



# Power To the People? Not So Fast

**T**HE TSUNAMI OF POPULAR PROtests, which have cascaded back and forth across the Middle East and North Africa in the last three months, appeared for a time to be an irresistible force, giving renewed meaning to the notion of a common Arab identity.

The long-serving Tunisian and Egyptian presidents were swiftly and dramatically toppled, and activists and sympathizers gleefully tried to guess who was next: Would it be Yemen's president, whose position at the top of his failed state became more precarious by the day? The king of Bahrain, where pro-democracy protesters appeared to be resilient enough to effect a fundamental change in the rules of the political game? Or would it be Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, who experienced a stunningly swift loss of control of much of his territory by a rapidly swelling armed opposition?

Meanwhile, most other Arab regimes, from Morocco to Iraq, Algeria to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, tendered a combination of carrots and sticks intended to pacify their restive publics, albeit without tangible results. The protests even reached Iraqi Kurdistan and, briefly, Syria.

But while the newly empowered social and political forces in Tunisia and Egypt strode into the uncharted waters of democratizing political life, other embattled leaders held on, and even counterattacked. In turn, Arab leaderships now found themselves facing significant foreign policy choices: whom to support, whom to oppose, and what, if any, operative steps should be taken?

Much of the collective Arab attention has now fallen on the violent confrontation in Libya between regime and opposition. Having been a constant target of Gaddafi's barbs over the years, Saudi Arabia and its fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states took particular pleasure in his plight, and were eager to be on the side of a popular uprising, instead of being the targets of one. The new Tunisian government, angry with Gaddafi for his expressed sympathies towards the deposed president, lined up squarely with the Libyan opposition. Algeria, on the other hand, appeared to be quietly assisting Gaddafi, fearing post-Gaddafi chaos in Libya as well as further inspiration for its many protest groups. Egypt, for its part, may have sent Special Forces to make contact with Libyan rebels in the areas adjoining the Egyptian border.

Representing the overall Arab consensus, the Arab League, long belittled as a dysfunctional and irrelevant body, delegitimized Qaddafi's regime. Its support for a UN-sanctioned no-flight zone provided crucial legitimacy for the French-US-British decision to intervene militarily, in accordance with a UN Security Council resolution. Similar such backing had been provided in 1990 after Iraq had invaded Kuwait, but this time the decision was based on a broad consensus, not a bare majority. To be sure, Arab countries had towed the line of international sanctions against Gaddafi in the 1990s, but the League's official siding with a domestic insurgency against an Arab regime was unprecedented, even if the will to participate in an actual military operation was apparently lacking. At the same time, the



AVI KATZ

centrality of the GCC states' leading role in building the anti-Qaddafi consensus was driven home by indications that Qatar and the UAE were intending to send warplanes to join the Western coalition. By contrast, in the wake of the initial bombing raids, League Secretary General Amr Moussa then backtracked somewhat.

Collective security was also the watchword in Bahrain, albeit in a far different context. In this

case, the king of Bahrain invited in 1,000 soldiers of the GCC's "Peninsula Shield" joint force, led by a Saudi contingent, in order to bolster his position in the face of escalating protests by democracy activists, mainly Shiites, who were largely excluded from Bahrain's main power centers despite them being a majority of the population. The entry of GCC forces was a first, albeit a highly controversial one, as the force had been created to deal with external threats, not internal ones. Almost immediately afterwards, Bahrain security forces cracked down hard on the protesters, and the prospects of a negotiated end to the protests receded.

While Bahraini protesters were adamant in insisting that theirs was a non-sectarian movement demanding real democracy and a devolution in the king's powers, the authorities framed the issue more in sectarian terms, suggesting that Iran, which had long claimed Bahrain as its own, was seeking to influence Bahraini Shiites. Certainly, Saudi Arabia was convinced of an Iranian hand and, in any case, was deeply concerned that the Shiite unrest in Bahrain would spill over in the Shiite-populated areas of Saudi Arabia's eastern provinces. Whether or not these tough measures would stabilize or exacerbate the situation remained to be seen. Certainly, they went against the advice of Washington, indicating the degree to which American influence on its regional allies has waned.

In any case, the Bahrain events provided an important reminder that the unfolding "Arab Spring" had geopolitical implications. Notwithstanding the harsh repression employed against its own Green Movement protesters, Iran was delighted with the overthrow of Egypt's Mubarak and Tunisia's Ben Ali, and with the new assertiveness among Bahraini Shiites. Tehran quickly tested the Egyptian waters by sending two Iranian warships through the Suez Canal and into the eastern Mediterranean, something that had not been done since the fall of the shah. Less successful was a large arms shipment destined for Gaza, via Alexandria, which was intercepted on the high seas by Israeli commandos.

Both cases of muscle flexing suggested that Egypt would not have the luxury to concentrate exclusively on fashioning a post-Mubarak political system. ●

**The author is the Marcia Israel Senior Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University.**