



Summertime and the Livin' Ain't Easy

Spring has turned to summer in the Middle East and it promises to be a long hot summer of strife

THREE ARAB AUTOCRATIC REGIMES – BASHAR Assad's Syria, Muammar Gaddafi's Libya, and Ali Abdullah Saleh's Yemen – are literally fighting for their lives. The Egyptian economy is in tatters, casting a heavy shadow over the prospect for realizing the hopes and ideals of the Tahrir Square generation.

Protests in Jordan, Morocco and Algeria, while not currently posing threats to the regime, preoccupy their ruling elites.

As the US prepares to depart Iraq eight years after toppling Saddam Hussein, Baghdad's fragile democracy looks like Lebanon's writ large: Iraq is a state fractured along religious, ethnic and tribal lines, with a weak central government and heavy involvement of neighboring states in the country's internal affairs. In Lebanon itself, Hizballah and Syria's other clients watch the Syrian drama anxiously.

The likelihood of Palestinian popular protests in advance of the expected September request for UN recognition of a Palestinian state is high. Bloodshed in Sudan has increased in advance of the formal secession of the southern provinces, as the Khartoum government seeks control of contested, oil-rich territories.

Some historical perspective might help make sense of the dizzying events. Thirty-two years have passed since the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and the Iranian Islamic revolution decisively shaped the region's strategic landscape. The first removed the leader of the Arab world from the circle of possible military confrontation with Israel; the second brought a dynamic and militant Iran more directly into the "game" of Arab politics.

Saddam's foolhardy response to these two developments resulted in a bloody and costly eight-year war with Iran: Syria's support of non-Arab Iran in that war against its rival Arab Baathist twin in Baghdad was an unprecedented blow to the long-standing norm of Arab solidarity.

An even greater blow was delivered by Saddam himself, in 1990: the attempted swallowing up of Kuwait, a fellow Arab League member state, which in turn resulted in the worst inter-Arab crisis ever. Briefly, an anti-Saddam Arab coalition, led by Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria, helped defeat Saddam and restore the territorial status quo ante. But subsequent efforts to institutionalize their alliance, which would help stabilize the region and provide coherent collective Arab leadership, foundered.

In addition, Egypt, the traditional leader of the Arab camp, failed to adopt the internal political and economic reforms necessary for restoring its regional preeminence. Exacerbating the picture of Arab fragmentation and helplessness was the toppling of Saddam in 2003. Into the resulting vacuum stepped a newly confident Turkey (even before the AKP's ascension to power in 2002) and an increasingly empowered Iran. Arab responses were more divided than ever.

So what do the latest developments mean for the region? US-allied Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) monarchies, led by Saudi Arabia, were deeply shaken by the fall of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, a close US ally, and even more so by Bahrain's democracy movement among its Shiite

majority against the Sunni ruling elite. In response, they have banded together, seeking to erect firewalls against the protests and assert themselves more forcefully on regional issues.

In Yemen, a poor, populous failed state torn by tribal and religious divisions and a haven and breeding ground for al-Qaeda, the GCC has led diplomatic efforts, which would result in Saleh's removal. (Wounded by rocket fire, he is currently recuperating in Saudi Arabia.)

Whatever happens, Yemen will be high on the list of Saudi concerns in the coming months and years. Further afield, GCC states have actively supported the anti-Gaddafi forces in Libya. More generally, GCC leaders have invited Jordan and Morocco to join their framework. Arab monarchies, in their thinking, must make common cause (as they did against radical pan-Arabism back in the day). Presumably, Jordan and Morocco would benefit from Gulf largesse as they managed domestic demands for reform.

All eyes are currently on Syria. Turkey, acutely embarrassed by the regime's brutality, which is now producing a flow of refugees across the Syrian-Turkish border, has become increasingly condemnatory, and is cultivating opposition groups. As for the Iranian regime, which violently repressed its own democracy movement two years ago, it can only hope that its ally in Damascus will similarly succeed.

This overall picture, and especially the current crisis in Syria, historically the self-defined "beating heart of Arabism" since the beginning of the modern Arab nationalist movement, leads one to question the extent to which being "Arab" will still be a meaningful defining marker of political identity in the coming years.

Iraq, whose president and foreign minister are Kurds and whose Shiite-dominated government has close ties with Iran, is already viewed by many Arab states as being irreparably outside the fold. A coalition of Syrian opposition groups recently declared that "the Syrian people are of many ethnicities: Arab, Kurd, Caldean, Assyrian, Syriac, Turkmen, Chechen, Armenian and others." In Morocco, Arabic is apparently no longer going to be the sole official language, as imminent constitutional reforms are poised to confer a similar status to Tamazight (Berber).

Of course, Sunni Islamist movements, which offer an Arab-Islamic synthesis to questions of collective identity, have a different take on the matter. As they expand their activities – in Egypt, Tunisia and probably in Syria as well – they will challenge efforts to reduce the significance of "being Arab." ●

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