

Tunisia's Spark and Egypt's Flame: the Middle East is Rising

The Arab world plays dominoes with empire

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The protesters in Tunisia and Egypt are calling for deep elemental changes in their societies.

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Is this how empires end, with people flooding the streets, demanding the resignation of their leaders and forcing local dictators out? Maybe not entirely, but the breadth and depth of the spreading protests, the helplessness of the U.S.-backed governments to stop them, and the rapidly diminishing ability of the United States to protect its long-time clients, are certainly resulting in a level of revolutionary fervor not visible in the Middle East in a generation. The legacy of U.S.-dominated governments across the region will never be the same. The U.S. empire's reach in the resource-rich and strategically vital Middle East has been shaken to its core.

There's a domino effect underway in the Arab world. Tunisia was the spark, not only because its uprising came first but because the people of Tunisia won and the dictator fled. Egypt remains for the United States the most important strategic Arab ally.

The fall of Hosni Mubarak, the U.S.-backed dictator in power for more than three decades, would mean an end to Washington's ability to rely on Cairo to stave off Arab nationalism and independence and an end to Egypt's role as a collaborator in the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Whatever happens, what's likely, though not inevitable, is that never again will Tunisia be used as a transit point or Egypt as a "black site" secret prison for U.S. agents engaged in the "extraordinary rendition" of detainees for interrogation and torture.

Stirrings of popular dissent are already underway in Yemen and Jordan too. All the other U.S.-backed monarchies and pseudo-democracies across the region are feeling the heat. The U.S. empire in the region is crumbling.

Tipping Points

The alliances of the last half century are being shattered, the old order is ending. What's next? As is always the case when revolutionary processes erupt, it's still too soon to tell. Things move slowly until a sudden tipping point, and then it's all too quick, too sudden to keep up.

The breadth of public participation is key for understanding the implications of these uprisings. In Tunisia, the protests involved workers and middle class professionals, but were composed at the core by disenfranchised, disempowered, and educated unemployed people. Mohammed Bouazizi, a young man in the impoverished town of Sidi Bouzid, symbolized these demonstrators by setting himself ablaze to protest not only unemployment and poverty, but also the humiliation and degradation he faced.

Among the hundreds of thousands across Tunisia who marched, chanted, demanded, and won the abdication of their longstanding dictator, thousands are the young men and women whose college degrees have provided no security, whose lives were constrained by the lack of jobs, lack of opportunities, and lack of hope.

In Egypt, participation was even broader. The thousands and hundreds of thousands filling the streets, occupying Cairo's famed Tahrir (Liberation) Square, include not only the most impoverished of Egypt's urban slums and rural farmers and peasants. They also include the educated, the middle classes, even many of the wealthy, all finally saying no to the paucity dignity and freedom of their lives. Their demand was clear: not just reform, not just new elections, but an end to the Mubarak regime.

It is also important to recognize what the demands in Tunisia and most essentially in Egypt were not about. They were not about opposition to the United States; we have not seen the U.S. flag burning or crowds attacking the U.S. embassy. They were not even about Egypt's thirty years of collaboration with Israel's occupation, especially its role in maintaining the siege of Gaza - opposition to which is arguably the greatest point of political unity in the country. People have been very clear - and very public in the media - about their awareness of and outrage towards the U.S. history of arming Mubarak with the very weapons killing protesters in the streets; the "Made in USA" tear gas canisters from Jonestown, PA are featured all over the media. But the demands of this mobilization are directed to domestic, internal issues, aimed at changing the very nature of the ruling structures of the country and its impact on the people who live there. Foreign policy will come just a little bit later.

The reach of protest support is crucial too. In Tunisia, the police were divided, and while some, for a while, tried to do the bidding of the government, many refused to fire on protesters who carried flowers and rejected violence. The Tunisian military, which unlike in Egypt and other countries was traditionally apolitical even at the top levels, refused to support the dictatorship, and indeed it was a top-ranking military officer who gave a powerful voice to the protesters' demand that Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali resign.

