Emerging Regional Security Architecture in the Middle East- Post Arab Spring Period

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Introduction

The popular demonstrations manifest– what was dubbed as "Arab Spring", coupled with the responses of the governments in power and the ensuing political changes in the Middle East, have had critical implications for regional security and stability. These uprisings shook the foundations of regional political landscape and have left deep marks on the political culture of the Middle East.

The Middle East has been in transition since late 2010. The large-scale demonstrations across Arab states sparked by self-immolation of a street vendor in Tunisia had wide ranging impact on the politics of the region. The wave of mass protests, spreading from Tunisia to other neighboring states, has been termed 'Arab Spring'.[1] These uprisings brought dramatic transformations in four states: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. In the wake of these developments political upheavals were set in motion in other states as well. The regime in power in Bahrain was undermined; stability of Saudi Arabia was threatened; and most crucially it unleashed a civil war in Syria which continues unabated. The rest of the regimes in power in other Arab states have been shaken, momentarily, at the very least. These revolutions, popular movements or uprisings, however they may be described, are arguably the most significant development in the regional politics of Middle East in decades.

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[1] The term "Arab spring" was first used by conservative US commentators to describe the small scale pro democracy protests in Iraq and Egypt in 2005. Charles Kutmaar in an op-ed called it so
http://seattletimes.com/html/opinion/2002214060_krauthammer21.html
When Tunsian fruit vendor committed suicide Foreign Policy Magazine published an article titled, "Obama's Arab Spring", and from there commenced popular usage of the term.
http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/01/06/obamas_arab_spring

Background of Arab Spring

The initial protests soon developed into mass movements because they were born out of the long-term failure of Arab states to provide political freedom and economic opportunities to their citizens. The resentment in the Arab world against the prevalent socio-political system had been brewing for years, till it boiled over. Existing socio-economic inequalities between the common people and governing elite had been further exacerbated by the rising global food prices since 2008, and effects of global financial crisis. It is, therefore, not surprising that these protests driven by identical conditions, shared a common theme: change of state policies and demands for increased representation in the political systems.

The protests first forced president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia to resign after nearly twenty five years in office. Next, they spread to Egypt where within two weeks strongman, Hosni Mubarak was forced to give up power. After the removal of Mubarak the military took over the reins of power, held elections, and Muslim Brotherhood (MB) led by Mr. Morsi formed the government. Morsi attempted to quickly gain control of vital state institutions including the military and judiciary, but differences soon emerged between MB and military authorities. Moreover, various political groups clashed over drafting of the constitution. Soon unrest erupted again and a new wave of protests started and President Morsi was removed in the military coup backed by certain political groups. Today military is back again as a new military strongman Gen Al-Sisi has assumed power after winning the presidential election.

In Libya, civil war broke out when Colonel Muammar al-Qadhafi attempted to suppress the mass movement which had turned violent. International community led by NATO countries intervened which eventually led to killing of Qadhafi and formation of a new government led by rival political groups. Yemen also witnessed a civil war, as President Ali Abdullah Salih resisted attempts aimed at his ouster but ultimately had to resign.

Moreover, demonstrations took place in parts of Saudi Arabia, the regional leader. In Bahrain protestors succeeded in building momentum against the Al-Khalifa family in power there, despite attempts to suppress it by the police supported by forces of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). In Syria, the ruling Al-Assad family harshly repressed the protests and now a civil war with regional and

global dimensions is under-way. The number of casualties in the ongoing Syrian civil war is very high. Till early July 2014 more than 170,000 casualties have been documented.[1] Additionally, over two million Syrians have taken refuge in neighboring countries.[2] On 4th June Syria held presidential elections amid civil war, and President Bashar Al-Asad was re-elected with overwhelming majority for a third seven year term. Rebels and international community have however denounced the elections as farce.[3] Meanwhile, external actors are reportedly supplying men and material to both sides. Islamist groups are also taking part in the fighting, while diplomacy for resolving the crisis has failed.

