



PERSPECTIVES

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The “Arab Spring” and the New Regional Chessboard

By Dr. Spyridon N. Litsas

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The “Arab Spring” phenomenon has created new strategic conundrums in the Middle East, as well as new opportunities for diplomatic ties and cooperative schemes. The volatility it has generated is likely to increase, with both positive and negative results.

One need not be an academic in the discipline of international relations to grasp that the Middle East has gone through profound changes since street vendor Muhammad Bouazizi set himself on fire outside police headquarters in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid on December 17, 2010. This desperate act triggered a political earthquake that penetrated the entire region in a phenomenon that would come to be called the “Arab Spring.”

The most fundamental change the “Arab Spring” brought about in the socio-political spectrum of the Middle East is the switch from the pan-Arab ideology that produced the Baathist parties to the multidimensional canons of pan-Islamism. While pan-Arabism offered a nationalist version of the Arab world – a direct outcome of the birth of Turkish nationalism at the beginning of the 20th century – pan-Islamism addresses Islam and its doctrines, generating new political alignments and new asymmetries.

Pan-Islamic movements are now present across the Arab world. Salafism has become relevant again as a tool to fill the gap left by the collapse of Baathism in the Arab mentality. Jihadism has found new audiences.

Some analysts blame the “Arab Spring” for the increased geostrategic volatility that has turned the Middle East into the Balkans of the 21st century. These views are mistaken. They do not sufficiently consider the dynamics of

international politics as the ultimate changing force in human life, but rather view the evolution of the international system as a linear, and thus predictable, process that promotes stability rather than volatility. The “Arab Spring” reminded both politicians and academics that change, whether positive or negative, can occur even in conservative environments where traditional practices are considered unquestionable sociopolitical foundations.

The emergence of a pan-Islamic ideological norm as the cornerstone of the new era is forcefully changing the Middle Eastern status quo. Upheavals like the “Arab Spring” generate regional power vacuums and thus new alliances. Cooperative schemes are forged as states try to adjust their stances according to the transforming balance of power.

In Egypt, the “Arab Spring” phenomenon offered an opportunity to Ankara to develop a radical pro-Muslim Brotherhood agenda. This had two objectives for Erdoğan: first, to exercise direct control over the group; and second, to elevate Turkey as a major naval power in the eastern Mediterranean by making use of the major Egyptian ports and the Suez Canal. Consequently, Erdoğan and his officials openly declared their support for Hamas at the expense of Turkish-Israeli relations, which had been close since May 1948.

This shift caused Jerusalem to search for new arenas for cooperation in the region, which led to the establishment of close ties with Athens and Nicosia. Egypt, following the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood and the rise of Abdel Fatah el-Sisi, is gradually becoming the fourth leg of a developing and formidable geostrategic square in the region of the eastern Mediterranean.

The new dynamics have also produced contradictory phenomena. For example, the *sui generis* cooperative scheme that has emerged between Sunni Turkey, Wahhabi Qatar, and Shiite Iran, with the consistent encouragement of the Kremlin, would have been unthinkable before the “Arab Spring.”

Looking at the big picture, the “Arab Spring” is a direct result of systemic changes that occurred during the transition from the post-Cold War, incomplete, unipolar balance of power to the post-9/11, well-defined, multipolar one. Thus, systemic volatility is very intense. The next phase of the “Arab Spring” will unfold as a result of friction, both direct and indirect, that has developed between those powers that have invested in the structural geostrategic and political changes of the region (i.e., Russia, Turkey, and Iran) and those powers that have invested in maintaining the status quo (i.e., the US, Israel, Greece, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the GCC, minus Qatar).

The inclusion of Saudi Arabia among the status quo states might be surprising, especially now that Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman is

purging the domestic political landscape as he attempts to pull the state into the 21st century. Yet it is this very internal process that reinforces the Saudi conviction that to face the disorder generated by the “Arab Spring,” the state must reduce regional geostrategic unpredictability. This inclination on the part of the Saudis can be seen in the unconcealed and accelerating antagonism between Riyadh and Tehran over Yemen and Syria. Saudi Arabia targets Iran and vice versa not just for regional dominance or religious reprisal, but because two different grand strategic orientations regarding the future of the Middle East are colliding.

The “Arab Spring” has reshaped the whole Middle East, and has also affected the non-Arab states of the eastern Mediterranean (i.e., Greece and Israel). The region’s political volatility is almost certain to increase. It is therefore vital for the status quo states to consolidate their cooperation and prepare themselves for difficult times ahead.

The “Arab Spring” will continue to have unpredictable effects, either through the rise of a fourth generation of jihadism, or through the hegemonic ambitions of those states that aim to make the most of the geostrategic changes occurring in the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean.

Dr. Spyridon N. Litsas is Associate Professor of International Relations at the University of Macedonia and Visiting Professor of Strategic Studies at the Supreme Joint War College of the Greek Armed Forces.

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