



## THE ARAB SPRING: ITS GEOSTRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE<sup>1</sup>

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The democratic uprisings and consequent turmoil in the Arab world during the last 18 months have had significant impact on the geostrategic situation in the Middle East as well as on the policies of major regional and global powers. As the upheavals continue to unfold, especially in strategically important countries such as Syria and Bahrain, they will continue to have a major impact on intraregional politics as well as great-power interests.

### THE SYRIAN IMBROGLIO

Syria has for many decades been the bellwether of Arab politics, especially in times of intense ideological competition. This is the consequence of its strategic location between the two traditional centers of Arab power, Egypt and Iraq, and the perception that it is the heartland of Arab nationalism. In much of the twentieth century, Syria was seen as the ultimate prize for contending trends and powers; whichever ideological or political trend emerged victorious there came to dominate, more often than not, the Arab political scene. This was true in the 1950s and 1960s during the time of intense competition, indeed a cold war, between “revolutionary” military regimes espousing the cause of Arab nationalism and conservative monarchies determined to hold on to their power and privilege.<sup>2</sup> As Curtis Ryan points out with reference to the current situation, “Once again, regional politics shows many signs of an Arab cold war and, once again, that broader conflict is manifesting itself in a struggle for Syria.”<sup>3</sup>

However, this time around, non-Arab Iran is a leading protagonist in the new cold war in the Arab world, with Saudi Arabia as the rival pole of power. Turkey’s involvement in Syria has further complicated the picture, with Ankara and Riyadh lined up on the side of the opposition and Iran on the side of the regime. Iran’s role in the current regional cold war has introduced sectarian (Shia versus Sunni) as well ethnic (Persian versus Arab) divisions into the competition for pre-eminence in the region. Tehran is a firm supporter of the Asad regime, Iran’s primary Arab ally and an essential conduit for Iranian military and financial support to the Lebanese Hezbollah. It is also perceived by the Iranian regime as a part of the “resistance” front against Israel, one of Iran’s two primary regional antagonists—the other being Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, supports the Sunni-dominated opposition against the Asad regime largely because of the latter’s connection with Iran. There are reports not only of financial support to the Syrian opposition by the Saudi and Qatari governments, but also of weapons transfers from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to the Free Syrian Army and other armed elements that have been fighting the regime’s soldiers as well as launching attacks against government targets.<sup>4</sup> Such external support has helped turn a movement for democracy against an authoritarian regime into a full-fledged civil war.

These reports seem to be borne out by the increasing lethality of opposition attacks on regime targets above all on the nerve center of the security apparatus of the regime on July 18, 2012, that killed several top

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regime stalwarts including the Defense Minister and the brother-in-law of President Bashar al-Asad. Several respected analysts have predicted that this event marks the beginning of the end of the Assad regime.<sup>5</sup> Current trends in the fighting in Syria demonstrate two things. First, that the involvement of regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey on behalf of the opposition and Iran on the side of the regime has turned the conflict

in Syria from a domestic to a regional affair. Second, it also demonstrates that while the supporters of the Assad regime, both regional and extra-regional, suffer from constraints imposed upon them by international opinion, supporters of the opposition suffer from no such constraint as the rebels' cause is increasing perceived as legal by the international community.

What happens in and to Syria could have not merely regional but also global ramifications, thanks to the Syrian regime's links with Russia and, secondarily, with China, and the supported extended to the opposition by the United States and its European allies Russia and China have so far resisted Western calls to put pressure on Asad to resign. They have also vetoed three UN Security Council resolutions seeking to impose sanctions on Syria, the most recent on July 19, 2012.<sup>6</sup> During a recent visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin to China, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Weimin told reporters that China and Russia both "oppose external intervention in the Syrian situation and oppose regime change by force."<sup>7</sup> In the words of one analyst, "Russia's leaders have said repeatedly that their goal is to guard against instability, not to support Mr. Asad. They have signaled that Russia would accept a change of leadership in Syria, but only if devised by Syrians and not imposed from outside, an unlikely prospect in a country riven by violence."<sup>8</sup> This seems to signal that, while Moscow is not committed to the indefinite preservation of the Assad regime, it is averse to a Libyan-style Western intervention that would damage Russia's standing and role in Syria, its sole ally in the Arab Mediterranean. The fact that Russia's sole military base outside the countries that formed the former Soviet Union is located in Tartus, Syria, should not be underestimated especially since its psychological value to Moscow is greater than its strategic worth.