Though the autocratic rulers in Middle East who had ruled their countries with an iron fist have been deposed, the state structures they had created still endure. Especially, the powerful security apparatus built by them to ensure domestic stability and protection of their regimes did not disappear with the ouster of the rulers. By and large the transitions in these countries have ushered in new political regimes which have failed to deliver on promises of change and better governance which the protesters had demanded.

Nevertheless, Arab Spring was an event of historic magnitude nearly equal in significance to the Arab awakening of late nineteenth century that led to the creation of Arab nation-states. It can also be compared to the regional transformations after the Second World War when Arabs expelled imperialist powers, replaced many royal families and also sought to build a pan-Arab union rooted in socialism as advocated by Gamal Abdul Nasser.[4]

It is in this background that few states in the region are attempting to enhance their security by vying for regional dominance and containing the impact of dramatic political turmoil. This has led to the emergence of new dynamics in the Middle East: internal political contests have been fused with geo-political interests of the nations. For understanding the emerging dynamics of regional security and stability, it is important to briefly explore broad contours of evolving regional security architecture of Middle East.

Brief History of Middle Eastern Regional Security Order

Maintaining a balance among various powers, regional and extra-regional, has been an enduring feature of the regional security architecture of the Middle East

during the 20th century. From 19th to the middle of the twentieth century the Middle East, and in particular the Persian Gulf region, has been central to security and stability in the international system. During most of the 19th century and effectively till the end of Second World War Britain not only wielded extensive influence in the Middle East but also exerted greater control over the Persian Gulf region (also termed as 'East of Suez'). British protectorates in the region included modern day states comprising United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Iraq. Governments of these states relied on the advice of British authorities in all matters despite being autonomous territories. Strategically the location of these states was crucial for imperial Britain as they provided important docking and refueling facilities and also served as military stations between Britain and its Indian empire. Moreover, Britain also had critical economic interests to safeguard and advance in the region. Persian Gulf and the larger Middle East region provided more than half of oil supply to British military forces from 1912 onwards.[2] Thus, for Britain maintaining stability in the region became a vital national interest to ensure oil supplies and secure access to the Suez Canal.

This translated into maintaining a vast military presence in the region by Britain. It had a garrison city stationing one army battalion and an airbase in Sharjah from 1932-1952.[5] British army, air force and navy also had stations in Bahrain from 1935 to 1970.[6] Britain also assumed responsibility of ensuring defence and security of each Gulf state by signing treaties.[3] This continued until 1967 when Britain announced its decision to withdraw its military forces and assets from 'East of Suez'. After the Second World War economic pressures, the rise of two new super-powers (US and Soviet Union) and a growing wave of decolonization made it difficult for Britain to hold on to its external territories. By 1971 all British forces left the region, paving the way for the United States and the then the USSR to expand their spheres of influence here.

The end of Second World War saw the beginning of Cold War between the USA and USSR. Access to Middle Eastern oil became a critical strategic objective of both superpowers. The US sought to contain communism and deny Soviet Union space

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[2]http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a524799.pdf; furthermore, a significant development was Royal navy switched to oil from coal in 1912.

[3] It entered into treaty with Oman in 1829, the Trucial States (the present-day United Arab Emirates) in 1835, Bahrain in 1861, Kuwait in 1899, and Qatar in 1916
http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/iais/downloads/Onley_Britain_and_Gulf_Shaikhdoms.pdf

for expanding its influence in states in the region (Suez crisis of 1956 is an example)[4] and ensuring the security of Israel. From 1970s the US interests in the region have endured and grown. The US continues to focus on protecting its allies and partners i.e., ensuring security of Israel and building defense capabilities of Arab states to balance Iran as manifested by defense cooperation between GCC states and the US. Its objectives included ensuring free flow of energy from the region i.e., ensuring that the Persian Gulf remains open for world commerce as demonstrated by presence of US naval assets in the crucial Strait of Hormuz, disrupting terrorist organizations aiming to threaten US interests, containing Al-Qaeda and other transnational groups, and prevention of the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region.[7]

