established under the aegis of the global superpower, made the political division of the Arabs a permanent feature of the region, crippling pan-Arab institutions ever since. This political paralysis also affected previously powerful civil society groups with a pan-Arab outreach (such as the Cairo-based Union of Arab Lawyers) that suddenly became dysfunctional because they were not able to distance themselves from political power and sponsorship.

Political Islam gradually filled the vacuum left by failing Arab nationalism [1]. This new version was substantially different from the earlier Islamic revival in the course of the 1979 revolution in Iran. It was partly linked to, and further invigorated by, the mujahideen movement in Afghanistan that, in a kind of Machiavellian "Great Game," had initially enjoyed the support of the United States (with Saudi Arabia as proxy). Muslim revival in the wider Middle East was, thus, also a repercussion of the erstwhile geopolitical rivalry between the US and USSR — or an unintended consequence of a typical proxy war for strategic dominance in Central Asia.

The events of 2001 in the United States led to a further, and pervasive, alienation between the Arab-Muslim world and the West in particular. The post-September 11 period has witnessed political and military interference by the United States in the region on a massive scale. The far-reaching project of a "New Middle East," driven by a desire to reshape the politics of targeted countries according to US interests, has not only brought violent régime change but has produced "unintended consequences" that can best be described by reference to what Paul Kennedy earlier characterized as the phenomenon of "imperial overreach" [3].

### Arab revolt 2011ff

The events of the so-called "Arab Spring" (or "Arab Winter," depending on one's standpoint), a series of revolts and uprisings that have swept across North Africa and the Middle East since 2011, were to a considerable extent triggered, and subsequently reinforced, by US interventions under the guise of human rights, protection of democracy and the rule of law. It is no coincidence that it was exactly in the era following the end of the East-West conflict, in an atmosphere of triumphalism over a self-declared "New World Order" [4], that the principle of "responsibility to protect" was conceived — as a kind of post-modern version of the earlier doctrine of "humanitarian intervention." This interventionist policy created a political vacuum and led to social instability that has gradually affected the entire region.

The examples are numerous:

- In hindsight, the massive intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 not only seems to have profoundly destabilized Pakistan, but to have resulted in a situation where the invaders have to acknowledge the return, and rehabilitation, of the Taliban, and have to prepare their own withdrawal in the face of mounting attacks by their adversary, and without being able to steer the political process in the direction they had chosen for the country and the region in 2001.
- After decade-long comprehensive sanctions that devastated the country's economy and led to the death of up to a million innocent people [5], the invasion and occupation of Iraq in March 2003 — under the false pretext of arms of mass destruction — was the most serious event that profoundly destabilized the political order of the entire region. The chaos and violence in Iraq was an ominous sign of things to come in terms of social and religious tensions in the region.
- The 2011 intervention in Libya, an effectively US-led campaign of NATO with the undeclared, but vigorously pursued, aim of regime change [6], was another important element in the "macro strategy" of reshaping the region and creating a "Greater Middle East" according to the hegemonic power's vision.
- As far as the "micro management" of social and political transformation in the region is concerned, the use of the "new social media," encouraged and partly supported, but also infiltrated, by Western groups and intelligence services, has become an important logistical factor in the developments since 2011. In important respects, the pervasive use of these tools even risks to make countries ungovernable.

There is no doubt, however, that it was the longstanding frustration of Arab populations with autocratic régimes, built up over decades since decolonization, that initially triggered, and further fuelled, the Arab revolt at the beginning of the 21st century. It indeed originated as a movement of resistance to perceived injustices and the inability of sclerotic systems (that had been in place since the Cold War era) to deliver even the most basic social services and provide vital infrastructure. The uprisings were not primarily about religious identity or political ideologies, but resulted from a profound frustration over the conditions of daily life. The violent changes of régime in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, the ongoing revolt in Bahrain and the chaotic and brutal civil strife in Syria were initially all borne out of a deep social dissatisfaction, and not so much of ideological zeal.

Instead of acknowledging the real causes and addressing the basic issues of popular frustration, the Western countries practiced a policy of double standards in dealing with the developments; they acted on the basis of political-strategic bias and merely paid lip service to humanitarian principles. Evidence of this 21st century version of Machiavellianism is plentiful. To mention only a few examples:

- The almost total neglect of the revolt in Bahrain is due to it being perceived as confrontation of a Shia-majority population with a Sunni ruling family that rules a country, which is host to a major US naval base and is allied with Saudi Arabia.
- The Western support of Sunni-allied fighting groups in Syria is to be seen in the context of that government's alliance with Shia Iran.
- Finally, in spite of the fact that they are not "democratic" régimes according to Western standards, the continued close partnership with traditional Sunni monarchies is a cornerstone of the United States' dealing with the regional upheaval (even if this means overlooking the justified grievances of large segments of the populations in those countries).

