THE ARAB SPRING AND CHANGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Background

In December 2010, the so called Arab Spring began with public protests in Tunisia following the suicide of a young, unemployed man, Mohamed Bouazizi, who set fire to himself after officials had blocked his attempts to make a living selling vegetables.

Protest and unrest spread from Tunisia to Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. In the cases of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen the protests led to the fall of Government or Head of State. In the cases of Bahrain and Syria protests continue whilst the picture from Saudi Arabia isn’t entirely clear.

The Domino Effect and Use of Social Media

It is clear that a domino effect took place across the Middle East with protests spreading from country to country. It is arguable that, in the past, significant unrest in an individual country could have been suppressed and news of it prevented from reaching the outside world. However, with the advent of social media, such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, it has become far more difficult for regimes to prevent information about protest reaching the outside world.

The use of social media also appears to have allowed protestors to organise themselves within countries and to coordinate campaigns against incumbent governments.

Another contributory factor to the domino effect was possibly the television coverage provided by the Qatari based TV station Al Jazeera. Its coverage of the Arab Spring from an Arab perspective may have encouraged protest across the region.

The Response of the International Community

In general, the response from the international community has been one of soft political and diplomatic power. Criticism of incumbent, undemocratic leaders and their often violent attempts to retain power has been expressed by Western leaders and the UN. An example of this has been the reaction of the West to the situation in Syria where the Assad Government appears determined to crush any protest using brutal measures. The protests and violent crackdown have now continued for several months and the response of the West has been to criticise and call for restraint, but as yet they have not taken any concrete action.

Only in Libya have international forces, under the leadership of NATO, aided the rebel cause under the guise of protecting the civilian population. UN Security Council Resolution 1973 (2011) gave members the ability to protect Libyan civilians.

The support of the international community appears to have been pivotal in the overthrow of Colonel Gaddafi. Significantly, this support included Arab countries such as Qatar and
the United Arab Emirates (see paragraph 5 of the UN resolution). The support from Qatar
included both weaponry and the use of Special Forces who, it has been reported, helped
opposition forces remove Gaddafi from his Tripoli compound.

It seems clear that without proactive international support, the Libyan rebels could not have
succeeded in overthrowing Gaddafi.

**The Arab Spring a year on – has democracy taken hold?**

When the Arab Spring took place in the first half of 2011 there was a sense of great hope
that change may bring democracy to the Middle East and countries in North Africa. Thus
far, the outcome appears to have been different.

Promised elections in Tunisia were successfully held and now a coalition of Islamist and
secular parties led by the Islamist group Ennahda is in Government.

In Egypt, elections for a new President have been delayed several times and a number of
candidates were prevented from standing in April. Elections are now due to take place on
23-24 May with the military (currently ruling Egypt) promising to hand over power to the
new President on 1 July. Concern in Egypt currently surrounds whether the military will
look to rig the elections to ensure their representative wins. According to Reuters:

> “Many Egyptians believe it will remain an influential player behind the scenes for
> years to come and may seek to influence the vote.
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> Every president since the king was toppled in 1952 held a top military post before he
> was appointed, including Hosni Mubarak who was a former air force commander.
> Mubarak was ousted last year after big protests against his rule.
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> Only one of the candidates standing in the election, Ahmed Shafiq, has a military
> background. He also once led the air force.
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> Alongside Shafiq, who was also Mubarak's last prime minister, the other front-runners
> are ex-Arab League chief Amr Moussa, Islamist Abdel Moneim Abol Fotouh, and
> Mohamed Mursi, a candidate for the Muslim Brotherhood.”

Parliamentary elections were held in Egypt in January and they saw an overwhelming
victory for Islamist parties.

The Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) won the largest number of
seats under Egypt's complex electoral system. The hardline Salafist Nour party came
second.

In Libya elections are yet to take place. They are due to be held by 23 June but there have
been increasing calls to see them postponed because of concern that the country is not yet
stable enough to hold elections. According to the Daily Telegraph:

> “The hope is that elections will bring both representation and stabilisation.

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1. [http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/16/us-egypt-elections-army-idUSBRE84F0X720120516](http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/16/us-egypt-elections-army-idUSBRE84F0X720120516)
However, in order to be meaningful, elections must be postponed. Holding elections without prior stabilisation could, in fact, significantly compromise the prospects for representation and, as things currently stand, enable various militia leaders to translate their military clout and revolutionary status into political gains, to the detriment of the broader population."

The situations in Yemen, Bahrain (as witnessed by the recent protests during the staging of the Bahrain Grand Prix) and perhaps most concerning in Syria are no nearer to a democratic outcome.

The Threat of Islamic Extremism

The Arab Spring saw the fall of regimes which had survived possibly because they were seen as a bulwark to Islamic extremism fall. Once secular countries are now open to the influence of Islamic fundamentalists and the possibility of Sharia Law.

The Parliamentary election result in Egypt adds weight to this feeling.

As for the situation in Tunisia, according to the Washington Post:

“One year after the uprising … Tunisia stands divided between two visions of its future. Last year’s street clashes in this sun-spangled city by the sea have morphed into a different kind of battle — more intimate confrontations in which many families struggle with essential questions of identity.

Secular parents, surprised to find their daughter covering her hair in public, worry they are losing their child to extremism. Moderately religious families argue over a son’s decision to grow a beard and demonstrate against aspects of Tunisian life they have always taken for granted: beer and wine, bikinis on the beach, Hollywood movies on TV. In workplaces, kitchens and sidewalk tearooms, one question dominates: Can and should Tunisia’s blend of Western and Islamic values and practices be maintained under the North African country’s new freedom, or has that freedom unleashed a religious extremism that threatens to push this land of 10 million people toward a new kind of dictatorship?”

The UK Government’s View

Writing a year after the Arab Spring, William Hague, the UK Foreign Secretary wrote:

“Some are already writing the obituary of the Arab awakening. They point to bloodshed in Syria, clashes in Egypt and attacks on religious minorities as evidence that the revolutions have lost their way.

Electoral success by parties rooted in Islam has led some to fear that change may be for the worse. But to say that Arab Spring has turned into cold winter is wrong. Such pessimism misses the extraordinary opportunities that popular demand for freedom and dignity bring, and could lead us to disengage at a time when we need to redouble our diplomatic and long-term support to the region.

The Arab Spring was always going to be a long process, not an instant fix. It was bound to take different forms in each country. The staging of genuine elections in countries that

have been denied them for decades is significant. But it is what happens after elections that will determine success or failure.

The new governments in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya face enormous challenges as well as sky-high expectations from their people. Having paid a high price for their revolutions, they expect tangible improvements in daily life. As Eastern Europe after 1989 showed, this takes time.

One year on, we must steel ourselves for setbacks and crises, such as we see in Syria today, but there will also be great progress in other parts of the region. This is the new reality.

But being realistic does not mean losing faith. Far from it: greater freedom and democracy in the Middle East is an idea whose time has come. It holds the greatest prospect for the enlargement of human freedom and dignity since the end of the Cold War."

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