

The Arab Awakening: What Does It Mean for the United States?

Michele Dunne, Ph.D.

Director, Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East
Atlantic Council

Reacting to the end of the 43-year rule of Muammar Qaddafi, a 40-year old Libyan physician said, "This is a sensation that I never felt before...even though there is no water and no electricity, we are very grateful, first to God, but also to the outside world that helped our cause," according to an August 27, 2011, story in the *Washington Post*. Being out from under authoritarian rule is indeed a feeling that most Libyans (as well as Egyptians and Tunisians) are experiencing for the first time, and for many it might well be frightening as well as thrilling. All of the old certainties are gone in the Arab countries that have already undergone change and those where there are active uprisings (Syria, Yemen). But even in countries such as Saudi Arabia or Algeria, in which there has been only limited unrest so far, the durability of the current political order is now in question.

For policy makers in the United States as well, uncertainty about who will rule the Arab countries and how to deal with them is an unfamiliar feeling and raises concerns about what the future might hold:

- Will the early euphoria, such as that expressed by the Libyan quoted in the *Post*, give way to disillusionment once the obstacles to building economic prosperity, justice, and democracy become clear? And will that in turn lead citizens of Arab countries to lose faith in democracy and resort to Islamic theocracy or once again to authoritarianism?
- Will Islamists dominate the political process simply because they are more organized and disciplined than other groups, especially liberals?
- Will Arab countries gang up on Israel, as Islamists, leftists, nationalists, and other political forces gain a greater say in foreign as well as domestic policies?
- Will new Arab leaders, elected or otherwise, refuse to cooperate with the United States? What are the best ways for the United States to influence Arab countries in this new era?

Potential for Disillusionment

It helps, in addressing these worries, to sort out more realistic concerns from less realistic ones. If transitions from authoritarian rule in other regions are any guide, it is inevitable that Egyptians, Libyans, and Tunisians will be disappointed with the speed and results of democratization. Polling by the International Republican Institute (IRI), for example, shows that Egyptians have unrealistically high expectations about how much their economic fortunes will improve after the January revolution, hopes that are certain to be frustrated. In fact, the evidence is already in that disappointment is mounting. Demonstrators returned to Cairo's Tahrir Square in large numbers in July and August to protest many aspects of the military's handling of the transition. And among

Tunisians polled by IRI in May, only 46 percent said they believed their country was headed in the right direction, compared to 79 percent who said so in March.

Political and economic aspects of transitions offer different potential sources of frustrations for citizens. In Tunisia and Egypt, political forces have struggled over who should be included in decisions governing the time frame and road map for the political transition, especially whether to prioritize elections or the writing of new constitutions. Tunisians have opted for a fairly inclusive process of decision making via large committees and have decided to elect a constituent assembly first, write a constitution, and later proceed to parliamentary and presidential elections. In Egypt, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) has refused to include civilians in the transitional leadership and has insisted on holding parliamentary elections first, to be followed by the selection of a constituent assembly, writing a constitution, and election of a president. Each route offers advantages and disadvantages, but by either one it will be well over a year from the time of the revolution—perhaps close to two years—before Tunisia or Egypt has a new political system and the institutional building blocks required to initiate a long and complicated transition to democracy.

Unreasonable economic expectations are just as likely to be met with disappointment as political ones. Economic grievances, particularly youth unemployment, were a major factor motivating the uprisings; and people expect that cleaning up corruption and cronyism will bring about immediate and tangible improvements in living standards. But there are no quick-fix remedies for Egypt's chronic economic problems, for example, which have deep roots and cannot be alleviated without long-term structural reforms. And while longer political timetables are often necessary to ensure development of a sound democratic process, they impede government economic decision making as well as the reestablishment of security, which is essential to attracting

domestic and foreign investment. Thus, disappointment with stagnant or even deteriorating economic conditions might even outweigh political grievances as the primary factor driving public disillusionment with transitions in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere.