While the Russian connection with Syria functions as a constraint on the Western powers' proclivity to directly intervene in Syria, the Assad regime's close relationship with Iran acts as an incentive for the United States to seek the regime's removal, especially in the context of the stand

off between Iran and the P5+1 (the 5 permanent members of the UN security council plus Germany) on the nuclear issue. Syria is Iran's trump card in the Arab world; it acts

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as a conduit to Hezbollah, augmenting Tehran's potential for retaliation against Israeli and American targets for attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities.

Working against this logic is the fact that Western intervention to depose the Asad regime is likely to leave the United States and its allies stuck in a quagmire, since they do not seem to have a plan for post-Asad Syria. It may thus turn out to be a re-run of the Iraq war, which has left the U.S. image in tatters in the Middle East. Such an intervention without the clear endorsement of the Security Council—highly unlikely because of Russian and Chinese opposition—can also embroil the Western powers and regional allies like Turkey in serious conflicts with Iran and Russia. This is the primary reason why the United States, while cranking up its anti-Asad rhetoric and covertly supporting the armed opposition, has refrained from calling for military intervention to remove the Syrian regime a la Libya.

However, events like the Houla massacre on May 25, 2012, may force Western military intervention because of the pressure of public opinion, despite the fact that neither the United States nor its European allies have any appetite for it.<sup>9</sup> It is in order to prevent this contingency that sober voices, including that of former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, have been advising Western leaders not to get militarily involved in the Syrian situation.<sup>10</sup> Some

analysts have even gone to the extent of arguing that the West should allow Russia to take the lead in finding a solution, especially since military intervention could easily lead to anarchy without achieving the goal of removing the Asad regime.<sup>11</sup> The lack of unity among the opposition forces adds to the fear of anarchy in Syria once the Asad regime is toppled. According to one analyst, "Political chaos and continuing violence after Assad seems almost guaranteed. A wide gulf has opened between the exiled political opposition and the commanders of the rebels on the ground; there are tensions between the Muslim Brotherhood and other groupings; and regional militias are establishing themselves as provincial powers."<sup>12</sup> External forces, both regional and extra-regional, are likely to be sucked in more deeply into the Syrian morass if this scenario unfolds over the next few months.

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## THE CASE OF BAHRAIN

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Bahrain, like Syria, is strategically very significant both globally and regionally. It is the home of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, which is responsible for American naval forces in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, Arabian Sea and the East African coast as far south as Kenya. The military significance of the Fifth Fleet has been greatly enhanced because of the confrontation between the United States and Iran. The Fifth Fleet's armada will be in charge of carrying out any decision by Washington to launch strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities.

The American naval presence in Bahrain becomes all the more important in this context. Any major transformation of the domestic political order in Bahrain could threaten the naval base and thus have a major impact on American force projection in the Persian Gulf. This outcome would seem more than likely given the pro-Iranian sympathies of the majority Shia population in Bahrain, which would be empowered in a democratic transition. This is likely to shift the psychological, if not the military, balance in Iran's favor by putting on notice other Gulf monarchies,

such as Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE, that an American military presence or security umbrella is unlikely to protect their regimes indefinitely. In fact, the fall of the Bahrain monarchy would likely convey the message that an overt American connection might be counterproductive from the perspective of regime security because of popular antipathy towards the United States.

The overthrow of the Bahrain monarchy, or even a reduction in its absolute power, would have a major impact on the regional balance between Saudi Arabia, the regime's leading protector, and Iran, whose sympathies lie with the majority of the population. It was no surprise that the Saudis, using the cover of the GCC, of which both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are members, sent troops into Bahrain in March 2011; they were ready and willing to protect the regime at all cost. Saudi Arabia thus ensured that the hardliners within the regime, led by the prime minister, emerged victorious over accommodationists, represented by the crown prince, who were inclined to reach a compromise with the democracy movement. The Saudi move also emboldened the Bahraini regime to crack down sharply on the pro-democracy protestors, turning the confrontation into a zero-sum game.<sup>13</sup>

