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# The Arab Spring

## A Critical Moment for Global Governance

Edward Rawson and Mitch Yoshida

In only six months, political upheaval in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has toppled two regimes, triggered UN-sanctioned military action against one, and caused nine others to make concessions and/or engage in violent repression. While the long-term regional and global implications of these developments remain unclear, it is already evident that they are undermining and overwhelming several of the cooperative frameworks that undergird global governance. The outcome of these challenges will, moreover, alter the relative influence of democracies and autocracies within international institutions by shaping an ongoing debate over the viability of autocratic states. By working through international institutions that have the legitimacy and expertise needed to reinforce and relieve the affected frameworks, U.S. and European policy makers can augment the influence of democracies and strengthen global governance.

### Effects on Cooperative Frameworks

Political upheaval in MENA is affecting cooperative frameworks in three ways. First, it is undermining those that are vital to regional and international security. The erosion of Egyptian-Israeli cooperation, which is rooted in a bilateral peace treaty and has helped isolate the terrorist group Hamas, is of particular concern. Egypt's interim government has already scaled back Hosni Mubarak's commitment to Israel's blockade of the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip by halting construction of an underground steel wall and allowing Mahmoud al-Zahar, Hamas' Foreign

Minister, to meet with Egyptian officials in Cairo.<sup>1</sup> Mubarak-era stability may also crumble on another front: as this fall's parliamentary and presidential elections near, 54% of Egyptians support withdrawing from the peace treaty with Israel.<sup>2</sup> This view, combined with the influential Muslim Brotherhood's outspoken support for Hamas, makes it likely that Egyptian-Israeli relations will deteriorate further after the elections.<sup>3</sup>

U.S.-Yemeni counterterrorism cooperation against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) – which has declared its intent to attack Western interests, is considered the most capable Al Qaeda branch in the world, and is set to strengthen with the death of Osama Bin Laden – is also being undermined.<sup>4</sup> In response to widespread opposition to his rule, Yemen's President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, has suspended nearly all operations against AQAP and the Obama administration has frozen a record counterterrorism assistance package to the country because of recent protests.<sup>5</sup> Although early reports indicate that the Yemeni opposition movement is diverse and therefore not dominated by Islamists, the virtual suspension of counterterrorism operations has created a security vacuum that AQAP has been able to exploit.<sup>6</sup> In the southern province of Abyan, it has declared an emirate and U.S. intelligence officials have stated that the group is close to launching a new attack.<sup>7</sup> Whether this threat grows or recedes depends on how quickly counterterrorism operations can be restored and how effective they will be if Saleh and his relatives, who have played essential roles in

Yemeni counterterrorism operations, are removed from the government.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, U.S.-Bahraini security cooperation has not been undermined but is at risk. This relationship allows the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet to use the island country as its base of operations, enabling it to safeguard oil shipments out of the Persian Gulf and deter Iran. Despite the Sunni monarchy's continued crackdown on opposition groups with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) support in the form of troops from Saudi Arabia and security personnel from the United Arab Emirates, the rift between it and the Shia majority is widening. A Bahraini military court's recent decision to sentence four Shia protestors to death for the killing of two policemen has led Ali Salman, the head of the largest opposition group, to warn that finding a negotiated solution has become more "complicated."<sup>9</sup> As the crackdown continues, there is a growing risk that an increasingly desperate majority Shia population will resort to Iranian aid and evict the U.S. Navy.

Second, political upheaval in MENA is overwhelming international institutions. In Libya, a prolonged conflict between Muammar al-Qadhafi's regime and NATO-backed rebel forces has triggered growing refugee flows into neighboring countries. As a result, the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) may not be able to cope with the situation because of a lack of funding. According to the UN, only \$144 million out of a \$313 million three-month aid appeal for Libya has been funded.<sup>10</sup> If this gap is not filled, UNHCR may not be able to prevent large numbers of refugees from entering Egypt – a potentially destabilizing humanitarian burden for an interim government that is attempting to build a democracy.<sup>11</sup>