In order to promote its strategic and economic interests in the region the US built several military alliances in the first decade after World War-II. One example of such alliances is the Baghdad Pact signed with Iran, Pakistan, and Iraq in 1950.[8] After the British withdrawal from the Middle East, US pursued a "twin-pillars policy".[9] It then relied on Saudi Arabia for its diplomatic and financial power and Iran for its military power and strategic access to the Strait of Hormuz. During this period it provided military supplies and extensive economic aid to 'pro-Western' governments in the region as well. The oil crisis of 1973 and Iranian revolution of 1979 were major setbacks for this policy. To restore stability the US increased its military engagement by deploying naval assets and stationing forces in the region. Moreover, it encouraged negotiations between Israel and Arab states in order to end military conflicts. Peace treaty between Egypt, the primary military power in the Arab world, and Israel was concluded in 1978.[10] This peace treaty and subsequent agreements between Israel and other Arab states froze the Arab-

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[4]On July 26, 1956, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser announced nationalization of Suez Canal, which was owned and operated by a joint British and French enterprise. Though President Nasser announced compensation to the company but French and British governments were outraged. They launched a military operation to secure the canal and take back control of the area. Meanwhile, acting on secret understanding with British and French governments, Israel also attacked Egypt across Sinai Peninsula and to within 10 miles of the Suez Canal. British and French forces captured the canal, but United States fearful of Soviet intervention in the region, publically censured Britain and France and called on them to accept United Nations ceasefire and pressured them to withdraw their forces. For more details see Calvocoressi, Peter. Suez ten years after. Pantheon Books, 1967. Louis, W. R., & Owen, R. (1989). Suez 1956: The Crisis and Its Consequence. Oxford University Press on Demand.

Israeli conflict and restored regional stability. Egypt agreed to provide unfettered access to Suez Canal in lieu of the US arms supply and economic aid.[11]

In 1980s Western nations supported Iraq in the eight year long Iran-Iraq war from 1980-88.[12] But when Iraq attempted to annex Kuwait, Saudi Arabia called on the US and western nations to intervene militarily. Autonomy of Kuwait was restored after the US military launched the operation Desert Storm in August, 1990. The first Gulf War (1990) managed to liberate Kuwait and contain Iraq, and reinstated Saudi pre-eminence in the region and the Muslim world. This war also shaped the contours of a new regional security order by 1991, which gave each regional actor a chance of survival. But peace as a result of war proved fragile.[13]

The *status quo* established by 1990 war lasted during the decade of 90s. But US-led war against Iraq (2003-2011) however disturbed the regional balance. The US attempted to contain Iranian influence and its regional power through offensive engagement in Iran's immediate neighborhood. During a 2002 speech US President George W. Bush termed Iran as part of "Axis of Evil", and alleged that it had attempted to build nuclear weapons and exported terrorism.[14] Thus US military presence in Iraq constituted a direct threat to Iran.[15] The US also sought to promote Israel as the regional power. But this seemed to have the opposite effect. In last one decade, wars within Iraq and Afghanistan had freed Iran of pressures on its borders with both these neighbors. Furthermore, as a result of this war Iran became a more powerful player and was able to wield influence in post-Saddam Iraq and project power in Lebanon and Palestine by supporting Hezbollah and Hamas.[16] Additional pressures were exerted on Iran after the US and Israeli intelligence sources claimed that it was developing nuclear weapons. The crisis over Iranian nuclear endeavors has been continuing since 2002. West negotiated with Iran during this period and at the same time put sanctions against it. Iran endured the brunt of the economic sanctions put against it by the US, the United Nations and the European Union for years but subsequently decided to negotiate on its nuclear program. It reached an interim agreement with the Western powers in November 2013 for gradual freeze of nuclear activities in return for part lifting of sanctions.[17]

Identity Based Politics

A defining characteristic of competition among regional powers in the Middle East is identity based politics. Many fault lines among different sectarian and ethnic groups exist here. These include Sunni-Shia, Kurdish-Arabs-Persian, and various different religious and tribal communities. The fault lines present a strategic opportunity for a state actor to mobilize motivated groups in another nation to promote unrest.[18] As the influence of Iran expanded in the last one decade the existing fault lines between Shias and Sunnis became wider. In 2004, Jordanian monarch Abdullah warned of an ideological threat from the rising Shia Crescent i.e., Shia countries and communities in Iran, Southern Iraq, Lebanon and Syria.[19] This warning was aimed at pushing other Sunni Arab states and Egypt towards a more cooperative security partnership with Israel and the US for containing Iran.

