

The Turmoil in Africa and the Middle East

Causes and Likely Outcomes

Presented by Dick Florea to Quest Club of Fort Wayne on February 3, 2012

Preface

At this moment, it is just past 7:30 in the evening in Cairo and Tripoli. How different it is tonight from February 3rd just one year ago. President Hosni Mubarak, the heavy-handed 30-year ruler of Egypt, was clinging to power and would, in 8 more days, resign. The uprising in Egypt was being closely watched in neighboring Libya, where another strong dictator, Colonel Muammar Qaddafi would in coming months be caught begging for mercy in a sewer pipe, and then killed.

This paper will look at what has become collectively known as the Arab Spring, the complex and remarkable revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests that have been taking place in the Middle East and North Africa during the last 14 months. Guided by the assigned title, the strongest attention will be given to the northern Africa nations of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya as well as the current uprising in Syria ... what has happened and why, and what is next for the people of this region.

The Uprisings

The catalyst came in Tunisia. It was the suicide of a produce vendor in mid-December, 2010. Mohamed Bouazizi had been harassed for years by police. He was said to be a simple man, who bought his fruit on credit in the evening and sold it the next day. On this particular day his merchandise was seized by police and he was humiliated. He tried to complain to the governor, but was denied the chance...even after threatening to set himself on fire. He followed through on that threat. His last words reportedly were "How do you expect me to make a living?"

His death awakened the Tunisian public to an intolerable set of national conditions. Protests began in the ensuing hours and 5,000 people attended his funeral. Police violently broke up the protests, the protesters in turn became more violent, and the situation escalated. This quickly and surprisingly led to the fall of Tunisia's dictatorial and corrupt government...the 23-year regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. News spread throughout the Middle East, inspiring more protests in countries of high unemployment and poverty and ruled by corrupt authoritarian governments.

In January 2011, mass protests erupted in Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country. The actions in Tunisia inflamed decades of smoldering grievances against the heavy-handed rule of President Hosni Mubarak. Over nearly three weeks of protests, Egyptians of every stripe gathered in Tahrir Square with a single unifying demand: Mubarak must go, now. They organized themselves into teams to guard the barricades and search for weapons among people joining the crowd. They set up field hospitals and water distribution stations. A group of volunteer engineers even poured cement for public toilets. And on February 11, in a display of steadfast, focused anger after Mubarak defiantly insisted that he would not step down, they busted out of Tahrir Square. Thousands marched near the presidential residence, previously a sacrosanct no-go zone, and tens of thousands converged on the radio and television building – the nerve center for state propaganda – leaving regime mouthpieces trapped and frightened inside. In the face of such a display, Mubarak was forced to resign – less than 24 hours after adamantly refusing to do so. Cairo erupted. People poured out of their homes. Cars began honking wildly. And chants of "It's done!" broke out.

As Egypt's autocratic rule under Mubarak was ending, protests broke out in several parts of Libya on a so-called "Day of Rage" to challenge Colonel Muammar Qaddafi's iron rule. According to Human Rights Watch, thousands turned out in Benghazi, Tripoli and three other locations. State media in Egypt, however, showed Libyans waving green flags and shouting in support of Qaddafi. We know the story. After a six-month struggle, Qaddafi was pushed from power in August, went into hiding, was captured and killed last October. The last fugitive son, and onetime heir-apparent, was captured in November. Unlike the Egyptian uprising, this became military warfare....and the United Nations Security Council authorized a rather risky

foreign intervention, marked by cruise missiles and drones. The rebel movement was hindered by internal dissention and a lack of military training.

The three uprisings shared a common call for personal dignity and responsive government...people saying they had “had enough.” But Lisa Anderson, president of American University in Cairo, notes the patterns of revolt in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya were different in some respects. “The demonstrations in Tunisia spiraled toward the capital from the neglected rural areas. In Egypt, by contrast, urbane and cosmopolitan young people in the major cities organized the uprisings. In Libya, raging bands of armed rebels in the eastern provinces ignited the protests, revealing the tribal and regional cleavages that have beset the country for decades.” Technology played a role. Social networks kept the movements alive and connected. And in countries of state-controlled media, technology allowed everyone to watch and helped to spread the virus of protest.

The Aftermath

Let us now “fast forward” to see what has been happening in these three countries, saving the unfolding Syrian situation until later. We will start with Egypt, the Arab world’s most populous country, the ideological home for both Arab nationalism and modern Islamist political movements.