Recent reports suggest that the Saudi and Bahraini governments are working toward some sort of union that would allow the Saudis to control Bahrain's defense and foreign policies in return for ensuring the security of the Al-Khalifa regime. The majority of Bahrain's population is opposed to this move but has no say in the matter. It is the fear on the part of other GCC members that the Saudis will use the same model to erode their independence that has been holding up the Saudi-Bahraini merger.<sup>14</sup> The Saudi interest in supporting the armed movement against the pro-Iranian Syrian regime is in part dictated by the need to keep Tehran pre-occupied with the Syrian situation thus preventing it from adopting a more active stance in the Persian Gulf in general and Bahrain in particular. This coincides with the American strategy of preventing Iran from expanding its influence in the energy-rich Persian Gulf region by forcing it to concentrate its

diplomatic capabilities on Syria.<sup>15</sup> Syria also shows up the contradictions in Iranian policies toward the Arab Spring—supporting democracy in Bahrain while opposing it in Syria—thus detracting from its credibility in the Arab world.

## THE ARAB SPRING AND ISRAEL

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The geostrategic fallout from the upheavals in the Arab world are not restricted to the fact that they have accentuated and accelerated the cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Neither is their impact limited to the negative consequences they may have for the U.S.-Russian relationship. Israel, the *bête noire* of both the secular nationalists and the Islamists in the Middle East, has been watching this drama unfold in its neighborhood with great consternation.

This is particularly true of the transformations taking place in Egypt, the first Arab country to sign a peace treaty with Israel, and whose president had been a reliable ally of the Jewish state for over 30 years. The Hosni Mubarak regime had, among other things, collaborated with Israel to keep Hamas hemmed in, above all by closing the Rafah crossing and preventing aid from reaching the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip. Not much has changed so far in the relationship between the Egyptian authorities and Gaza despite the symbolic opening of the Rafah crossing; it remains open only sporadically, with what passes through it strictly controlled by Egypt. But this could change in the near future as a democratic dispensation takes hold in Egypt.

Consequently, with the transfer of power from military to civilian authorities in Egypt imminent, and with the Muslim Brotherhood likely to control both the Parliament and the presidency, Israel is apprehensive. The entire dynamic between Egypt and Hamas, on the one hand, and Egypt and Israel, on the other, is likely to undergo radical change. According to Israeli analyst Yoram Meital, "The changes in Israeli-Egyptian ties will be wide and

deep. Egypt is about to make a number of revisions to its security and foreign policies that many in Israel, particularly our decision makers, view with trepidation.”<sup>16</sup>

One should note, however, that the antipathy toward Israel in Egypt transcends the Islamist-non-Islamist divide. According to a recent poll by the Pew Research Center, released in May 2012, 61 percent of Egyptians are in favor of annulling the peace treaty with Israel.<sup>17</sup> Another poll, conducted by Shibley Telhami of the University

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of Maryland in May 2012, showed that 97 percent of Egyptians consider Israel a major threat to their country.<sup>18</sup> These figures demonstrate that any democratically elected government in Egypt is likely to adopt a more hard-line posture toward Israel than that of the preceding regime. This would be especially true if the current Israeli policy of occupation and colonization of Palestinian lands continues, and if the Egyptian Sinai remains de-militarized according to the terms of the Camp David agreement. Most Egyptians see the latter provision as a significant derogation of Egyptian sovereignty.<sup>19</sup>

The replacement of the Asad regime by an opposition government in Damascus is likely to be, at best, a mixed blessing for Israel. Its gain from the fall of a Syrian regime allied with its regional adversary Iran may quickly vanish if it is replaced by a government with Islamist tendencies that reflects the popular sympathy for the Palestinian cause. Such a government is also expected to make the return of the Golan Heights to Syria a major part of its foreign policy agenda. The Asad regime, despite its

occasional anti-Israeli rhetoric, had ensured that its border with Israel remains quiet, an arrangement that suited Israel admirably. However, if a democratic government came to power in Damascus, Israel's border with Syria, like its border with Egypt, might once again become a point of military and political tension, especially in the context of Israel's continuing occupation of the Golan.<sup>20</sup> Israel is therefore ambivalent about, if not opposed to, regime change in Syria, thus putting it somewhat at odds with at least the declared position of the Obama administration, which has called unequivocally for the removal of Asad from power.<sup>21</sup>