It was in the backdrop of this fragile regional security order that Arab spring or popular uprisings erupted. In the ensuing situation regional states endeavored for ensuring internal political stability and safeguarding their interests in the region, as well as containing rise of Iran and non-state actors.

Geopolitical Implications of the Uprisings

The uprising in Arab states translated into advent of wide-spread internal and trans-border violence. As a result of uprisings monopoly of national security apparatus over violence gradually eroded, while governing institutions became more inefficient as ungoverned spaces within national boundaries increased. Such conditions encouraged ethnic, secessionists, religious, and sectarian groups, with grievances against the *status quo* to raise their own militant wings. These violent non-state actors or armed groups with political objectives continued to challenge the writ of the state and expanded control over territories in many Arab states. As these groups were spreading across many countries violence assumed a regional character and has caused destabilization in the whole region.

Growing unrest in the Sinai region of Egypt is a case in point. The peace established after the Camp David Accords, of 1979, had made Sinai a strategic buffer zone between Egypt and Israel.[20] Sinai had been home to militant insurgents in late 80s and 90s, but insurgency ultimately subsided by 1998 as a

result of strong actions taken by Hosni Mubarak regime.[21]'[5] With the weakening of the Egyptian state, following the removal of Hosni Mubarak, tribal militants have increased attacks on Egyptian security forces. They aim to establish an Islamic regime in Egypt spreading out from Sinai.[22] They had also attempted to attack Israeli security forces, which potentially threatens long term peace between Egypt and Israel. The crisis in August 2012 was overcome with the US intervention and increased cooperation between Egyptian and Israeli militaries.[23]

Similarly non-state actors are active in Yemen and most recently in Syria as well as in Iraq. Al-Qaeda and other Islamic militants are capitalizing on the weakening governance capabilities of these states. As a result they have become a critical challenge for regional security of the Middle East.

Relative Absence of an External Balancer

In the last few years the ability of the major extra-regional power i.e., US, to shape events have been undermined to some extent but it still maintains considerable economic, military and political leverage in the region. With the emergence of highly fragmented polities in many countries of the region space for the US interventions has also shrunk. Its efforts have often led to further destabilization of the region. Meanwhile, regional actors are seeking support of other extra-regional powers, both middle level powers and great powers, in the regional competition as the developments in Syria have demonstrated. These powers include countries of Europe, Russia and China.

European states have deepened their political, economic and security cooperation with Middle Eastern states bilaterally and also from the platform of European Union since the advent of political changes in the region. Europe has been calling on Arab states to democratize and has also provided economic support to stabilize Arab economies. Moreover, during the Libyan civil war NATO intervened militarily to oust Muammar al-Qadhafi. After the overthrow of regimes in power in Arab states, EU provided support for the election process and institution building to Tunisia, Egypt and Algeria. It also enhanced regional cooperation with the Union of Mediterranean and Arab League.[24]

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[5]Mubarak regime employed zero tolerance approach i.e. brutal crackdown on insurgents to contain the threat. This was a crucial part of Egypt's treaty obligations when Camp David accords were concluded in1978.

During the early years of Arab spring Russian involvement in the region has been low-key but as the new political dispensations took root, Russia also began exploring avenues for cooperation. At one time it even expressed a desire to work with Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. But after removal of Morsi government, Cairo and Moscow held talks for arms sale worth $2 billion comprising 'advanced aircraft, helicopters and surface-to-air missiles'.[25] Washington in the meanwhile had held back from supplying Egyptian security forces with aid and arms.[26] But Russian engagement in the region increased as Syrian civil war intensified. Moscow has been providing Assad regime economic and military support, and maintains a naval base in Syria. It, along with China, also vetoed United Nations Security Council's resolution threatening Syria with sanctions or military intervention for its continued use of force against the protestors.[27] These Russian maneuvers have curtailed ability of the US and its Arab allies to remove Bashar Al-Assad from power.