Hosni Mubarak had come into office in 1981 following the assassination of Anwar Sadat, whom he served as vice president. A recent New York Times background piece included these observations:

Until the recent unrest, Mubarak had firmly resisted calls to name a successor. He had also successfully negotiated complicated issues of regional security, solidified a relationship with Washington, maintained cool but correct ties with Israel and sharply suppressed Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism – along with dissent in general.

The country has one of the largest and most sophisticated security forces in the Middle East. The Times article notes Egyptian police have a long and notorious track record of torture and cruelty to average citizens. The government would deny there is any widespread police abuse, frequently blaming rogue officers for episodes of brutality.

In recent years Egypt has struggled through a seemingly endless series of crises and setbacks. The sinking of a ferry left 1,000 mostly poor Egyptians lost at sea, fire gutted the historic Parliament building, terrorists hit Sinai resorts, and labor strikes were widespread.

In the months immediately after the revolt the population excitedly struggled with the questions of what the nation needs and how to fix it. The economy now seems to be relatively stable, with principal revenues from gas and oil sales and the Suez Canal. Tourism is a major exception. Nearly 15-million tourists went to Egypt in 2010, feeding some \$13-billion into the economy. In the first month after the revolution the number of visitors fell by 80 percent. Investment has stalled. The country is facing mounting debts and dwindling foreign reserves, and it seems all but inevitable that currency will be further devalued, sending prices of food and goods soaring. The Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party was the clear winner in the parliamentary elections. It should be noted that many Egyptians clearly embrace Islam, but also seem to prefer at least some separation of politics and piety. In a Gallup survey last June, 69% of Egyptians said they wanted religious leaders to "advise those in authority," but only 14% supported them actually writing the laws.

Egypt is still under martial law, with the ruling military council firmly in control and acting as the highest authority. The new Parliament remains subordinate to the ruling military council, although the generals have promised to turn over power to civilians by the end of this June, with some still undefined limits. Just last week, tens of thousands gathered January 25 in Tahrir Square on the national holiday marking the first anniversary of the protests. It turned out to be a mixture of celebration and agitation. The spirit that unified last year's uprising was replaced by new tensions between the country's political factions and the military rulers.

Many are growing weary of the protests and yearn for stability. Hossam Bahgat, a human rights activist interviewed by the Christian Science Monitor, put it this way: "We are nowhere near where we thought we would be. We're all exhausted and frustrated, but we know this is our historic window, and we know we have no choice but to persevere until we win or this window closes."

Several questions loom regarding Egyptian rule going forward. How far or how fast might the Brotherhood push to make Egypt more Islamic? And the bigger question of whether the current

maneuvering between the Brotherhood and the military will end in an accommodation or in conflict. Jimmy Carter, in Egypt to monitor the January elections, met with the military leaders and later said he doubted the military would fully submit to the authority of a civilian democracy.

NBC correspondent Ayman Mohyeldin notes that one year after the President Mubarak's fall, not a single senior officer in any Egyptian security force has been convicted in the killing of protesters in the 18-day uprising. Since he left office, Mubarak has not spent time in prison, instead remaining under 24-hour medical watch at advanced medical facilities. Early in August, to the surprise of many, the ailing 83-year-old Mubarak was rolled into a courtroom in a hospital bed to face charges of corruption and complicity in the killing of protesters. The symbolism of that day's events, watched live on television by tens of millions, served as a national catharsis for Egypt and electrified the Arab world. In closing arguments in January, Egyptian prosecutors called for his hanging. Though they have failed to produce specific testimony or evidence that he directly ordered the use of force or the shooting of demonstrators, the contention is he was responsible by virtue of his official position. The defense team has been given a full month to make its case. And while Mubarak is granted all of the protections of due process, civilians facing much lesser charges are being tried rapidly in military tribunals. Lots of suspicion surrounds the proceeding, fueled by the fact that the entire ruling military council and the country's general prosecutor are among the handful of officials appointed by Mubarak who have remained in power.

Let's now return to Libya. First, some background on the central figure.

Colonel Qaddafi took power in 1969 and ruled with an iron fist. His most notorious action was the 1988 bombing of Pan AM Flight 103 over Scotland, which killed 270 people. Libya later accepted responsibility and paid more than \$2-billion to families of those victims.

Qaddafi always kept the Libyan military too weak and divided to rebel against him. Distrustful of his own generals, he built up an elaborate paramilitary force – accompanied by special segments of the regular army that reported primarily to his family. And he had a 3,000-member revolutionary guard corps, which guarded him personally.