Israeli apprehension of Arab uprisings against authoritarian rulers is summed up by a leading strategic analyst: “Jerusalem realizes that the demonstrating crowds in the Arab streets are not likely to be effective agents of democratization and that the popular sentiment in the Arab world is largely anti-Western and of course anti-Israel.” He concludes, “As Israel's strategic environment becomes more hostile, the expansion of the IDF and the updating of its war-fighting scenarios is a necessity.”<sup>22</sup> Israeli reactions based on such partly false assumptions are likely to exacerbate regional tensions as the Arab upheavals continue to unfold. Given America's close relationship with Israel, the latter's negative feelings “also have the potential to complicate the U.S.-Israel relationship further and make it harder for the United States to benefit from the Arab Spring.”<sup>23</sup>

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## REGIONAL INFLUENTIALS

Despite major uncertainties accompanying the current uprisings, one thing is clear: Most of the energies of Arab governments, whether authoritarian or democratic, will be concentrated in tackling domestic issues for the next few years, if not decades. This would leave them with little inclination to pursue pro-active foreign policies—except for tiny Qatar, flush with gas wealth and ready to use its high international profile to enhance the legitimacy of its

regime among its tiny native population.

### *Saudi Arabia*

The only major Arab country likely to engage in active diplomacy is Saudi Arabia. Its enormous oil wealth gives it the means, and it feels threatened by a nexus of external and internal forces demanding an active foreign policy to curb the growth of Iranian influence in the region. Saudi Arabia, with its vast reserves of oil, a respectable demographic base, and a huge inventory of sophisticated armaments bought from the West, principally the United States, is located at the center of the Arab Gulf system and is the predominant power in the GCC. Its geostrategic competition with Iran and self-proclaimed role as the protector of Sunni interests against Iran and its Shia co-religionists in Iraq and the Levant have increased its value as an American ally and made it the central pillar of U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf. However, Saudi Arabia is perhaps a colossus with feet of clay. Bolstering its capabilities, principally by the transfer of high-tech weapons from the United States, is unlikely to change the balance of power between Riyadh and Tehran. The Saudi state is vulnerable; it is led by octogenarians, lacks genuine political institutions, and has to rely simply on cash to influence events. Consequently, Saudi Arabia's inherent weakness and the built-in contradictions in its foreign policy are likely to limit its regional appeal and considerably hobble its diplomacy.<sup>24</sup>

### *Egypt*

Egypt, the traditional leader of the Arab world, will remain introverted for a long time to come, given its domestic political uncertainty and a decaying economy. This is likely to detract tremendously from its capacity to influence regional affairs. Despite more political openness and a public face of civilian rule, it is unlikely that the fundamental power structure will undergo radical transformation, except in the very long run, if and when civilian forces are able to chip away at the military's domination of political and economic life. Therefore, it is unlikely that the Egyptian

revolution, while it may spur other Arab countries to follow suit, will have a major impact on the strategic landscape in the Middle East in the short and medium terms. The current stand off between the military and the Muslim Brotherhood following the former's decision to disband the elected parliament on flimsy legalistic grounds makes it even more certain that Egypt will continue to be fixated on the domestic struggle for power at the expense of expanding its regional role.

### *Iraq*

The other traditional major center of Arab power, Iraq, is centrally located in the Middle East, connecting the Fertile Crescent to the Persian Gulf. However, Iraq's power was drastically depleted and its influence dramatically curtailed, beginning with the Gulf War of 1991. Iraq's decline became a full-blown reality following the invasion by the United States in 2003. Since then, it has been mired in the domestic mess created by the invasion and the attendant destruction of its state institutions and governing capacity. Furthermore, the invasion decimated it militarily and drastically reduced its capacity to influence regional events diplomatically. Its fractious politics and continuing domestic violence have also contributed to making Iraq more an object of influence—from Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United States—than an autonomous center of power with the ability to influence regional events.<sup>25</sup>

The basic lesson of the account so far is that the Arab world, in general, and major Arab powers, in particular, with the possible exception of Saudi Arabia, will not be in a position to greatly affect regional outcomes for the next couple of decades. This leaves the three non-Arab powers—Israel, Turkey and Iran—as major regional players. They bring different strengths and weaknesses to the table.