Events in MENA are also overwhelming the G-20's ability to address the global economic challenges on its agenda. World oil prices, which have risen from an average of \$96 to nearly \$120 per barrel due to Libyan production cuts and fears that Saudi Arabia and other major oil-producing states will experience similar challenges, are projected to cut global economic growth by at least half a percent if the increase continues for the rest of the year.<sup>12</sup> As a result, G-20 pledges to combat oil price volatility,

reduce unemployment, strengthen social safety nets, and promote development will difficult, if not impossible, to fulfill. A sustained supply disruption in Saudi Arabia would further amplify this challenge by raising world oil prices to an average of \$150-\$200 per barrel and cutting much of the world's growth by at least three quarters of a percent for this year.<sup>13</sup>

Third, struggles between autocrats and democratic protestors in MENA have pushed the relative influence of democracies and autocracies within international institutions into a state of confusion. They are having this effect by throwing open a major debate over the viability of autocratic states. Some, citing the longevity and rise of autocracies, have argued that the extension of democracy into these states is a distant prospect at best and may not even be a desirable development.<sup>14</sup> Others disagree and take the position that the spread of democracy is inevitable.<sup>15</sup> The Arab Spring's impact on the

broader world is bound to weigh heavily on perceptions of what constitutes a viable political order within states and will, therefore, alter the support accorded to democracies and autocracies within international institutions.

### **Possible Futures**

While it is not yet clear how the aforementioned effects will develop, two extreme illustrative scenarios reveal their potential combined impact on global governance. In the best-case, UNCHR is able to stem refugee flows out of Libya, which do not derail a swift transition to democracy in Egypt. Yemen and Bahrain follow suit, accommodating opposition groups and short-circuiting their radicalization. As a result, counterterrorism operations against AQAP are restored and the threat to the Fifth Fleet's ability to protect oil shipments out of the Persian Gulf and deter Iran is minimized. Although Egypt's new government includes Islamists, it is not dominated by them and relations with Israel do not degenerate into conflict. Political stability in these states relieves pressure on oil markets, which accelerates the growth of the global economy and improves the G-20's chances of addressing the economic challenges on its agenda. These transformations lend support to claims that, as the *Financial Times'* Philip Stephens recently

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asserted, “history is on the side of democracy.”<sup>16</sup> Heightened support for this view around the world augments the influence of democracies within international institutions.

In the worst-case, refugees fleeing Libya overwhelm UNCHR’s capabilities and play a role in undermining the transition to democracy in Egypt. The failure to establish a democratic government in Egypt, and in Bahrain and Yemen, leads to internal struggles for control that end with the founding of Islamist regimes hostile to

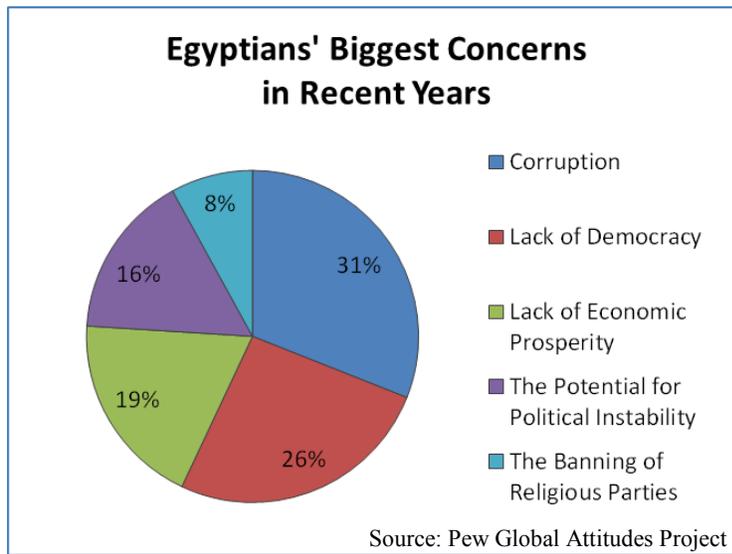
some or all external interests. Egyptian-Israeli relations deteriorate further, U.S.-Yemeni cooperation against AQAP ends, and the Fifth Fleet is expelled from Bahrain. This turn of events increases the world’s energy costs, which slows the growth of the global economy and overwhelms the ability of the G-20 to address the challenges on its agenda. Individuals and governments around the world, beset by the perception that democracy does not necessarily produce the best outcome for the international community, shy away from supporting its extension into other states. In this atmosphere, the influence of democracies on international institutions declines.