In Egypt, the much-hated security police agencies backed by Mubarak and the Interior Ministry first attempted to suppress the widening protests, but despite inflicting many casualties, largely failed to retake the streets; in many areas they were simply overpowered. The military, to the contrary, overwhelmingly refused to confront the popular movements. While Egypt's top military brass is a privileged cohort closely linked to the Mubarak regime, the army itself is made up of generally poor conscripts, who were simply not willing to turn their guns on fellow citizens. Just days into the revolt, soldiers, tank drivers, and even officers were proudly proclaiming their unity with the people in the streets, and were being welcomed with flowers and sweets into the arms of the protesters.

Despite the \$1.5 or more billion in military aid Washington has provided Egypt every year since 1979, Mubarak's government has been unable to use the military against the popular revolt.

The protesters in Tunisia and Egypt are calling for deep elemental changes in their societies. These are not economic demands alone, though ending corruption and the call for jobs, education, and health care are vital. These are not only about human rights, although the release of political prisoners as well as the rights to assemble and to protest are all on the agenda. The protesters aren't primarily Islamists, although Egypt's powerful but always cautious Muslim Brotherhood joined the street protests on January 28. (They're not explicitly secular either). In Egypt especially, young people, adept at social media and savvy web mobilizers, are playing a leadership role unusual in the region, though reminiscent of the young activists of the first Palestinian uprising, or intifada, of 1987. They have gained significant respect and authority from the older more experienced leaders with whom they've joined in a broad opposition coalition.

These are mobilizations calling for an end to not just decades but generations of dictatorship and for a new era of democracy and popular power. They're calling for participatory democracy, not simply new elections, making the region a whole lot harder to control for the United States.

Parallels

The Egyptian protests so far appear closer to the people-power ouster of Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 than any other international precedent. There are major differences between Egypt's upheaval and Iran's anti-shah mobilization of 1978-1979. There, mass protests were composed primarily of numerous competing, contending, and sometimes antagonistic social movements all divided along political, sectarian, and organizational lines.

At the Middle East regional level, there is somewhat of a parallel in the shifts of Latin America's southern cone in the late 1980s, as U.S.-backed dictatorships in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and others were brought down. The long struggles for democracy were led by experienced political coalitions that cohered around broad progressive social movements, trade union federations, and left parties that made it possible to engage directly with power. Starting in Brazil, with the rise of the Workers Party, these social movements first succeeded in ending military dictatorships, then took up the even harder struggle against ostensibly civilian governments still dependent on the U.S. and still committed to neoliberal economic models that devastated poor and indigenous people across the continent.

Those social forces don't have exact counterparts in the Arab world, where years of greater suppression of social movements (other than in the mosques) left them relatively less organizationally unified. Democracy didn't rise right away when military dictatorships were swept away in Washington's backyard. But in that huge Latin American bloc, where popular struggles continued, the United States lost control of that strategic area where once it reigned supreme. With varieties of center-left, broadly progressive and solidly left governments in power in Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay, Paraguay, and beyond, the U.S. empire there has been defeated. It is perhaps a model that the social movements of the Arab world, now cohering around the Tunisian/Egyptian model, are looking to emulate.

Organizing and Opposition: Tunisia

The protesters occupying the streets in Tunisia, and the inability/unwillingness of the police and

especially the military to reclaim the streets for the dictatorship, forced the downfall of Ben Ali's 23-year-long reign of U.S.-backed brutality and corruption. The opposition that called Tunisians into the streets did not emerge as a unified, disciplined, organized hierarchy but rather a somewhat anarchic, partly spontaneous, and brilliantly coordinated often twitter-driven panoply of politically and geographically disparate forces. Tunisia's Islamist opposition leaders, long ago forced into exile, appear ready to return home to join the protests, but like their Egyptian counterparts they're not taking over. This isn't a religious or sectarian revolution.

It was particularly interesting that as the opposition savored their victory, the only international support they requested wasn't financial or military or even diplomatic, but legal. They asked Interpol to enforce an international arrest warrant for the former dictator and his family, as well as for crimes against the nation.

So Tunisia, against all odds and expectations, started the revolutionary trajectory of today's Middle East. But Tunisia is a relatively small country, and ranks a paltry 69th on the list of world oil producers. Ben Ali was helpful to the United States (as in allowing transit flights for detainee interrogation), but with no U.S. military base its strategic value was secondary. President Barack Obama could claim that "the United States of America stands with the people of Tunisia," in his State of the Union speech with little concern.