### *Israel*

Israel's major strength is its military capacity, conventional and nuclear, underwritten by the United States. So far,

it has been a strategic objective of the United States to ensure Israeli conventional military dominance and nuclear exceptionalism in the Middle East. This has encouraged Israel to engage in policies of continued occupation and colonization of Palestinian territories. It has also allowed Israel to destroy with impunity Iraqi and Syrian nuclear facilities and seriously threaten Iran over its nuclear-enrichment program, with the aim of dragging Washington into a shooting war with Tehran.<sup>26</sup>

However, despite its military power, the vast majority of the region's population considers Israel as *in* the Middle East but not *of* the Middle East, due to its settler-colonial origins. This perception is augmented by the Jewish state's demonstrated capacity to draw upon America's unquestioning support for its policies, including those perceived in the region as expansionist and aggressive, based upon the Israel lobby's enormous domestic clout in the United States.<sup>27</sup> Israel, therefore, suffers from a huge legitimacy deficit and is considered an extension of Western power in the Middle East.

As stated above, the fall of pro-Western authoritarian regimes such as that of Mubarak and the rising tide of democracy in the Arab world have further eroded Israel's capacity to influence the course of events in much of the Middle East. Popularly elected governments sensitive to public opinion while adhering to treaties are likely to be

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more hostile toward Israel as compared to their autocratic predecessors. This conclusion is augmented by the fact that, as Robert Malley points out, "[T]he question of Palestine still resonates more deeply than any other [in Arab countries], and it's going to be very hard for any aspiring political leader in these countries to try to gain

political capital by normalization or by advocating peace with Israel."<sup>28</sup> Israel's political position in the region is likely to weaken further, especially as the United States begins to disengage from the Middle East in the wake of disastrous interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. In this context, Israel's military prowess is of limited value. The reality is that most people in the Middle East treat Israel as a "pariah" state with no legitimate role in regional politics.

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## PIVOTAL POWERS

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A constellation of several factors has paved the way for the emergence of Turkey and Iran as the pivotal powers in the Middle East. These factors include the incapacity of major Arab powers to influence the course of regional events as well as what increasingly appears to be the end of "America's moment" in the Middle East, following its disastrous military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan and its failure to stand up to the Netanyahu government on the issue of Jewish colonization of Palestinian lands.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, both Turkey and Iran possess a combination of varying degrees of hard and soft power that equip them to affect regional events to a greater extent than their neighbors.<sup>30</sup> Conversely, both Iran and Turkey have developed major stakes in the outcome of the democratic uprisings in the Arab world that have come to affect their strategic and economic interests; they even threaten to embroil them in bilateral confrontation, as is the case with Syria.

### Turkey

Initially, both Turkey and Iran welcomed the democratic uprisings against authoritarian Arab rulers, but for different reasons. For Turkey, the Arab Spring meant the reaffirmation of its own success in democratic consolidation, especially the curtailment of the military's power in the political sphere. Several Arab movements for democracy openly declared that Turkey provided the model they would like to emulate, raising its stature further

in the eyes of Arab publics.<sup>31</sup> Prime Minister Erdogan was treated like a rock star when he visited Egypt, Libya and Tunisia soon after the overthrow of authoritarian rule, and Turkish leaders were not averse to their country being seen as the role model for emerging Arab democracies.<sup>32</sup>

For different reasons, Iran welcomed the overthrow of pro-Western Arab dictators in Egypt and Tunisia, celebrating the revolutions that overthrew pro-Western dictators as extensions of its own Islamic revolution. Moreover, in the words of one analyst,

[Supreme Leader] Khamenei's view has always been that the more democracy there is in the Middle East...the better it is for Iran. He's seen over the last decade or so that, when democratic elections have taken place, in Lebanon they empowered Hezbollah, in Palestine they empowered Hamas, in Iraq they empowered Shiite Islamists. So...when the uprisings began in the Arab world, Khamenei felt fairly confident that this was going to be in line with Iran's interest, not America's.<sup>33</sup>

Paradoxically, as the democratic contagion spread, the attendant upheavals and civil conflicts put several of the gains made by Turkey and Iran over the past decade in jeopardy. These included Turkey's "zero problems with neighbors" policy as well as Iran's increasing popularity with the Arab street on issues ranging from Palestine to its defiance of Western powers over the nuclear issue. They also strained relations between Ankara and Tehran. This was the result of two factors: (a) the unpredictable nature of the Arab uprisings and the unanticipated outcomes of such upheavals and (b) the intrusion of geostrategic interests that complicated the cost-benefit analysis in both Ankara and Tehran.