### A Historic Opportunity

While U.S. and European policy makers do not always have decisive influence over events in MENA, they have exercised significant influence in the region and can help steer them toward the best-case scenario. They can accomplish this by working through international institutions that have the legitimacy and expertise needed to reinforce and relieve the affected cooperative frameworks. In Libya and neighboring states, UNHCR must receive the funding it needs to relieve pressure on Egypt. The organization has stated that it currently expects a shortfall of \$169 million as Libya faces widespread shortages of food, medicines, fuel, and other necessities.<sup>17</sup> As fighting drags on and refugee flows

increase, adequate financial support will become increasingly vital.

The GCC, moreover, can play a central role in restoring U.S.-Yemeni counterterrorism cooperation and safeguarding the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain.



Restoring operations against AQAP requires a swift and peaceful political transition, which the GCC is in a strong position to facilitate as it commands the support of Yemeni President Saleh. Despite Saleh’s reluctance to accept a GCC-proposed plan to remove him from power, the organization should continue work to satisfy opposition demands for his immediate departure. In Bahrain, the GCC’s material support for the Sunni

monarchy’s crackdown on opposition groups must ease and be accompanied by efforts to press for an agreement that affords the Shia majority greater political participation and economic opportunities. Since both autocratic regimes are members of the GCC, however, progress may require additional pressure that the UN Security Council could bring to bear. Joint U.S. and European diplomatic efforts may be able to overcome the Security Council’s recent reluctance to adopt positions on these issues.<sup>18</sup>

Ensuring that Egyptian-Israeli relations remain stable is another task that international institutions are well-suited for. In Egypt, where 36% of the population favors maintaining the peace treaty with Israel, steps to strengthen political parties ahead of this fall’s parliamentary and presidential elections would help ensure that this minority view is fully reflected in the new government.<sup>19</sup> This need, and the broader task of building democratic institutions to support a multiparty democracy, can be fulfilled by the UN and the OSCE – institutions that have the necessary expertise and have already stated their willingness to assist with the electoral and other aspects of the transition.<sup>20</sup> By providing sustained political support for these efforts, U.S. and European policy makers can help minimize damage to a relationship that is vital to regional and international security.

The G-20 and the European Union, moreover, can

play major roles in addressing fundamental issues that triggered the Egyptian revolution in the first place. In a recent poll, Egyptians cited corruption, a lack of democracy, and a lack of economic prosperity as their top three concerns in recent years.<sup>21</sup> Even though these factors contributed to the downfall of Mubarak, they could also cause democratic developments in Egypt to be short-lived. In addition to UN and OSCE support for the formation of democratic institutions, a G-20 agreement on steps to reduce the volatility of agricultural commodity prices and the implementation of EU-proposed steps to integrate Egypt into the European market would go a long way toward removing these sources of instability.<sup>22</sup>

By working through international institutions to reinforce and relieve the affected cooperative frameworks, U.S. and European policy makers can help calm oil markets, remove an impediment to global economic growth, and improve the G-20's chances of addressing the economic challenges on its agenda. These successes would trigger a shift in world political thought. Opponents of freedom, who have gained ground in recent years, would likely face increased calls for freedom within their own borders due to the now-widespread availability of communications technologies such as cellular phones, Facebook, and Twitter.<sup>23</sup> While world may not see the "end of history" for some time, it would at least

come within sight as fundamental differences over what constitutes a viable political order within states would narrow. If U.S. and European policy makers seize this historic opportunity, they can simultaneously augment the influence of democracies within international institutions and strengthen global governance. □

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## NOTES

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