In recent years China as well has made significant inroads in the Middle Eastern states. In last one decade China's trade with the Arab world has increased almost tenfold from $25.5 billion in 2004 to $239 billion in 2013.[28] After several months of political instability Arab states increased engagements with China in recent years to gain economic support for development. Egypt during President Morsi's government actively sought economic and trade cooperation from China.[29] When ties between Saudi Arabia and the US had strained Riyadh increased oil export to Beijing,[30] and gave it contracts for major development and infrastructure projects.[31] Similarly, Iran awarded major telecommunication and construction contracts to Chinese companies, while Iraq has also opened up its oil fields to China.[32] Arab states view Beijing as a reliable ally because it is against interference in their internal affairs and does not support democratization process. Its preference is promotion of stability in the region.

Despite political, economic and military cooperation these actors lack the capability to decisively affect the course of events. Unlike the US these powers therefore, do not propose to project military power by stationing their forces in the Middle East. Regional states are increasingly wary of the fact that the US is downgrading its military engagements in the region as it pivots to Asia-Pacific. This has translated into the struggle among regional states for security and stability in the absence of a credible extra regional power. Regional competition among states after the US' refusal to take decisive action against the Assad regime,

and tension between Iran and group of GCC states led by Saudi Arabia, civil wars with regional spillover as demonstrated by Syrian conflict, are manifestations of this phenomenon. The rising powers of Russia and China are aggravating local conflicts in an attempt to countervail the US, while regional actors are exacerbating the conflicts as evidenced in Syria where GCC and other regional states are supporting rebel groups. In addition Iran and Russia are actively supporting the Assad regime.

The Emerging Regional Actors

In last three years regional power balance in the Middle Eastern region has been reshaped. A few states have made some short term gains, while influence of others has waned. States have sought to balance and compete for power at regional level as the disinclination of the US to intervene forcefully have created space for them to act. Egypt the traditional leader of the Arab world, was embroiled in political turmoil, three other states; Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, played a vital regional role in influencing regional political dynamics. Qatar with its huge media soft power and being a financial powerhouse, has made attempts to play a critical role on the regional scale. Iraq, on the contrary, is still recovering from its long war, while Syria has become the new venue for regional competition among extra regional and regional powers.

Egypt however remains central to regional developments despite having faced internal instability recently. Post-Mubarak Egypt is no longer capable of playing an active role in regional politics. On the contrary, it has itself become the arena of power play among regional players notably, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Turkey and Qatar. Saudi Arabia and UAE supported Mubarak regime, while Qatar and Turkey decided to back Muslim Brotherhood government led by Morsi.[33] Thus, the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood government was, in part, a result of regional rivalry. Post-Morsi Egypt relied on economic bailout from Saudi Arabia and UAE, while limits to the power of Qatar and Turkey became evident after a strong blow was dealt to Muslim Brotherhood in the region.[34]

In recent years, Turkey has emerged as the key regional actor and relies more on its soft power rather than on its quite substantial military strength. It has huge economic investment in the Middle Eastern states and its economy has been growing at a fast pace. With a political system inspired by ideals of an Islamic

democracy and a vibrant economy it seeks a role of the moderator in the region and become a role model for other Muslim states. Turkey also improved its international image as it has resolved its disputes with its neighbors. Turkish democracy however has come under pressure recently, as people took to streets to protest against growing attempts by the government to suppress freedom of expression and its encroachment on the secular characteristics of the state and society.[35] Growing internal unrest has also put strains on Turkish regional foreign policy and impaired its ability to influence the Middle Eastern states.