Libya and Bahrain tested Ankara. After an initial period of hesitation, Turkey's commitment to democracy triumphed in the case of Libya. It remained dormant in the case of Bahrain, however, for reasons related to potentially lucrative economic dealings with the GCC states, in

general, and Saudi Arabia, in particular. Syria posed a similar problem for Iran, with geostrategic considerations trumping moral considerations. Syria also posed a major challenge for Turkey, which had invested a great deal economically and politically in improving relations with the Assad regime. Furthermore, Syria threatened to unravel the recently burgeoning relations between Turkey and Iran. As stated earlier, Tehran and Ankara ended up on opposite sides of the Syrian divide. Iran emerged as the major regional supporter of the Assad regime, and Turkey as the opposition's prime center of anti-regime operations, as well as the spearhead of the international strategy aimed at changing the political dispensation in Syria.

Three factors seem to have affected Turkey's decision regarding Syria. First, Ankara could not be seen to be ambivalent once the Assad regime started brutally suppressing the opposition and killing civilians. Turkey was flooded with refugees and the AKP government's own legitimacy rested on its democratic credentials. Second, Ankara calculated that the Assad regime was bound to fall sooner or later and did not want to alienate the future rulers of Syria, given Turkey's geostrategic and economic interests in a country it had tried so hard recently to cultivate. Third, Turkey found the Syrian uprising a convenient medium through which to signal the United States that it was on the same side as the Western powers on issues related to the Arab Spring and that stories of Ankara cozying up to Tehran at the expense of its relations with the West were highly inflated. The convergence of Turkish and Western interests on Syria was particularly useful for Ankara; its relations with Israel had deteriorated, negatively affecting its ties with the United States.<sup>34</sup>

### *Iran*

Iran had had its own compulsions regarding Syria, not least its dependence on the Assad regime to act as the major conduit for Iranian financial and military assistance to the Lebanese Hezbollah. Furthermore, the



Syrian regime had been Iran's primary Arab ally since the revolution, standing firm even when almost all other Arab powers lined up in support of Iraq during the war of 1980–88. While the overthrow of Saddam Hussein opened up major opportunities for Iran to gain influence in Iraq, continuing uncertainties in that country, including prospects of renewed sectarian conflict and the unstable nature of the Shia-dominated governments in Baghdad, make Syria a strategic asset for Iran that it cannot readily sacrifice. According to one analyst,

The close bilateral relationship [between Iran and Syria] reflects a strategic reality in which Assad's Syria is Iran's springboard into the Arab Middle East, its partner in the ongoing ideological and physical confrontation with Israel and the US, and its buffer against the pro-western Sunni monarchies of the Gulf. For Assad, Iran is a source of protection, security and funds.<sup>35</sup>

Also, any form of foreign intervention, especially of the Western-Arab League variety that toppled the Libyan regime, is anathema to Iran; it might set a precedent that could one day be used against the Iranian regime. Moreover, while Tehran was not particularly committed to the Qadhafi regime, especially after the latter joined the Western camp in 2003, it is heavily invested in the Asad regime militarily, diplomatically and economically. The fact that Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners, especially Qatar, are taking the lead in demanding Asad's removal makes the Iranians even more suspicious of the real reasons behind the demand for regime change. Such calls have also placed the Syrian issue squarely at the center of the cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia over primacy in the Persian Gulf.

The Syrian issue also created major tensions between Turkey and Iran as the two powers rose to leadership positions on opposite sides of the political divide. The Iran-Turkey rapprochement is based on economic considerations. Iran is the second-largest supplier of

natural gas to Turkey and supplies Turkey with 40 percent of its oil. Turkey is a major exporter to Iran of manufactured goods. It is also based on political considerations, including a mutual interest in keeping the Middle East free from foreign intervention, ensuring regional stability, preventing the emergence of an independent Kurdish state, and curbing Israel's predatory behavior. All this has been seriously jeopardized by differences over the Asad regime.