Egypt is a whole other story. The next phrase in Obama's speech, that the United States also "supports the democratic aspirations of all people" suddenly became a whole lot trickier.

Organizing and Opposition: Egypt

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If the people of Egypt – in their extraordinary unity – succeed in winning their call for structural transformation and not just new elections, for real, participatory democracy and not just electoral reform, Washington's most important ally will suddenly be a whole lot harder to control. Mubarak's appointment of Omar Suleiman as his vice-president certainly elicited cheers in the White House situation room – he's a longstanding friend of the U.S. military and of Israeli officials of all stripes – but rated jeers in the streets of Cairo. He came out of years as Egypt's intelligence chief, though with a primarily international role. He wasn't known for direct involvement in the regime's apparatus of repression and torture, but he's widely disdained as one of Mubarak's closest aides. His appointment won't satisfy anyone calling for an end to the Mubarak regime.

At the moment, Egypt's streets belong to its people. The powerful iconic moments continue to come thick and fast. On Friday, on the huge Sixth of October Bridge across Cairo, an armored personnel carrier moved onto the bridge to force protesters off. It moved into the crowd, slowly, but people turned and gathered in front of it, forcing it to a halt unless the driver was willing to plow right into the crowd. He wasn't, he turned, and the tank-like vehicle raced off the bridge at top speed, with hundreds more protesters filling in the space. Despite the completely different results, it was a moment that visually evoked the 1965 confrontation between state police and non-violent civil rights marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama.

The protests have been extraordinarily non-violent and inclusive. On Friday, as the muezzins chanted the call from the minarets of Cairo's mosques, thousands of protesters lined up in the street to say their prayers. Thousands more did not; these weren't religious protests, and Islamists were simply present among the throngs of people. They weren't leading or in control. In Suez, the strategic city abutting the Canal, 4,000 additional security police were sent in to confront the Friday

demonstrations, but they failed, with some turning to join the protesters. A police station, famous for having been occupied by Israel during the 1967 war, was the only site targeted that day. In Alexandria, police were divided, with so many turning to join the protesters that there too, they failed to regain control of the streets.

There has been looting, and people in many neighborhoods have responded by forming local guard teams with checkpoints and in some cases a rough kind of vigilante justice. Some of the looters have been caught with government-issued weapons and identification; there is certainly fear of a possible campaign by the regime to create lawlessness, sowing fear and chaos as the only and inevitable alternative to Mubarak's security police. But so far, courage has triumphed over fear.

An Uncertain Relationship: Egypt and Israel

One of the big uncertainties is what the impact of the current transformation will be on the 30-plus year-old U.S.-orchestrated ties between Egypt and Israel. The 1979 Camp David peace treaty, the first signed by an Arab state with Israel, remains the centerpiece of Israel's security doctrine and at the core of the U.S.-Egypt relationship. Israeli officials, not surprisingly, are terrified at the prospect of the Mubarak regime collapsing. As Israel's former ambassador to Egypt noted, "The only people in Egypt who are committed to peace are the people in Mubarak's inner circle and if the next president is not one of them, we are going to be in trouble."

Tacitly acknowledging that the Israeli relationship with the Egyptian government is possible only because there's no democratic accountability in Egypt, Deputy Prime Minister Silvan Shalom went further, saying "if regimes neighboring the Israeli state were replaced by democratic systems, Israeli national security might significantly be threatened." And Israel isn't happy about the possibility of shifts in the United States or other nations long uncritically supportive of Mubarak. January 31 headlines in Ha'aretz include, "Israel Urges World to Tone Down Mubarak Criticism Amid Egypt Unrest."

But two things stand out. First, the protesters' demands are overwhelmingly focused on internal Egyptian issues - freedom, human rights, the economy - cohering in the demand to end the Mubarak dictatorship. Although it's certain that the overwhelming majority of the people in the streets aren't happy with Mubarak's decades of collaboration in Israel's occupation of Gaza and beyond, this isn't their top priority. Second, it's unlikely that any new government that comes into power, whether interim or permanent, will move towards a full-scale break with the United States and Israel, such as the "unsigning" the Camp David peace agreement. Aside from everything else, the \$1.5 billion in aid the U.S. provides Egypt every year is grounded in the terms of Camp David. No new Egyptian government is likely to give that up, at least right away.

