5 The Arab Regional System and the Arab Spring

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I. Introduction

Seven years ago, the Arab summit conference, hosted by Tunisia's long-serving autocratic president Zayn Al-Abidine Ben Ali, issued a ringing declaration proclaiming Arab leaders' commitment to a comprehensive reform of political life. Democratic practice would be consolidated, they stated, by expanding the role of civil society, widening women's participation in all fields of life, while reinforcing their rights and status and protecting the family and Arab youth. This would be done in conjunction with comprehensive economic and social development that placed a premium on education, social solidarity and combating poverty, while guaranteeing an independent judiciary and the freedom of expression, thought and belief.[1]

The declaration, a year after America had occupied Baghdad and toppled the Iraqi Ba`th regime, was an acknowledgement of a stark fact – that collectively and individually, Arab states had become weaker, vis-à-vis both other regional actors and the international political and economic order, and that something fundamental was needed to rectify the situation.

To no one's surprise, however, the Tunis declaration proved to be an empty vessel. The pledges of comprehensive domestic reform went unfulfilled in the ensuing years, while both Iran and Turkey projected increasing power and influence into the Arab

[1] Tunis Declaration of League of Arab States, 2004, issued at the 16th session of the Arab Summit, 22-23 May,Tunis**.** Available at: http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/compilation_democracy/league.html.

lands - namely Syria, Lebanon, the Palestinian arena, Iraq and the Gulf. Sunni Arab regimes – Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council, Egypt, Jordan and the Siniora government in Lebanon, although not defenseless against Iranian maneuvers, were unable to cut Hizbollah, Iran's client-proxy in Lebanon, down to size, let alone pry Damascus loose from Teheran.

Rival inter-Arab gatherings in January 2009 in the wake of the Israel-Hamas war exposed these fissures again, and separate efforts by Saudi Arabia and Qatar to heal inter-Arab rifts at the Doha Arab summit in March 2009 proved ephemeral. The 2002 Arab Peace Initiative for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, while becoming a legitimate part of the package of reference points for diplomatic efforts, seemed largely forgotten by Arab states themselves. In fact, when speaking in early 2009, Syria's President Bashar al-Asad proclaimed the Arab Peace Initiative "already dead"[2]. The Arab regional system increasingly appeared to be a concept whose analytical value had diminished, with inter-Arab affairs becoming folded into the larger Middle East regional system.[3]

II. Tunisia, an Unlikely Spark

Even as the Arab state system had reached a level of fragmentation and dysfunction which called into question its very existence, satellite television, cellphones and, more recently, internet-based social networks brought the citizens of Arab states,

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[2] Teitelbaum, Joshua, 2009: *The Arab Peace Initiative: A Primer and Future Prospects* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs). For an analysis of the way that inter-Arab dynamics shaped the initiative, see Maddy-Weitzman, Bruce, 2010: "Arabs vs. the Abdallah Plan", in: *Middle East Quarterly,* 17,3 (Summer): 3-12.

[3] Noble, Paul, 2008: "From Arab System to Middle Eastern System? Regional Pressures and Constraints", in: Korany, Bahgat; Dessouki, HIllal Ali E., (Eds.): *The Foreign Policies of Arab States* (Cairo and NY: AUC Press, 2008): 67-165, esp. 150.

from Morocco to the Gulf (the hallowed [*al-*] *watan al-`arabi*) into unprecedented (virtual) contact. One may ask whether the basis was being laid for a new version of Benedict Anderson's "imagined community"[4]. To be sure, in terms of classic Pan-Arabist doctrine which promoted political union of the Arab world, this was not the case. However, given the common problems facing most Arab societies, the heightened mutual awareness and intimacy in the Arab region proved to be far more significant than anyone could have expected.

Improbably, the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a struggling 26-year old vegetable seller in a dusty provincial Tunisian town on 17th December 2010, ignited a steadily rising tsunami of popular protests that have cascaded back and forth across the Middle East and North Africa. Ironically, the spark came from Tunisia, which for most of its 55 years of independence, has been at the margins of Arab politics, studiously pursuing its own path, in both domestic and foreign affairs, seeking mainly to avoid the embrace of radical and potentially threatening states (Nasser's Egypt, Gaddafi's Libya and Algeria) and political movements (pan-Arabism, Islamism).