Writing for The Atlantic, Associate Editor Max Fisher provides an interesting look at how Qaddafi ruled.

Fisher notes there's a popular Bedouin saying that, if you have a bag of rats and you want to keep the rodents from escaping, you have to keep shaking the bag. Qaddafi, he says, was the bag-shaker...constantly shifting his home rule and his foreign policy....despite little popular support at home and a world that largely despised him.

“When the middle class grew too strong, he abruptly changed the currency, collapsing personal savings. When businesses became too powerful, he opened up more government subsidiaries to shut them down. When government leaders and ministries earned enough influence to potentially challenge his rule, he shifted their power to popular councils. One year he might free political prisoners, the next put them into mass graves. His secret police were everywhere, but so were his handouts. When people got sick of it and rallied, he had a senior official send in riot police; then he'd declare common cause with the protesters and sack the official. He formed new democratic institutions. Yet, somehow, he always ended up in charge.

Abroad, he was just as savvy, just as willing to strike ruthlessly at his rivals one moment and to join them the next. Two of his first foreign policy decisions were to guarantee the U.S. military base its safety, ensuring early American support, and then, when he no longer needed the U.S., to kick the Americans out forever, winning support from anti-Western movements at home.”

The country was formally declared liberated three days after Qaddafi was killed, setting in motion the process of creating a new constitution and an elected government. The transitional government has been struggling with little success to persuade various local militias around the country to surrender their arms and submit to a central authority. The local chiefs are holding on to their weapons in part to ensure that their local interests do not lose out in the formation of a new government.

A draft law leaves the most difficult and politically delicate questions, like drawing up districts or settling on an electoral system, to a proposed commission to be named later. The law would bar former officials of the Qaddafi government from serving on the panel. But it would not remove them from the current interim administration or from future government jobs. The presence of former Qaddafi government personnel is a common complaint with the transitional administration.

The law, as drafted, would allocate 20 of the 200 seats in the assembly to women. The assembly is expected to be chosen by June 2012 and empowered to form a government while it writes a new constitution.

Compounding any compromise is the very tribal culture of Libya. TIME magazine notes there are more than 140 tribes and clans, some of them with centuries-old enmities. Qaddafi was able to keep them all in line by employing a mixture of patronage and punishment. Matching that, but without repression, is likely to be a huge challenge.

Lawlessness in recent months remains a cause for concern. Retired US Army Colonel Michael Silverman, a recognized expert on counterinsurgency, says loose weapons from Libya have already bolstered the substantial black market in the region, a market that Al Qaeda affiliates trade in with regularity. Luckily, Libya had mostly dismantled its weapons-of-mass-destruction. The US State Department in August expressed confidence that the few remaining stockpiles of chemical weapons were secured prior to the regime's collapse.

The UN has painted a disturbing picture of the situation in Libya. Five months after the fall of Tripoli, the security situation is getting worse, not better. Militias operating outside the control of the interim government remain heavily armed and they continue to detain, and sometimes even torture, hundreds of prisoners suspected of being loyal to Gaddafi. Doctors Without Borders, the international medical humanitarian organization, has decided to suspend its operations in detention centers in Misrata after confirming that detainees are being tortured and denied urgent medical care. The UN says Libyan militias are holding thousands of people in secret detention centers, while the interim government struggles to assert its authority.

There are, however, some positive factors in the situation. These include Libya's enormous oil wealth, and its relatively small population of 6.6 million. It has a higher literacy rate than its neighbors, and, unlike Egypt, has little religious diversity.

Oil is the mother's milk of Libya's economy — before the war, it accounted for about one-quarter of the country's economic output, 80 percent of government revenue and 95 percent of export earnings.

Libya's oil production remains at about 40 percent of the level that it was before the revolution began. But none of the country's 40 critical oil and gas fields were seriously damaged in the war.

Most of the important oil ports and refineries, virtually idled by international sanctions and months of fighting, are now ramping back up. Officials boldly predict that by June, the country will once again be pumping 1.6 million barrels of oil a day, although independent experts say that is conceivable only if the country can avoid a relapse into violence. The industry's rapid pace of recovery is a beacon of hope.

Under Qaddafi's rule, Libyans kept their personal and political opinions to themselves, and unedited thoughts were shared with only a trusted few. Now all that has changed. In a country where politics and public life were for generations violently and obsessively policed, young people are now breathing and speaking more freely than ever before. Even on a day when there are no classes, students gather on the campus of Tripoli University, where political prisoners were once publicly hanged. The students swap stories from the revolution and debate the merits of the postwar transitional government.