What is a likely possibility for any new transitional or interim government seeking credibility from its own people would be an immediate move to open the Rafah crossing between Egypt and Gaza, allowing the free flow of people and goods. That would not end, but would significantly undermine Israel's occupation and siege of Gaza. It would allow Palestinian students to reach their schools abroad, enable patients to find medical treatment in Egypt or elsewhere, and allow families simply to leave the tiny crowded Strip that has been a prison for the 1.5 million Palestinians there for at least the last five years. It would be a great move, ending Arab state support and sustenance of Israel's occupation policies. There's a danger, of course, that the Israeli response would be a claim that because Israel is now more isolated it needs more military aid and a U.S. commitment to support an even more aggressive posture in the region, such as a new assault against Gaza or Lebanon or even a strike against Iran. Israel would likely reject any further U.S.-backed negotiations.

But given the continuing failure of those talks, since they're not based on the requisites of human rights and international law, the end of the "peace process" illusion might be a good thing. It will require a huge amount of education and mobilization here in the United States to keep our government from a full embrace of an even more militarized Israel. But a new Middle East without at least some of the U.S.-armed and U.S.-backed dictatorships across the Arab world, still means new possibilities for a just peace based on international law and human rights.

The Stakes for Washington

The stakes for the United States in Mubarak's ouster and the rise of — what we all hope will be — a truly democratic, people-based government of a whole new kind in Egypt, couldn't be higher. In the past, aside from the relationship with Israel, the United States needed Egypt, the biggest Arab country, to insure the rest of the Arab world remained a pro-U.S. bastion. In 1991 the United States was desperate for an "Arab coalition" to join its war against Saddam Hussein, so Egypt was key. Despite massive public opposition, Mubarak's approval led the Arab coalition against Iraq. (Washington arranging forgiveness of 50 percent of Egypt's foreign debt just at that time no doubt helped.)

The question now is what has changed? Does Washington still fear that a truly independent Egypt is dangerous now because maintaining Arab allies in thrall is still key to maintaining U.S. hegemony across the Middle East? The United States has military bases in Egypt, it pays off Egypt to guarantee its access to and effective control of the Suez Canal, and it relies on Egypt to carry out interrogation by any means necessary on detainees in the so-called "global war on terror." What might be different now?

During the Cold War, Washington feared that Egypt's non-alignment really meant it was in the Soviet camp; U.S. strategy was to get it out. In 1956, when Israel, Britain, and France attacked Egypt in a campaign to wrest control of the Canal, the United States sided with Egypt to stop it, giving the U.S. new leverage in Cairo. But it wasn't until 1970, when President Gamal Abdel Nasser died and Anwar Sadat came to power, that the United States managed to pull Egypt fully out of the Arab nationalist and non-aligned movements and into its own orbit. When President Jimmy Carter negotiated the 1979 Camp David treaty with Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, Egypt was isolated throughout the Arab world. Sadat was assassinated in 1981 as a result. Mubarak has been in power ever since.

Other Arab rulers have already weighed in. Saudi King Abdullah and Jordanian King Abdullah II are both on Mubarak's side: Abdullah "condemned" the protests, and Abdullah II was "reassured" in a call with Mubarak. According to al-Jazeera, official Palestinian media reported that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas telephoned Mubarak and "affirmed his solidarity with Egypt and his commitment to its security and stability." Translation: "Egypt" = its regime, not its people. In fact on January 29th, according to Human Rights Watch, Abbas' police force in Ramallah broke up a Palestinian rally in solidarity with Egypt.

So is the Obama administration starting to understand the limits of Washington's ability to influence, let alone control, events in the Arab country it has long viewed as its closest ally? Or is this like 1978, just months before the Shah of Iran was forced out of power by a massive popular uprising, when Carter toasted the shah as an "island of stability" in the Middle East?

Obama administration officials haven't been quite that tone-deaf. At least rhetorically, there's clearly some recognition that this is already a very new Middle East. On January 26, President Obama expressed support for "a government that is responsive to the aspirations of the Egyptian people."