What makes the traumatic process of social transformation in the entire region even more complex are the geopolitical implications in terms of the traditional "Middle East conflict," namely the yet unresolved Arab-Israeli dispute over Palestinian and Syrian territories, and the age-old Sunni-Shia rivalry. The latter has — in different strategic constellations — put Iran versus the Sunni Arab bloc. The Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s (the first modern "Gulf War") was the most tragic example of this intra-Muslim rift.

It is commonplace that the dynamic of socio-economic tensions and cultural rifts, differing from country to country, makes developments unpredictable. Foreign interference from different sides of the geopolitical spectrum — whether in Egypt, Libya or Syria — has not only further complicated the situation, but led to "unintended consequences" as well. One of the most obvious, and drastic, examples of the unpredictability of events has been the counter-revolution in Egypt, namely the return of the *ancien régime* (essentially represented by the military oligarchy) with full force, in the course of which more than a thousand people were indiscriminately killed and many hundreds summarily sentenced to death. Another tragic example is the social and political disintegration of Libya, which practically has made the country a "failed state." The most serious case of unintended consequences, however, is the fracture of Syria along sectarian lines. The civil war in this country has led to a deepening of the Sunni-Shia rift in the entire region, in particular in Iraq and Lebanon; it has made Syria a hotbed of *jihadism* that may pose a long-term security threat to the Mediterranean region and Europe. The intensification of the civil strife has also created a new tension point of Muslim-Christian relations at the global level. Furthermore, the inter-ethnic dimension of the conflict has direct implications for the *Kurdish national issue* that has remained unresolved since the end of the Ottoman Empire. The consequences for domestic politics in Turkey an Iraq, and for transborder relations in the triangle Iraq-Turkey-Syria (with serious implications for those countries' bilateral relations) are obvious. The destabilization of Yemen — in one of the geopolitically most sensitive regions — is another case in point.

Generally speaking, Western intervention in the region has effectively triggered a further *revival of political Islam*. This is evident in the formation of new Islamic fighting groups in countries such as Libya and Syria, and in the intensification of their networking activities involving these two countries and Iraq. It has also been evident in the ever more extreme confrontation between Islamist and secular groups in Egypt where a long civil war is looming on the horizon — with unpredictable consequences for peace and stability in the entire region. The hopes for socio-economic improvement are dashed almost everywhere, and disillusionment has set in on all sides. Chaos, anarchy and stagnation have left the League of Arab States even more crippled than before. A just and lasting solution of the Palestinian issue seems to be out of sight, and dangerous desperation has set in among large sectors of the Arab population.

## Quid nunc?

Although it is always risky to make a diagnosis from abroad, it seems to be certain that a *long period of uncertainty* lies ahead. If we take into consideration the historical and social realities of the region, the major challenge will be whether and how the countries manage the transition from sclerotic *ancien régimes*, a legacy of the cold war, towards polities that are able to reconcile Muslim Arab identity with modernity, and in particular with the realities of technical civilization.

If we look at the Middle East in the overall context of the emerging global order, we should try to analyze how the region is repositioning itself in, and is affected by, a constellation of (global) *interregnum*, namely a transitory phase from *unipolarity* (after the sudden end of the cold war's bipolar balance of power) towards a *multipolar* system the scope of which is only visible in rudimentary form.

In the last two decades, the countries of the region were effectively "at the mercy" of the dominant global power that (a) traditionally has been siding with Israel as occupying power in Palestine, and (b) — in the vacuum that resulted from the disappearance of the Soviet Union as global actor, has embarked on a far-reaching strategic project of *reshaping* the region in terms of political systems and identity of states. As far as the ability of the United States to set the socio-political agenda of key states in the region is concerned, one should also not overlook that country's dominant position in terms of pop culture and international media. More recently, the so-called "New Social Media" have had an enormous impact in logistical as well as cultural terms [7].