The Turkish decision to station a NATO anti-missile defense facility in Malatya in southeastern Turkey has added to these tensions; the Iranians perceive the facility, with some justification, to be aimed against Iran. Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan tried to assure Iranian leaders during his visit to Tehran in March 2012 that, not only will the data collected by the NATO radar facility not be shared with Israel: "If NATO does not comply with Turkey's conditions, we can ask them to dismantle the system."<sup>36</sup>

Turkey has also been a consistent supporter of Iran's right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. Erdogan reiterated it most recently during his visit to Tehran in March 2012, stating categorically, "No one has the right to impose anything on anyone with regards to nuclear energy, provided that it is for peaceful purposes."<sup>37</sup> He went further, stating that the West should be fair and treat everyone equally on the issue of nuclear energy, repeating his criticism of Western silence on Israeli possession of nuclear weapons: "This should be accounted for as well. Otherwise we have to question why they are not acting with honesty and fairness."<sup>38</sup>

Nonetheless, the logic of good neighborliness and restraint on issues that had helped Turkey-Iran relations blossom in recent years has been severely tested by the Syrian uprising and Asad's refusal to cede power. It has also come under strain on the issue of Iran's support to the Shia-dominated government in Iraq headed by Nuri al-Maliki, which has increasingly alienated the Sunni and Kurdish minorities and brought the country once again to the verge of civil war.<sup>39</sup> It is significant that the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq, once treated

with deep suspicion by Ankara, has consistently sought Turkey's support in its ongoing political and economic battles with the Iraqi central government.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the differences outlined above, the two countries share a common interest in avoiding the disintegration of Iraq; among other things, it could lead to the creation of an independent Kurdish state, anathema to both. Also,

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an Iraq divided on sectarian and ethnic lines could easily become the source of region-wide instability, threatening to Balkanize the Middle East, a prospect that neither Ankara nor Tehran would welcome. In the final analysis, therefore, it is unlikely that differences between the two countries over Syria will bring Iran and Turkey into direct confrontation with each other or seriously imperil their long-term relations. Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoglu, during a visit to Iran with Prime Minister Erdogan in March 2012, reiterated that differences over Syria would not be allowed to undermine relations between Iran and Turkey: "There is common ground between Turkey and Iran. We will not let a regional balance based on Turkish-Iranian rivalry to emerge. There could be those who want a new cold war, but both Turkey and Iran know history well enough to not let this happen."<sup>41</sup>

It would be wrong to interpret the current disagreement between Turkey and Iran over Syria as an extension of the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry or as a struggle for primacy in the Fertile Crescent. Both Iran and Turkey realize that they need each other economically as well as to keep foreign intervention in the Middle East to a minimum.

Moreover, they realize that their spheres of interest are largely distinct, with Iran primarily concerned with the Persian Gulf and Turkey with the eastern Mediterranean. It is only in Syria and Iraq, where their interests overlap, that they could potentially collide; but even here, both sides have tried to minimize friction. While Syria is important to Iran, it is less so than is Iraq. Iran may in the final analysis come to terms with a post-Asad regime in Damascus, as long as such a regime is not unduly anti-Iranian and as long as Turkey concedes Iran primacy in Iraq outside of Iraqi Kurdistan. As one analyst concludes, "[A]lthough divergent interests in the Syrian conflict pull Turkey and Iran in opposite directions, their mutual interest in maintaining cordial relations will likely prevent the Syrian issue from precipitating a major split...[S]o far, Turkey and Iran's opposing interests in Syria have only led to heated rhetoric [which] indicates that Ankara and Tehran value their cooperative rivalry even as the ongoing turmoil in Syria polarizes their interests."<sup>42</sup>

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## CONCLUSION

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The uprisings in the Arab world have laid bare the conflicts as well as the convergences of interest between the United States and Russia, on the one hand, and among the major regional players, on the other. At the same time, they have demonstrated that the major Arab powers, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, are unlikely to play any significant geopolitical role in the Middle East for the next couple of decades.

The geostrategic future of the Middle East is likely to be determined in the short and medium terms by the interactions of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia, with the United States and Russia playing significant supportive roles. Syria, Iraq and Bahrain are the likely venues where the regional rivalries will be played out, with regimes and their opponents acting as both autonomous players and proxies for the regional powers. The latter, in turn, are likely to be sucked into the conflicts accompanying the

Arab uprisings.

An interlocking set of conflictual and cooperative interactions at the domestic, regional and global levels will continue to characterize what started as the Arab Spring. It is likely to stretch out over several seasons, if not years. Events constituting the Arab Spring were initially unleashed by domestic responses to inequities and injustices within individual Arab countries. However, their impact cannot be understood and their outcomes cannot be predicted in isolation from the larger regional picture and the policies and actions of major regional players as well as external powers such as the United States and Russia. This is what provides the Arab Spring with geostrategic significance and makes the phenomenon most interesting from the perspective of scholars and students of international relations.

## ENDNOTES

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