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged that Mubarak's naming a vice-president and new prime minister wasn't nearly enough to answer the concerns of his people, and she called for "change that will respond to the legitimate grievances of the Egyptian people which the protests are all about." That's important – defending the Mubarak regime and its version of "stability" is no longer the only issue on the U.S. table. But nonetheless they're not getting it quite right yet. Clinton's spokesman, P.J. Crowley, admitted the government was "looking at" the huge military aid grant given to Egypt every year; he didn't say Washington is deciding whether or how to cut it. Both Obama and Clinton are stressing the need for an "orderly" transition – and given that the current popular uprising in the streets is anything but orderly, that sounds an awful lot like this administration isn't accepting this transition on its own terms.

Clinton explicitly stated the United States would not support "some take-over that would lead not to democracy." And in a clear reference to the Muslim Brotherhood, she said Washington would "not favor any transition to a new government where oppression...would take root." One can only wonder, do President Obama and Secretary Clinton really think the United States still has the power, let alone the right, to decide what's sufficiently "orderly"? Is it really Washington that gets to choose the specific kind of take-over leading to a U.S., rather than Egyptian, version of democracy, or to choose who might be allowed to join a transitional post-Mubarak government?

The day before Clinton described Mubarak and his wife, Suzanne Mubarak, as "personal friends." Did that hint at a U.S. promise to provide the family with political asylum or some other form of protection, when judges around the world, relying on the Pinochet precedent of universal jurisdiction, begin to issue warrants for their arrest? Could they actually provide such protection any longer?

The Hope

Certainly all of these considerations may change quickly. The emergence of a specific offer of negotiations by the broad opposition front known as the National Coalition for Change, led by former International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) chief and Nobel laureate Mohamed elBaradei, could well mean a shift in Washington's position. If the Obama administration makes clear that it's ending financial support for Mubarak, and that it welcomes internal Egyptian negotiations as the basis for a truly Egyptian solution to the crisis, urgent discussions could take place immediately between Mubarak's regime and the opposition that could lead quickly to Mubarak and his top officials stepping down and a transition to an interim government-in-waiting.

Of course such a move could – and likely will – take place anyway without U.S. approval. But at a moment when there appears to be at least a modicum of recognition in the White House about the depth of this Middle East sea change, perhaps it's not too much to hope that the Obama administration will try to move with history, rather than against it. The pressure is on. The opposition in Egypt has called for a general strike on Monday, January 31, and on Tuesday, February 1, for a "protest of the millions."

The U.S. is facing a strategic challenge in the Middle East beyond even what many White House and Pentagon strategists are likely recognizing. The years of Washington calling the shots in the region based on the exigencies of oil, Israel and a U.S. version of "stability" are definitively over. One possibility is that the U.S. will simply lose, one more piece of the empire crumbling. Like in Latin America, where U.S.-backed military dictatorships gave rise to U.S.-backed civilian versions, Washington continued supporting too-powerful militaries, still got its "free trade" agreements, but then eventually lost to the power of organized social movements demanding far more fundamental

changes, the U.S. could simply lose influence in the Middle East.

There is, however, another possibility, through which the U.S. – not Washington but the people of the United States – could actually gain greater influence, greater real security and greater stature in the world. That would require something more than a “new Middle East strategy.” It would mean re-tooling the very definition of “strategy” and “strategic interests” that has shaped U.S. foreign policy for generations. If the Obama administration took an entirely different approach, grounded in a real commitment to global equality and internationalism, a serious commitment to international law and respect for other nations, a new understanding of the rights of people, not just governments, to determine their own futures, just imagine what a “new Middle East strategy” could make possible. U.S. empire may be crumbling in the Middle East. The real interests of the people of the United States don’t have to.

Already, Washington has lost a huge part of its power and influence in the region. But as my colleague and regional expert Joshua Landis noted, “whereas Bush talked democracy but promoted civil war and dictators, perhaps Obama will be remembered as the U.S. president who allowed dictators in the Middle East to fall and gambled on democracy.” That wouldn’t be such a bad legacy.

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* From IPS, February 2011:

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