Mocking graffiti have replaced the reverential portraits of Qaddafi that once hung on walls across the city. And a new generation of colorful, independent newspapers speculate on the activities of his surviving children much the way our Western tabloids cover the lives of celebrities.

Let's now leave Egypt and Libya for a few minutes...to re-visit Tunisia and then see what's been happening in Syria.

Three weeks ago masses of Tunisians marched peacefully to mark the one-year anniversary of their revolution. The anniversary was greeted with prudent optimism, amid worries about high unemployment that cast a shadow over their pride at transforming the country.

Now a human rights activist is president, and a moderate Islamist jailed for years by the old regime is prime minister at the head of a diverse coalition, after the freest elections in Tunisia's history. The new leadership, to mark the anniversary, pardoned 9,000 convicts and converted the sentences of more than 100 prisoners from the death penalty to life in prison.

Tunisia appears to be the furthest along in its transformation. Political analysts warn, however, that further gains will not be easy or painless. There is worry about the country's economic and social situation. Unemployment has risen to almost 20 percent today from 13 percent a year ago,

and economic growth has stagnated as investment dries up and tourism, once a pillar of Tunisia's economy, evaporates.

The former president, Ben Ali, has maintained a low profile since his ouster, but has been convicted in absentia for corruption and other crimes during his regime.

We must also look at Syria, where protests first began last March, and continue in a violent way to this day. President Bashar al-Assad, who inherited Syria's harsh dictatorship from his father, at first wavered between force and hints of reform. But last April, just days after lifting the country's decades-old state of emergency, he set off the first of what became a series of withering crackdowns, sending tanks into restive cities as security forces opened fire on demonstrators.

As the crackdown dragged on, a growing number of soldiers were said to have defected and to have begun launching attacks against the government, bringing the country to what the United Nations in December called the verge of civil war.

Syria's crackdown has been condemned internationally, as has President Assad, a British-trained doctor who many had hoped would soften his father's iron-handed regime. Criticism has come from unlikely quarters, such as Syria's close neighbors, Jordan and Turkey, and from Russia.

Syria was expelled from the Arab League after it agreed to a peace plan only to step up attacks on protesters. And in late November the League imposed economic sanctions on Syria. The U.S. has also asked Assad to step down, and in August imposed a series of sanctions. In recent weeks the violence has gotten worse. The UN estimates 5,400 have been killed since the protests began. A resolution calling for Assad's resignation is currently being debated in the UN Security Council, but the action is stymied by Russia, which opposes a regime change.

And, we must include Yemen in this discussion. Yemen is a special concern to the United States for two reasons...from a security standpoint because of the strength of Al Qaeda, and from a strategic standpoint because of the oil shipping route through the Red Sea. The country has been in turmoil for over a year. President Ali Abdullah Saleh, in power for 33 years and a longtime U.S. ally, agreed in November to transfer power to his vice president. He retains title as President until an election later this month. Saleh is currently somewhere in the United States getting medical treatment. His intentions are hard to gauge.

That is a somewhat limited overview of what has been happening the last 14 months or so in the Middle East. What now are the “takeaways” from all of this?

Thomas Mann of the Brookings Institute suggests several.

The three successful revolutions – in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya – and the two ongoing revolutions – in Syria and Yemen – have all taken place in republics. It is hard to imagine how countries like Saudi Arabia or Algeria might succumb to mass protest. The monarchies are reservoirs of historic, cultural, and religious legitimacy...and are in a stronger position to manage dissent. If real democratization occurs in the monarchies, it will be slow, uneven, and bloody.

Islamists are in the future. Fear of Islamists, he writes, is no longer a legitimate reason to resist or oppose Arab democracy.

The United States and other Western powers should build a higher tolerance for instability, particularly as the Arab spring enters into its long, uncertain middle stage. Rather than fearing or avoiding it, the United States should take instability as a given and formulate creative policies to anticipate, manage, and get around it.

Another Brookings writer suggests there is a growing perception in the Arab world that the U.S. is a power in decline and doesn't have as much influence and leverage as it used to. For that reason, he says, they don't have to listen to the U.S.; ...they can defy the U.S.

Thomas Friedman, the respected author and columnist had some interesting thoughts published in the New York Times two weeks ago under the title “Trust, but Verify.”