The social transformation processes we are witnessing today can only be understood in the context of these earlier developments. The events that are commonly described as "Arab Spring" are characterized by a deep frustration with socio-economic conditions, especially in terms of *personal freedoms* and of the individual's *economic position*, namely the lack of economic opportunities. Dissatisfaction with a system, whether religious or secular, that cannot deliver has been at the roots of the often turbulent and at times violent search for a political *alternative*. However, the "Arab Spring" is not a *unidirectional* social movement, and there is no clear trend towards *religious revival* in particular. In virtually all countries of the region, whether they have been affected by violent revolts or not, we observe the fact of split societies — namely of *social disintegration* in terms of religious loyalties, class loyalties (i.e. conflicting economic

interests), or ethnicity (as in the case of Kurdish-Arab or Kurdish-Turkish relations). The secular-religious dichotomy in particular has the potential of long-term instability in Egypt, but also in Turkey.

In spite of all the proclamations and declarations (by involved parties as well as by outside observers), no major "ideological" trend can be detected in the region. Shifting alliances without any clear principles are evidence of this. Among the most drastic examples are the erratic co-operation patterns in the Syrian civil war, but also in Iraqi society and politics since the events of 2003. (This also applies to the warring parties' alliances with outside actors.) Because of the constant flow of refugees, political volatility and long-term instability will not only affect the neighboring countries, but the neighbouring regions too.

These developments have further made visible cracks in the region's *status quo*, i.e. in the political order that is a legacy of the power constellation after World War I and/or of the post-colonial consensus among the then great powers. This is obvious in the tendency towards the disintegration of nation-states whose structure and composition results from post-war agreements among powers from outside the region (as in the cases of Iraq, Libya, or Syria). After a lapse of several decades in the wake of decolonization, the *right to self-determination* of peoples (Article 1[2]) of the UN Charter) has again become an issue — whether this relates to the Kurdish question in Iraq, Syria and Turkey, the status of the Cyrenaica in Libya, or the claim to their Azawad homeland by the Tuareg people in Mali, to mention only a few examples. The resurfacing of national issues, in particular of that of Kurdistan, means that questions of *political geography*, including the redrawing of borders, are not taboo anymore. The Kurdish autonomous region in northern Iraq ("Iraqi Kurdistan" with its "Kurdistan Regional Government") has made the most decisive step so far, and has even begun to enter into negotiations with the government of neighboring Turkey.

Those who have drawn the borders, created states and/or acted as arbiters of these processes — the former colonial powers as in the case of the secret Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, the two world wars' great powers, and, more recently, the United States as hegemon, have either disappeared or are not anymore, whether unilaterally or multilaterally, in a position to act as arbiters or guarantors of peace, and to enforce a stable system from outside. The failure of the Western strategy in Libya and Syria has made this more than obvious.

The outside actors have indeed triggered a chain of events they are incapable to control in all its complexity. They increasingly appear unable to contain the fire and to prevent it from spreading to the wider region, with geopolitical implications that cannot yet be fully grasped. The "unintended consequences" of interventions, whether open or secret, in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, or Syria will go far beyond what we have witnessed so far as events of the "Arab Spring."

The *policy of clientelism*, well proven and practiced during the earlier imperial (or colonial) and, later, cold war periods, may be coming to an end in a constellation where identity politics has become a determining factor. The dynamics of social transformation processes in the region will rather be shaped by a complex interdependence between socio-economic interests and the assertion of cultural identity, whether in terms of ethnicity or religion, or a combination of both.

## The Middle East in the international system: strategic outlook

If we want to make an assessment of the general trend, we have to consider the following three aspects of the region's political and economic interconnectedness in a global context:

(1) There are a number of imponderables due to the complex socio-economic interdependencies under the conditions of globalization. This relates in particular to:

- *Economic links in terms of energy resources*: in the last few decades, the Western countries' dependence on the flow of oil from the Middle East has triggered an interventionist policy, which has given local disputes in the region a potentially *worldwide* dimension.
- *Implications in terms of migration*: (a) Local conflicts may be "exported" to immigrant (host) countries. (b) The constant flow of refugees may not only alter the demographic balance in the affected countries in the medium and long term, but may have a general destabilizing impact on socio-economic conditions and political order in the receiving countries, including those in the European region.
- *Free flow of information and communication at the global level*: This means a magnifying effect of the "new social media" far beyond national borders. Their use encourages, or generates, *international* involvement, whether in the form of solidarity with social and political groups and movements or in terms of organization and logistics. This may lead to profound destabilization (whether intended or not) of the political order in the respective countries. An essential element of *anarchy* in the use of the "new social media" must not be overlooked.