Arab pundits were quick to proclaim the heralding of a new era, one in which authoritarian governments could ignore the deep-seated grievances of their publics, especially their youth, only at their peril. By contrast, and not surprisingly, ruling elites in the Maghreb, Egypt, Jordan and the Arab Gulf states were extremely uncomfortable with the unfolding scene, and preferred to keep a low profile as long as possible. As the protests began to build in Tunisia, only one Arab leader, Libya's Mu`ammar al-Qaddafi, spoke out in support of Ben Ali, something which would not be forgotten by Tunisians in the months subsequent to Ben Ali's overthrow, as Qaddafi himself ultimately experienced a similar fate.

[4] Anderson, Benedict, 1992: *Imagined Communities* (London and NY: Verso).

III. The GCC States and the Arab Spring

As the protest movements spread like wildfire, creating dramatic scenes in Egypt, Bahrain, Libya and Yemen, the six Gulf Cooperation Council states, led by Saudi Arabia, quickly emerged as the only cohesive bloc of Arab states. Having banded together in 1981 in the shadow of the Iran-Iraq war, this club of pro-Western, oil-rich, tribally-based, geo-politically vulnerable monarchies has generally been like-minded on major strategic issues, while not being free of differences and rivalries, due particularly to the gadfly role embraced by Qatar. In this regard, Doha-based al-Jazeera TV's 24-7 coverage of the protests in Tunis and Cairo were crucial in building their momentum, to the extreme displeasure of Riyadh.

For the Saudi leadership, the toppling of Ben Ali, to whom it quickly gave asylum, was bad enough. The overthrow of Egyptian president Husni Mubarak three weeks later, the Saudis' prime ally in the region for more than 20 years, shook them profoundly, all the more so in light of what they viewed as the Obama Administration's failure to stand firmly behind him. Their response was multi-pronged, focusing on the next three emerging hot spots – Bahrain, Libya and Yemen, while concurrently pumping billions of dollars into their own societies, to neutralise potential unrest.

Most Western observers viewed the pro-democracy movement in Bahrain, a member of the GCC club of autocratic monarchs, as just that: a primarily middle class movement, seeking to reform the country's political system through the establishment of a genuine constitutional monarchy. But for the Saudis and their fellow GCC monarchs, the Pearl Circle demonstrators in Manama posed nothing less than an existential threat, on a number of counts. If they succeeded there, a spillover from the causeway connecting Bahrain to Saudi Arabia and the rest of the peninsula was deemed likely. Moreover, in the eyes of the Saudis and other Sunni Arab rulers, the underpinnings of the Bahrain protests were not so much civic as religious-communal, as the country's long-

repressed majority Shi`ite community sought to change the balance of power there.

For the Saudis, the immediate ramifications were expected to be felt among its own restive Shi`ite minority in the Eastern province across the water from Bahrain. Finally, there was the Iranian factor: periodic Iranian claims to Bahrain, and its vocal support for the Bahraini protestors posed a mortal danger in Saudi eyes – the extension of Iranian power and influence across the Persian Gulf and onto the peninsula itself. The GCC, whose *raison d'être* was to block the extension of Iranian and/or Iraqi power, would have failed colossally.

Hence, for GCC members, the choice was clear. Blatantly ignoring American advice to engage with the protestors' demands, Bahrain's King Hamad welcomed the deployment on 14th March, of approximately 1,000, mostly Saudi, National Guard forces, together with smaller contingents from other GCC states. Their presence gave him sufficient backing to crack down hard on the protests, bringing them to an end.

The GCC states' concurrent response to the sudden violent rebellion in Libya was the complete opposite. As opposed to intervening, to preserve the *status quo*, they spearheaded an Arab League resolution (only five other countries attended the meeting) calling on the UN Security Council to impose a no-fly zone to protect Libyan civilians from Gaddafi promised retributions. Concurrently, the League suspended Libya's participation in its activities. Reminiscent of the 1990 Arab summit's crucial endorsement of an alliance with the Western powers against Saddam Hussain, the League's appeal to the Security Council provided important Arab legitimacy for Western governments' subsequent actions. Qatar and the United Arab Emirates would even provide small contingents from their respective air forces, to participate in the NATO-led attacks on Gaddafi's forces, and the two countries, along with Kuwait, recognised the rebels' Transitional Council as the legitimate Libyan government.