American policy, he wrote, needs to be based on the assumption that, like all parties, Islamist parties contain moderates, centrists and hard-liners — and, in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood, lots of small businessmen. Which wing will dominate as they assume the responsibilities of governing is still an open question. America needs to offer the Islamists firm, quiet and patient engagement that says: “We believe in free and fair elections, human rights, women’s rights, minority rights, free markets, civilian control of the military, religious tolerance and the Egypt-Israel peace treaty, and we will offer assistance to anyone who respects those principles.”

There is an evolution under way — this is a very plastic moment — and our best chance of having an effect is to make sure we deal in a principled way with the Islamists (and also, by the way, with Israel, as the Islamists will be watching for any double standard)

and with the Egyptian Army. The Egyptian Army is also trying to figure out its role in this new Egypt. It is balancing its desire to protect its economic interests, avoid prosecution for any killings of demonstrators and maintain its status as guardian of Egypt's secular nationalist tradition. We need the Egyptian Army to play the constructive role that the Turkish Army once played — as midwife and protector of a gradual democratic transition.

In short, Friedman concludes, “the days of dealing with Egypt with one phone call to one man just one time are over. This is going to require really, really, really sophisticated diplomacy with multiple players — seven days a week.”

Greg Gause, who specializes in Middle East politics at the University of Vermont, was asked in a recent interview on National Public Radio about how the U.S. should react. His policy advice — and the title of his most recent piece on foreign policy— comes from Alice in Wonderland, in a saying by the White Rabbit: "Don't just do something; stand there." "My policy advice is not to overreact, to not try to direct this in a certain way," he says. "Because I don't think we have the power, I don't think we have the local allies, and until the dust settles, and until they have stable governments that then are going to engage in their own foreign policies, perhaps the best thing we can do is let that happen."

In that same NPR segment, Stephen Cook at the Council on Foreign Relations, noted that for decades, dictators delivered a relatively stable and predictable region. American foreign policy priorities like a reliable flow of oil, a relatively secure Israel, and a check on radical regimes and groups were met, more or less. We got what we needed, he said. "Yes, we can all feel warm and fuzzy about democracy in the region, but we also have to recognize that it's all not going to work out very well for us. There are going to be new and different challenges ahead for the United States with a more open and democratic Middle East."

For a February 2012 Quest paper, it is really hard to make summary conclusions about the Arab Spring. These were inspiring uprisings that achieved unbelievably successful results and toppled tyrants long entrenched at the pinnacles of state power.

As Time Magazine pointed out in naming “The Protester” its 2011 Person of the Year, “No one could have known that when a Tunisian fruit vendor set himself on fire in a public square in a town barely on the map, he would spark protests that would bring down dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya and rattle regimes in Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain. Or that the spirit of dissent would spur Mexicans to rise up against the terror of drug cartels, Greeks to march against unaccountable leaders, Americans to occupy public spaces to protest income inequality, and Russians to marshal themselves against a corrupt autocracy.”

The year 2011 was pivotal in many respects, but from the perspective of this paper on this day, its main outcome remains inconclusive...and might remain so for years to come.

Sources

- “*Death of the Qaddafi Generation*,” Mohamad Bazzi, *Foreign Affairs quarterly*, October 2011
- “*Demystifying the Arab Spring*,” Lisa Anderson, *The New Arab Revolt*, Foreign Affairs/Council on Foreign Relations ebook
- “*How Egyptians toppled Mubarak – and Who will Lead them Now*,” Dan Murphy, *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 12, 2011
- “*How Qaddafi Fooled Libya and the World*,” Max Fisher, *The Atlantic*, October 20, 2011
- “*Is the Arab Spring Good or Bad for the U.S.?*” NPR Morning Edition, January 9, 2012
- “*One Year Later: Five Lessons from the Arab Revolts*,” Thomas E. Mann, The Brookings Institution, January 11, 2012
- “*Person of the Year: The Protester*,” TIME magazine, December 26, 2011
- Times Topics*, The New York Times, various dates June 1, 2011 – January 30, 2012
- “Egypt News – Revolution and Aftermath”
 - “Libya – Revolt and Aftermath”
 - “Syria – Protests (2011 -)”
 - “Tunisia”
 - “Yemen Protests (2011 -)”
- “*Trust, but Verify*,” Thomas L. Friedman, *The New York Times*, January 17, 2012
- “*The Gaddafi regime is broken. What will take its place?*” Bobby Ghosh, TIME magazine, September 5, 2011
- “*U.S. ‘deeply concerned’ After Egypt raids NGO offices*,” Rebecca Collard, *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 29, 2011
- U.S. State Department Fact Sheets