(2) Since the failure of a US-proclaimed "New World Order" in the wake of unilateral — and eventually counterproductive — interventions in the region, we have been witnessing a *global realignment towards a new balance of power*. Although it is still an open question whether this will be a *bipolar* or a *multipolar* system, it seems to be obvious that *unipolarity* — in the form of US dominance — is unsustainable; roughly a quarter of a century after its beginning, this order has become rather fragile. The hegemon — or self-declared "indispensable nation" — has repeatedly been proven unable to stay ahead of developments even in its traditional spheres of influence (inside and outside the region), a predicament of which the dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most obvious illustrations.

What are the implications for the countries of the Middle East in the larger context of this global realignment? The intra-regional balance of power seems to be gradually shifting in favor of Turkey and Iran while inter-Arab strife and perpetual disunity have seriously weakened those countries' role. The formation of new alliances, whether formal or informal, with non-Western powers such as Russia or China has already begun. Amidst unending regional turmoil, US allies — whose "strategic partnership" with that country is a legacy of British imperial rule — may face an increasingly untenable position. Not only due to "imperial overstretch," but due to the United States' becoming less dependent on foreign energy sources, the *proxies* or de facto *protectorates* in the Middle East find themselves under increasing pressure to reevaluate, and redefine, their long-

term security strategies. According to the maxim "the enemy of my enemy is my friend", even a shifting of alliances involving the regional role of Israel has become possible. In connection with the nuclear controversy with Iran, a tactical constellation that mirrors — in structure, not content — the situation that existed during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s has again become imaginable. The Machiavellian potential of foreign policy, or international "realpolitik," must not be underestimated.

(3) The *multidimensional nature* of socio-political transformation has made these processes even less predictable. There exists a complex interdependence between religious, national (or ethnic), economic and political factors. One of the basic issues is that of *multiple identities*, and it is yet an open question whether those could be reconciled under the roof of a universal notion of *citizenship* (in the sense of *equal* participation in a polity which is perceived as neutral vis-à-vis the different identities of its members).

Related to the issue of identity and nationhood, there are a number of specific questions that touch upon the political organization of the region (internal as well as external):

- Will *multiculturality* prevail in the wake of Arab revolts? The most pertinent, and exemplary, case where this *modus vivendi* will be tested is Syria.
- What will be the consequences (in terms of the ethnic and tribal mix of Middle Eastern societies) of *democratization* along the Western (European) model? Will representative democracy and multi-party politics further exacerbate already existing tensions along sectarian (ethnic, religious, tribal) lines?
- Should the *right to self-determination* be invoked in constellations of dispute that have become virtually intractable, and where anarchy or the prospect of a failed state seems to be the only alternative?
- Will such situations necessitate, or bring about, an eventual *realignment of borders* that were agreed upon on the basis of a balance of power of an earlier era (in particular after World War I)? Will this process eventually include the emergence of new sovereign states? The regional *status quo* (i.e. the situation that prevailed since the phase of decolonization after World II) anyway seems to have become untenable.
- What are the implications of these developments for wider *Muslim-Western relations*? Will the drastic increase in inter-religious and secular-religious tensions in the region lead to a further *alienation* in the sense of a Huntingtonian "clash of civilizations"? [8]
- Will these developments result in a further marginalization of the United Nations because of that organization's ever more visible inability to resolve the long-term Arab-Israeli dispute or to pacify the situation in Iraq or Syria?
- Finally, do turmoil and anarchy in key Arab states indicate a further weakening — or eventually phasing out — of Arab nationalism as a *political* factor? What has become almost certain is the marginalization of the League of Arab States — in a situation where non-Arab regional actors have become increasingly influential and realignments between regional states are evolving on a basis that is far different from the traditional pan-Arab paradigm?

The deep-rooted identity crisis — of individuals and communities alike, and in a context of modernization often perceived as being forced — cannot be stopped, or re-

versed, unless the region becomes delinked from global developments, which is not a realistic option. In the era of globalization, the peoples and states of the region are indeed faced with a *double identity dilemma*: internal (nationhood vs. religion) and external (tradition vs. modernity).

The social upheavals and subsequent political realignment in the Arab world and the wider Middle East will create an unstable and partly anarchic situation for the foreseeable future — with erratic, quickly shifting alliances. This means a substantially weaker role for the region — though not necessarily for each and every state individually — in the emerging global order. Like the fog of war, the "fog of revolution" makes any prediction fraught with uncertainty. Similarly, any effort, by regional as well as outside powers, to exploit the volatility for their own benefit will be a risky gamble. Social transformation processes of the kind we have been witnessing require decades, if not longer, for a new viable order to emerge.

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