To the GCC states, indeed to all pro-Western Arab regimes, the Palestinian movement, Lebanese Shi`ites (who have never forgotten the disappearance in Libya of their charismatic leader, Imam Musa Sadr, in 1978), and Western governments in general, Gaddafi was an easy target. He had never made any bones about his disdain for the Gulf monarchies: his media had branded the late Saudi King Fahd the "pig of the peninsula" (*khazirat al-jazira*), and Gaddafi and King Abdallah had exchanged personal invectives on a number of occasions in recent years at Arab summits, in front of the television cameras. Sensitive to charges that ruling elites, and especially conservative pro-Western Arab monarchies, were opposed to the demands for reform from Arab societies, they consequently jumped at the chance to support the Libyan uprising.

To be sure, Arab support for Western intervention was not unanimous: the Syrian and Algerian foreign ministers, and reportedly the Sudanese and Mauritanian ones as well, all expressed their unhappiness about endorsing international intervention in Libya's internal affairs and warned of the consequences. Indeed, outgoing League Secretary-General Amr Musa backtracked on the League's decision just a few days later, as it became clear that NATO's mission was not just humanitarian but ultimately directed at achieving regime change. But Musa's statement had no discernible impact on the course of events.

Unlike the GCC states, Libya's immediate neighbours were more circumspect: Tunisia, concerned with the conflict near its border and the influx of tens of thousands of Libyan refugees and Tunisian returnees, clearly sympathised with the rebels. So did Egypt, which was presumably busy establishing contacts with the Benghazi-based Transitional Council in Libya's East (not far from the Egyptian border). Algeria, on the other hand, feared a spillover of the unrest, as well as a possible power vacuum in Libya. Reports persisted that the Algerian authorities were providing assistance to Libyan government forces, which the Algerians emphatically denied. Meanwhile, Turkey sought to play an active

role in shepherding the transition to a post-Gaddafi era, but with little results thus far.

Yemen posed a somewhat different set of issues. As it was, President Ali Abdallah Saleh, in power since 1978, faced multiple challenges to his authority, namely, from the Houthi Shi`ites in the North, restive southern secessionists, al-Qa`ida supporters, as well as a myriad of tribal rivals. Thus, even before the Arab Spring protests arrived in Yemen, Saleh's authority did not extend much beyond the major urban areas, making Yemen an essentially failed state.

For Saudi Arabia, Yemen had always constituted a potential soft underbelly. With difficulty, the Saudis weathered Nasser's 1962-67 intervention in Yemen on behalf of anti-royal putschists. Since then, they maintained links with the tribes on their common border, and employed a variety of carrot and stick methods including the swift expulsion of three quarters of a million Yemeni labourers in fall 1990. This was done to punish Saleh's tilt towards Saddam Hussein during the Gulf crisis, in order to ensure that a strong central authority would not emerge in Sana`a. A weak state was one thing; anarchy, with the possibility of al-Qa`ida's consolidation and assorted other dangers, was another. Hence, the Saudis fashioned a GCC mediation initiative, designed to ease Saleh from office while restoring a semblance of political order and social peace to the chaotic streets of Sana`a. The vicissitudes of the process were palpable, as Saleh played for time, and the GCC mission foundered. Subsequently, on 3rd June, Saleh was seriously wounded in a rocket attack on a mosque, and rushed to Saudi Arabia for treatment. Whatever the outcome, Yemen will be high on the list of Saudi concerns in the foreseeable future.

Over the last two decades, Saleh had periodically broached the subject of Yemen becoming a GCC member, only to be rebuffed as not suitable, on both geographic and other grounds. On 10th May, the notion of GCC expansion was revived, but not for Yemen; rather, the GCC's one-day consultative summit in Riyadh announced, at the Saudis' initiative, that Jordan and Morocco had

been invited to join the organisation, reportedly after an inquiry by Jordan's King Abdallah II. It is of interest to note that Jordan had first asked to join 15 years ago, while Morocco on the other hand had never broached the subject.[5] Whether or not these two non-Gulf states will actually become part of the GCC framework remains to be seen. In any case, the announcement was a clear indication that in Saudi eyes, Arab monarchies need to hang together or they will hang separately. Given the domestic pressure in both Jordan and Morocco to institute political reforms, together with both countries' need for economic assistance, it will be instructive to see what kind of aid the Saudis might provide to their fellow monarchs, and if it will, at all, influence the pace of reforms adopted in both countries.