The uprisings and subsequent instability had been unique to Iran in the Middle East before 1980. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979 Iran has not only stabilized internally it has also extended its influence to other Muslim states. It has intervened in internal affairs of countries which had sizeable Shia population including, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain.[6] In backdrop of Iraq war of 2003 led by the US, Iran expanded its influence in the Iraqi political system.[36] Hence, when Arab uprising began it initially looked as if Iran would benefit by the revolution in Egypt, the rise of MB, and most notably by protests in Shia-majority Bahrain. But the tide soon turned the other way. The protracted civil war in Syria has been a great setback to Tehran's strategy, but Iran remains fully committed to the defense of the Assad regime. Moreover, interim agreement between Iran and the Western powers on the nuclear issue has opened up prospects of wider US-Iran cooperation in the region.

Saudi Arabia and Resurgence of GCC

For Saudi Arabia, Arab uprisings were a strategic shock. In last one decade Saudi kingdom has been confronted with a wide range of strategic insecurities. It is concerned about Iranian attempts to develop a nuclear deterrent and also worried about sustainability of the regimes in Bahrain and Jordan, and about other regimes that failed to control uprisings in their countries. For Saudi Arabia, an Islamist party on the scale of Muslim Brotherhood would be an existential threat.

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[6]When the Shiites Rise By Vali Nasr From *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2006; Moreover, Shias are a strong majority in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Yemen, and Bahrain. There are substantial Shia minorities in Kuwait (35 percent), Qatar (15–20 percent), the United Arab Emirates (six percent), Pakistan (15 percent), and Afghanistan (15 percent).http://archive.wilsonquarterly.com/sites/default/files/articles/WQ_VOL30_A_2006_Article_01.pdf

Nonetheless Saudi Arabia has managed to muddle through by allowing controlled domestic reforms, beefing up its security apparatus and by forming flexible alliances with other regional and international actors. Saudi Arabia along with Turkey has been supporting Sunni cause in Syria, Bahrain and also in Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon.

Saudi Arabia has been the main driver behind the rise of the GCC. It was GCC forces, primarily Saudi military, which repressed the protesters in Bahrain.[37] Moreover, Saudi Arabia, through GCC has sought to contain and roll back Iran's expansion into the Arab world. GCC has strengthened its strategic relationship with the US for defending and deterring a wide-range of threats.[38] Meanwhile, the US has positioned major military assets in the region including a naval command and a base in Bahrain, regional headquarters of a major combatant command in Qatar, and has military bases in Kuwait, UAE and Oman and a few thousand troops are also stationed in Saudi Arabia to ensure stability of the regime.[39]

Conclusion

Impact of Arab uprisings on the states and societies of the Middle East has been profound and its after-effects will continue to impact the region for few decades to come. These uprisings had an internal as well as an external dimension. People demanded real change as a result of violent political activity. But their demand of political empowerment did not translate into a meaningful change in the nature of Middle Eastern states. States increasingly adapted and provided greater space to the people in the political systems. But growing internal instability and deepening Islamists vs. non-Islamists divide, sectarian fault lines and civil unrest have led to economic stagnation, increase in violence and weakening of governing apparatuses.

Arab uprisings shook the regional security order, as threats to regional security and stability grew manifold. States in the region adjusted their security arrangements to cope with these threats and competed and cooperated with each other, as well as, external powers to contain the growing threats and preserve regional stability. The regimes that were considered anchors of stability in the region experienced sudden upheavals but they managed to survive. Broad structures of regional security and stability have therefore, remained in place. The government of Muslims Brotherhood, despite its rhetoric of being anti-Israel could

not withdraw Egypt from the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. Similarly, GCC, which was formed to ensure security and stability in Gulf region, dominated the uprising through use of force as regional security architecture remained intact.

A significant change in the regional security order however, has been the emergence of new regional and extra regional powers. Today Turkey is asserting itself as an influential actor in the region, while Saudi Arabia is seeking alliances with powers outside the region. Similarly, Russia and China are also deeply engaged in the regional security and stability as both have vital economic and political interests in the Middle East. The role played by these actors can deeply influence the balance of regional power if competition and cooperation, between Middle Eastern states and extra-regional actors, increases in future.

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