While disillusionment is easy to predict, whether citizens will react by rejecting democratization is less clear. Who will be blamed for the failures might depend on whom the public deems to be responsible at the time: transitional authorities, the victors of the next elections, or outside actors. Perhaps the situation most to be feared would be one of disastrous economic collapse. In Egypt, for example, it is possible that within the next year or two unwise economic policies (especially a failure to rein in government spending on fuel subsidies) could lead to a budget crisis. That in turn could cause a loss of confidence in the Egyptian currency and trigger other damaging trends: a resumption of the rapid capital flight that occurred during the January 2011 revolution, a resort to printing money, and hyperinflation. In that dire scenario, it is not difficult to imagine panicked Egyptians calling for full military rule. It is also conceivable that Islamists would seek to profit politically from such a crisis by leveraging public dissatisfaction with the interim government's handling of the economy to stage a power grab.

There is much that the United States, especially if it acts in conjunction with Europe, can do to prevent such troubling scenarios from materializing. The European Union is the most important trading partner for the North African and Levant countries, and the United States is the single largest partner for Egypt. These symbiotic economic relationships can be harnessed to support stability and sustainable development in transitioning countries across the Arab world. The Arab awakening offers the United States and Europe a historic opportunity to offer the region a compelling vision of economic prosperity, built on trade incentives that would help to motivate better economic management and the reforms needed to support successful democratic transitions.

The Possibility of Islamist Domination

Islamist political forces are increasingly active, visible, and diversified in the Arab countries undergoing transition—just as are all the other political forces including liberals, leftists, and nationalists. Islamists enjoy some distinct advantages over the others because they are able to invoke values that are the regional equivalent of motherhood and apple pie. Two such values strongly expressed in the Arab uprisings have been: (1) dignity (*karaama* in Arabic), or the principle that citizens have the right to expect decent treatment by authorities and freedom from humiliation; and (2) justice (*'adaala*), meaning fairness in all forms but particularly the equitable distribution of economic benefits across the social spectrum. Islamist political groups generally are careful to choose electoral candidates who have a strong record of community service (physicians who founded charitable medical clinics, educators who established free kindergartens) and live a modest lifestyle, showing that they are in sympathy with the poor and are not corrupt.

Islamist forces also enjoy credibility born of the repression they suffered at the hands of the overthrown regimes. Although the repression varied in method and degree—Egypt's Muslim Brothers were allowed to run for elections but still were subject to arrest and military trial from time to time, whereas Tunisia's al-Nahda had to go into exile, and Libya's Islamists were brutally repressed along with all other opposition—all of these groups were seen as the principal enemies of the Mubarak, Ben Ali, and Qaddafi regimes and will logically reap the benefits of that now. This is true whether or not they played a major role in the uprisings that overthrew the dictators.

Islamist groups' superior discipline and organization relative to other groups are also factors in their success, but even the Islamists face strong challenges in these areas in the chaotic post-revolutionary environment. There has always been a spectrum of Islamists in Arab countries, which differs a bit from country to country: from jihadists who espouse violence to

achieve their ends, to Salafis who are extremely socially conservative but generally non-violent, to Muslim Brothers who gave up violence decades ago and participate in formal politics when permitted, to Islamists who cooperate closely with non-Islamists and Christians and take pragmatic positions on issues such as the rights of women and non-Muslims.

Under authoritarian rule, some Islamist tendencies were largely invisible or banded together for protection under umbrellas such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Now that all except violent jihadists are free to show themselves, Islamist political forces are fragmenting into multiple political parties in groups, banding together in small alliances, and even forming alliances with non-Islamist groups. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood formed the Freedom and Justice Party and tried in vain to insist that all of its members who wanted to be active in politics join that party. But several of the Brotherhood's senior leaders, who are household names in Egypt, broke away to form separate parties with other Islamists and non-Islamists, as did the Brotherhood young wing that worked closely with other youth movements during the revolution. There are also half a dozen Salafi parties and the relatively moderate Wasat (Center) Party, which combines former Brothers with Christians and other non-Islamists. This splintering of Islamist groups reflects a new and powerful desire to participate in the formal political arena and shape the institutional framework of the post-Mubarak system.