IV. The Egyptian-Saudi-Syrian Triangle

Throughout their modern history, regional Arab politics has generally been characterised by a higher degree of conflict than cooperation, and Arab coalitions have generally been of the "loose" variety. Seminal moments of systemic cohesion and collective leadership were usually marked by mutual understandings of three of the four Arab "majors" – Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria (Iraq being the fourth): e.g. the all-Arab war coalition of October 1973, the mediated end to the first phase of the Lebanese civil war in 1976, and combating Saddam Hussein's attempted swallowing of Kuwait in 1990. The failure, however, to successfully institutionalise their triangular alliance after the Gulf War (via the 'Damascus Declaration' framework) contributed heavily to Arab fragmentation and weakness.

[5] Henderson, Simon (2011, June 15). Saudi Arabia's No Good, Very Bad Year. *Foreign-Policy*. Available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com; al-Rantawi, Oraib (2011, June 23). Jordan and the GCC: few opportunities, many challenges. *Bitterlemons-International*, 18. Available at: http://www.bitterlemons-international.org/inside.php?id=1396.

From the moment of its entry into regional Arab affairs in the late 1930s, Egypt has almost always defined itself as *primus inter pares*, the natural and rightful leader of the Arab collective. But in recent years, its influence in the region diminished (even in the intra-Palestinian arena, one of its traditional bailiwicks), especially in comparison to the other two Middle Eastern heavyweight states, Iran and Turkey. Iran's penetration into the eastern Mediterranean region, which had begun in Lebanon, now included the Palestinian sphere and even Egyptian sovereign territory, via its smuggling networks across the Sinai Peninsula. Egypt's relations with Saudi Arabia were cool, despite their like-mindedness on strategic issues; with Bashar al-Asad's Syria, they were downright frosty. Neither Mubarak nor Saudi Arabia's King Abdallah, would forget Bashar's scathing description of them, during the 2006 Israel-Hizballah war, as "half men".

One of the themes frequently articulated by Egyptian commentators in the aftermath of Mubarak's removal was that Egypt's regional weight had declined, as a result of its excessive deference to American and Israeli interests. To that end, relations with Iran, according to foreign ministry officials, needed to be put on a new, more cooperative, and less confrontational basis. Shocked by Mubarak's overthrow, the Saudis could have only been unnerved by this sign of new Egyptian thinking. But the Iranian leadership apparently felt that there was little to gain from the Egyptian overtures. Having celebrated Mubarak's downfall, likening it to the Iranian public's toppling of the "American" Shah in 1979, Iran quickly flexed its muscles, sending Iranian naval ships through the Suez Canal to Syria. Technically, it was within its rights to do so, but under Mubarak Egypt had made it clear that it would not countenance such a move and Iran didn't force the issue. Iran also reportedly deployed submarines in the Red Sea.

By early April, the ground had shifted again, and Cairo and Riyadh were back on the same page. Egypt proclaimed its support for the "Arabness" of Bahrain, against alleged Iranian subversion among Bahrain's Shi`ites. Concurrently, the growing unrest in Syria helped Egypt achieve a long sought reconciliation between

the competing Palestinian movements, Fatah and Hamas; the latter was clearly shaken by the challenge to its Syrian patron and decided to place some of its eggs in the Egyptian basket. The fact that it was a post-Mubarak basket, and that Mubarak's right-hand man, Gen. Omar Suleiman, was no longer in charge of the Palestinian file, made Hamas' choice that much easier.

The Saudis, for their part, having midwifed the previous short-lived Hamas-Fatah reconciliation in 2007, could only have been satisfied with the latest agreement, even if it had not been of their making. Egypt and Saudi Arabia clearly needed each other. In that regard, the Saudis promised four billion dollars in soft loans and credit lines to bolster Egypt's ruling Military Council.[6] Notwithstanding the fact that Cairo had been the epicenter of the Arab Spring, while Riyadh could not countenance even the mildest form of popular protest, the regimes of both countries shared overriding geo-strategic interests, as well as similar dilemmas.

