

THE MIDDLE EAST AND RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

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The unexpected and speedy developments that have rocked the Middle East and North Africa are testimony to the fast pace of change in international relations nowadays. To better understand these developments, however, some general observations may help.

Firstly, the Middle East and North Africa are not a homogeneous entity and thus should not be treated in a monolithic fashion. For example, there is the Shi'a-Sunni divide that separates some countries from the rest. Iran, Iraq and Bahrain for instance belong to the former (Bahrain, however, is ruled by Sunnis) whereas the rest are mainly of the latter. Also, though, the majority population in this area are Arabs, there are also Iran and Turkey that are not.

Secondly, there are two important traits of tribalism and religiosity that pervade many countries in the region to varying degrees. Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iraq, Yemen and Jordan, to mention only a few, are more tribal in social hierarchy but Egypt and Lebanon, for example, are not. In terms of religiosity there is also divergence. Though, for example, Turkey and Syria are still secular in many ways, one could hardly say the same about Iran or Saudi Arabia. Yemen is an instance of both tribal life and religious zealotry. Many supporters of Al-Qaida are believed to reside in Yemen. Libya is also believed to house some of the extremist elements of radical Islamism that may now be part of the opposition fighting Qaddafi. It remains to be seen how this factor will play out in the support afforded to anti-Qaddafi forces by the West. Presumably this aspect has not been overlooked by policymakers.

Thirdly, serious economic hardship and unequal distribution of wealth have played a prominent role in the uprisings. Looking at data will provide an almost consistent picture. In Yemen, for instance, 74% are under 30 years old and half of those aged between 15 and 29 neither go to school nor have jobs. The locals are upset about poor schooling, inadequate healthcare and sanitation. Transparency International has described Yemen as one of the most corrupt places on the planet.

In Saudi Arabia, 70% are under the age of 30; 40% of Saudi youths have no jobs and half of those in work earn less than 3,000 Rials (\$840). This is when 7,000 to 8,000 royals receive from a few thousand to \$250,000 a month and the country has some \$440 billion in reserves.

In Qatar and UAE, due to huge amounts of cash available and the relatively low number of population, there has so far been no trouble.

Tunisia, the trigger to the uprising, has a large well-educated middle class amidst its 10 million plus people and boasts a tradition of quiet politics. Opposition forces that toppled old regimes in Tunisia and Egypt consist of Islamists, secular agents, trade unionists and many other in-between.

Libya has one of the largest cash reserves in the world, perhaps second only to China and Norway. Yet there is visible poverty in the country fed by tribal politics and rivalries.

Oman produces 860,000 barrels of oil a day and has a per capita income of \$18,000, which is seven times higher than that of Egypt. It has now increased the minimum wage by 40% to 200 Rials (\$520) a month.

In Syria, where the unrest has thus far led to the killing of many demonstrators, there are reportedly between 2 to 3 million Syrians who live in extreme poverty. Unofficial figures put unemployment rate somewhere between 17 and 20 percent.

None of the above, however, should be viewed as mitigating the impact of politics on these developments. The unresolved Arab-Israeli dispute, for instance, has had a disquieting impact on the psyche of the people in the region, particularly Arabs, that cannot be defined or assessed in economic terms.

A common feature amongst the regional rulers whose people have turned against them is that they always blame others without looking into their own records. Mubarak blamed the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Khalifa in Bahrain holds Iran responsible, Qaddafi pointed in the direction of al-Qaida first and then to ingredients in Nescafe that made people demonstrate. Al-Salih of Yemen has mentioned an operations room in Tel Aviv directed from the White House as the source of unrest.

Fourthly, there is a wider concern in the West and particularly in Washington over the rise of Islamists in these countries in the aftermath of the unseating of old regimes. This fear was less so in Cairo due to the presence of a nationalist and secular army that has now taken control of the situation after the departure of Mubarak from power. In Libya and Yemen, however, the situation is different. Libyans, for instance, make up the second largest contingent of *jihadists* in Iraq after Saudi Arabia and the highest per person in any country. Reportedly, Sufian bin Qumu, a rebel leader in Libya, was once the chauffeur of Osama bin-Laden.

In conclusion, it ought to be noted that the current rebellion has come in the wake of the inadequacy of pan-Arabism of 1950s and 1960s and the failure of political Islam in the region. A new model, however, based on Western liberalism, may have its own problems in articulating the politics of the area. Local history and traditions should be allowed to play a prominent role in devising the new political system governing the Middle East and North Africa.