This fragmentation of political groups is replicated among liberals, leftists, and other groups in Egypt and Tunisia and is typical in transitions from authoritarianism worldwide. Political leaders who have waited many years for a chance to compete want to form their own parties and test their chances with the electorate, and they are reluctant to sacrifice their ambitions to the greater good of their political trends. Political parties entering the first free elections often number in the dozens; there will be a sorting out over several electoral cycles.

Whether the multiplicity of Islamist groups will help or hurt their collective yield in upcoming elections is unclear. The range of options from fairly moderate to fairly extreme might attract more voters to Islamists, or it might be that too many parties divide up a limited pool of Islamist voters, thereby weakening the share of the single largest group (the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt and al-Nahda in Tunisia). Because voter turnout has been so weak in past elections in these countries, and results unreliable due to pervasive corruption and rigging, it is nearly impossible to say what percentage of the electorate Islamists of all stripes can command.

Islamists have also shown a degree of self-restraint regarding upcoming elections, recognizing that too big a win would provoke negative consequences. The Egyptian Brotherhood has announced that it will not run a candidate in the first presidential election, even though it is able to do so under revised laws; and so far it has opposed the candidacy of other Islamists as well. The leader of Tunisia's al-Nahda has also pledged not to run for president. Egypt's Freedom and Justice Party has committed to run for no more than half of the seats in the new parliament, declaring its goal to be winning 30 to 40 per cent.

Looking beyond elections to what share Islamists might have not only in parliament but in the executive branch, certain limitations stemming from the legal and institutional frameworks become evident. Under current rules, the elected president in each country appoints the cabinet and is under no obligation to include representatives of parties elected to parliament, so there is no guarantee that Islamists will attain prominent positions in the executive branch even if they win many seats in parliament. And parliaments themselves have limited powers in both countries, so a strong presence in these elected legislative bodies does not necessarily correspond to meaningful influence over government policies.

Tunisia and Egypt will also embark on the writing of new constitutions, however, and

it is expected that these major legal reforms will strengthen the powers of parliaments and reduce those of the presidency. What is unknown is the degree of change: will it be partial (for example, requiring a parliamentary vote of confidence in the cabinet) or extensive (moving to a parliamentary system in which the presidency is ceremonial)? That will not become clear for at least six more months, possibly much longer. This is also the case for Libya, which faces the challenge of engineering a political system from scratch, as even less of Qaddafi's eccentric *Jamahiriyah* is likely to be preserved than of the Tunisian and Egyptian pre-revolutionary systems.

It is difficult for US policy makers to cope with their concerns about Islamists in the Arab countries in transition, and it seems that any course they take might backfire. If the United States shows itself to be strongly opposed to Islamists, they will only benefit by positioning themselves as the defenders of Islam against a hostile West. On the other hand, it would be irresponsible of the United States to behave as though it had no preference about whether future leaders of Arab countries will respect democratic norms, protect the rights of women and non-Muslims, and abide by international treaties and commitments. During this uncertain transition period, it would be best for the United States to interest itself more in the development of strong democratic systems and institutions than in the specific results of any given election. The United States should also determine its policy and degree of support to elected governments based on the policies they actually adopt and should avoid reacting publicly to objectionable statements made during electoral campaigns.

Israel and Post-Revolutionary Public Opinion

Although neither Israel nor the United States has been a major issue in the Arab uprisings so far, the Arab revolutionary rallying cry of *karaama* (dignity) has implications for both. Whether it is fair or not, Arab publics gener-

ally see the continuing failure to resolve the Palestinian issue as a humiliation that is shared by all Arabs to some degree and for which they attribute blame primarily to Israel and the support it receives from the United States. Among the three countries currently in transition, this factor is most relevant in Egypt, where many see the 1979 peace treaty as a disappointment because it left Palestinian grievances unresolved. Many Egyptians believe that deposed President Hosni Mubarak traded independence in foreign policy and the ability to stand up to Israel on behalf of the Palestinians for the billions in military assistance he received from the United States, and some remain deeply skeptical of the claim that peace with Israel serves Egypt's national interests.