This was especially the case with regard to Syria. Early in the game, when Ben Ali had been toppled and Mubarak was on the verge of the same, Bashar al-Asad boasted to an American interviewer that Syria was immune from the threat of mass protests. Unlike those regimes, he declared, his government and the Syrian public were likeminded on core issues, especially the need to support the Lebanese and Palestinian *muqawwama* ("resistance") against Israel, and to maintain a reserved attitude towards the US.[7]

By the end of June, the regime was fighting for its life, and its legitimacy was in tatters. Its effort, to refocus attention on the Palestinian issue by encouraging mass marches across the Israeli-

[6] Bradley, John R. (2011, June 23). The al-Saud's spring. *Bitterlemons-International,* 18. Available at: http://www.bitterlemons-international.org/inside.php?id=1398.
[7] *The Wall Street Journal* (31 January 2011).

Syrian armistice line and along the Lebanese-Israeli border, failed to have the desired effect. Asad's Iranian ally and his Hizballah client both looked on with consternation over the budding threat to Asad's regime, and apparently supplied means and manpower to help Syria's security forces efforts to crush the opposition. As Syrian refugees fled across the border to Turkey, Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan, a self-proclaimed advocate of democracy, became ever more sharply critical of his former ally, and the Syrian economy suddenly no longer appeared to be an ideal arena for Turkish investors and businessmen.

Unlike the vocal and confident Erdoğan, Egyptian and Saudi leaders maintained an extremely low profile regarding the crisis in Syria, with the sole noteworthy criticism of the regime coming from outgoing Arab League Secretary-General (and candidate for the presidency of Egypt) Amr Musa. Much was at stake: the fall of a close Iranian ally would carry profound strategic implications for the region, whose possible permutations were innumerable. Much would depend on whether a cohesive and viable regime was established in its stead, or whether Syria would return to being a vulnerable entity, where rival outside powers interacted with competing local forces in a combustible mix.[8]

V. Concluding Thoughts

A forgotten, albeit telling, footnote to the Arab Spring and its relationship to inter-Arab dynamics was the failure to convene the Arab League's annual summit conference for the first time in a decade. Gathering Arab leaders together at such a moment was well nigh impossible, let alone expecting that they would formulate meaningful, agreed upon positions with regard to the protests. In any case, the Saudi-led GCC bloc had a good excuse to oppose a summit conference: it was scheduled to be held in

[8] This, of course, is the picture of Syria in its early years depicted by Seale, Patrick, 1986: *The Struggle for Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP).

Baghdad, hosted by a Shi`ite-dominated, Iran-friendly government, with a president and foreign minister who are both Kurds. In other words, for Sunni Arab ruling elites, Iraq appears to be a state with at least one foot outside the fold of the traditional Arab regional order.

More recently, an old-new issue of contention raised its head: Iraq expressed displeasure at Kuwait's plans to build a new port on Bubiyan island, at the head of the Persian Gulf, which would leave only a narrow lane for Iraq-bound ships. Moreover, the port would be situated just one kilometer away from the site of a similar Iraqi project for a giant new port of its own.

Six months on, the overall picture for the Arab regional system remains clouded. Post-Mubarak Egypt is overwhelmingly occupied with itself, and thus not yet ready to resume its traditional leading role in regional affairs. Whether or not the new Egypt will evolve towards a strong working democracy, and thus serve as a model for like-minded forces in other Arab states and help rejuvenate the Arab regional system, as some analysts predict, remains to be seen.[9] The Saudi-led GCC states, and fellow monarchies in Jordan and Morocco, are in a defensive, albeit cohesive mode. Libya and Yemen have been the scenes of ongoing violent confrontation, whose outcome is of keen interest to neighbouring states. Most importantly, all eyes in the region, Arab and non-Arab alike, are focused on Syria, historically, the self-defined "beating heart of Arabism" since the beginning of the modern Arab nationalist movement.

Given the weakness of Arab collective institutions, and the reassertion of other identity markers across the Middle East (from the Shi`ites and Kurds of Iraq to the Berber/Amazigh communities in North Africa), Syria's ultimate fate may help answer the

[9] Salem, Mohammed Anis (2011, March 16). Return of the Egyptian Model? *Al-Ahram Weekly* (March 10-16). Available at: http://weekly.ahram.org.

question whether, and to what extent, being “Arab” will still be a meaningful attribute of political identity in the coming years.