Public opinion unquestionably will count for more in a democratic Egypt than in an authoritarian one, including in foreign policy, and current and future Egyptian leaders will have to take it into account. While there is no indication of a public desire for military hostilities with Israel, Egyptians have already shown they will respond vigorously to events and will seek to use the peace agreement as leverage with Israel. Israeli raids on Gaza in July 2011 in response to rocket attacks and on the Egyptian-Israeli border in August in response to bombings led to large demonstrations around the Israeli embassy in Cairo. After early hints that the Egyptian ambassador to Israel would be withdrawn (perhaps leaked to quell public anger over the killing of several Egyptian border guards in an Israeli raid), the military leadership negotiated with Israel the expansion of Egyptian forces in the Sinai in an effort to prevent more attacks.

As troubling as the positions taken toward Israel by Islamists and other political groups might be, they probably reflect public opinion more than they shape it. The question is whether various political groups will follow up on their threats, for example, to request that the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty be resubmitted for parliamentary ratification. Whether they do so—as opposed to remaining focused

on urgent domestic issues such as writing a new constitution and resuscitating the ailing economy—depends on developments in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, as Egypt's foreign policy is more likely to be reactive than proactive. And how meaningful parliamentary criticism of Israel or action against Israel will be depends on how the balance of power in the political system is recalibrated by the new constitution.

The challenge for the United States will be encouraging responsible, peaceable behavior toward Israel on the part of Egypt and other Arab governments in transition without pushing so hard as to provoke a counter-productive backlash in the opposite direction. Citizens in these countries already are suspicious that the United States cares far more for the concerns of Israel than it does for the rights or grievances of Arabs. US actions that reinforce this impression would only enflame anti-US sentiment and boost the political appeal of extremists, without bolstering Israel's security.

A New Approach for the United States

In dealing with the Arab awakening, there are several factors the United States must take into account. First, **the United States did not start these uprisings and does not have the ability to stop, prevent, or control them.** It is fruitless to agonize over whether US interests would be better off had the uprisings not occurred; change is afoot in the region and there is no going back. What the United States needs to consider now is how to encourage successful democratic transitions and sound economies, and how to secure its interests in a changing strategic environment.

Second, the extent to which the new governments in transitioning Arab countries are willing to cooperate with the United States will depend, at least initially, on the relationship the United States had with the deposed regime. Thus it should be no surprise that the United States faces an uphill battle in reestablishing cooperative relations with Egypt after several decades of extensive financial and security

assistance to the old regime; the same is likely to be true of Yemen should a transition begin there. Libyans, by contrast, look favorably upon the long antipathy between Qaddafi and the United States as well as NATO military support for the rebellion and are far more positively disposed to cooperation with the United States as a result. **The United States should not give up on good relations with countries formerly governed by authoritarian allies, but US officials should roll up their sleeves and get to work on rebuilding relations damaged by lack of trust.**

Third, while it is true that the Arab countries face long and difficult transitions with uncertain prospects for success, it is clear that **these countries are now much more likely to become democracies than they were while governed by authoritarian rulers who dispensed political reform and civic freedoms with an eyedropper.** The United States should show a good deal of patience and remain focused on what is truly important: the development of political systems that will allow citizens the ability to change their government peacefully and the promotion of growth-oriented economic systems that will provide jobs and increase prosperity equitably over time. Retaining such a focus will require keep-

ing in check US reactions to the many setbacks, disappointments, and detours likely to occur along the way.

There is every reason to hope that the United States can have relations that are better—more mature, durable, peaceful, and multidimensional—with democratic Arab states than it had with authoritarian regimes over the long term. But this will require learning a whole new way of doing business for the United States and for Arab governments. Relations can no longer be focused solely on a small circle of high-level government contacts; the United States will have to cultivate relations with a broader range of officials and parliamentarians as well as with the public in Arab countries. Transitioning Arab states will want to be treated more as partners and less as clients, requiring significant change in assistance and security relationships. While democracy assistance and other forms of technical assistance will be required from the West in the short term, enhanced trade relations will most likely be the best way to encourage the development of sound political as well as economic systems in Arab countries over the medium to longer term.
