

**International Security Monthly Briefing – 20 April 2011**

## **ARAB SPRING OR AUTUMN?**

Paul Rogers

This month's briefing assesses the state of the 'Arab Spring,' principally in relation to Bahrain, Syria and Libya, and questions, whether the 'Spring' is already turning into 'Autumn'?

### **Introduction**

In relation to Libya, the **March briefing** concluded:

*“What began being seen as a narrow but essential humanitarian military intervention seems unlikely to end there, and this may have consequences right across the region and also for the future of NATO.”*

Elsewhere in the region, during the first half of April, there were many demonstrations in Yemen, but the Saleh regime hung on to power, while appearing increasingly vulnerable to a sudden demise. In Egypt, the military leadership consolidated power, and there were disturbing reports of detention of opposition figures. At the same time, public demonstrations continued with much of the focus on demands for the detention of ex-President Mubarak and close members of his family. To the surprise of many external observers, the former President and his two sons were placed in detention in early April, albeit initially for a short period. This action by the leadership suggested an acceptance that the power of public protest in Egypt was still high, giving hope that the “Arab Spring” still had sufficient vigour to have an impact across the region.

### **Bahrain**

As discussed last month, the protests in February against restrictions on freedom imposed by the Sunni monarchy and its political representatives seemed, initially, to lead to a reformist response which promised genuine political change. In the event, this proved not to be the case, as the Bahraini authorities, aided by 1,000 Saudi soldiers and 500 Emirati police, moved to put down the public protests with considerable force.

Repression of dissent continued into April, and included disturbing reports of violent action taken against injured protestors in hospitals. There were numerous further arrests, including lawyers engaged in defending protestors, and the indications by the middle of April were that the Bahraini authorities were determined to maintain control. In doing this, they were supported by the leaderships in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The Saudis, in particular, were concerned that the public protests in Bahrain, since they came primarily from the relatively marginalised Shi'a majority, could well spread to Shi'a communities in Saudi Arabia. While the Shi'a in the Kingdom are a minority, they are a significant presence in eastern districts, which are also the major oil producing areas.

The House of Saud also has persistent concerns over suspected involvement of Iran in Shi'a communities in the Kingdom, but an unexpected development in early April was the strong support given to the Bahraini Shi'a community by Shi'a politicians in Iraq. This was one of the first indications of the emergence of Iraq as a regional political player since the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime eight years earlier.

It seems probable that popular protest will continue to be met with considerable force within Bahrain and this raises considerable difficulties for Britain, France and the United States, all of whom have extensive defence interests in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. As they continue their

involvement in the evolving civil war in Libya, they represent this as motivated by the need to protect civilians from the repressive Gaddafi regime. In comparison, their opposition to repression in Bahrain is relatively muted, a stance that may become much more difficult to maintain in the coming months.

## Syria

The Assad regime in Syria had faced numerous protests during February and March, commonly centred on the southern city of Deraa. In early April, the protests expanded to include other towns and cities, including Homs in the north and the capital, Damascus. The regime responded primarily by using its large internal security forces to break up the demonstrations, often with lethal force. Subsequent funerals became major foci for further protests, yet the regime seemed reticent to engage in reform, or even to end the State of Emergency, which had been in place for 48 years and was a major subject for protest.

By mid-April, the internal security forces were failing to curb the protests, and in a sudden move on 19 April, the Assad regime ended the State of Emergency, released some political prisoners and abolished the State Security Court responsible for trying protestors and passed a law allowing some protests. These moves represented major concessions but it remained very much open to question whether they would be sufficient to bring the demonstrations to an end. Many thousands of Syrians have watched closely the rapid political changes in Tunisia and Egypt and there is an undercurrent that suggests fundamental opposition to the Assad regime itself.

It is probably accurate to say that the opposition to President Assad is not at the intensity of that to Mubarak in Egypt three months ago, but it appears to be strengthening. If that is the case, and if the regime makes no further concessions, then Syria may be facing political and social turmoil in the coming weeks at least on a par with that in Egypt earlier in the year. Syria, in recent weeks, has moved almost centre-stage in the Middle East in terms of the evolution of the Arab Spring, but it remains the case that the current focus is, inevitably, Libya.

## Libya

By mid-April, the civil war in Libya appeared close to a stalemate, although the advantage probably lay with the Gaddafi regime in spite of numerous air attacks by NATO forces. Of all the many developments in the first three weeks of April, four stood out as having long-term significance. The first was an attempt by the rebels to put together an armoured column of tanks and artillery to force Gaddafi's troops out of the key oil and gas export terminal at Brega. This was the first time that the rebels had managed to bring such heavy weaponry into action in any quantity, but the column was mistakenly attacked by NATO aircraft, destroying nearly half of the vehicles and rendering the operation a failure. Whatever the reason for the grievous mistake, the effect was to limit any further attacks by rebel forces who were subsequently concerned primarily with maintaining some degree of control over the important crossroads town of Ajdabiya, closer to the main stronghold of Benghazi than Brega.

The second development was the clear intention of the Obama Administration to withdraw most of its strike aircraft from the conflict, leaving the operation primarily in the hands of European members of NATO, with the French and the British providing most of the air power. Thirdly, and seemingly in conflict with this, was the decision of the Obama Administration to join in with the British and French in delivering an unambiguous joint statement that the Gaddafi regime must be removed. This meant that the clear aim of coalition action was regime termination. While there was a certain blurring of the lines between humanitarian aid and regime termination, with an implication that NATO would not seek to achieve the latter by force, the political commitment to regime termination was now so clear that there simply had to be policy implications, which would subsequently impinge on military operations. Indeed, the first of these appeared to be an agreement for a small Anglo-French force of logistics and intelligence specialists to move to Benghazi to aid the rebels. While there had been credible reports of

Special Forces, MI6 and CIA operatives active in the rebel areas, this was the first public announcement of direct security assistance.

Finally, by mid-April, it was clear that Gaddafi's military forces had adapted rapidly to operating under NATO air attack by moving over to using highly mobile vehicles or maintaining tanks and other heavy weaponry concealed in towns. While probably not having the logistics capability to pose a risk to the rebel centre in Benghazi, they had been able to take control of all the major centres in western Libya with the exception of the country's third largest city – Misrata. That now became the focus of intense fighting involving many civilian casualties, leading to a humanitarian crisis of considerable proportions. There seemed little prospect of NATO using air power in a manner sufficient to force back Gaddafi's troops, and there was therefore every prospect that Misrata would be the main focus of the conflict. If it did fall to Gaddafi's troops, then the consequences for NATO would be severe. For Sarkozy, Cameron and Obama, talk of regime termination would seem, at least in the short term, a hollow threat.

### Conclusion

With the repression in Bahrain and the clear intention of the Gaddafi regime to remain in control in Libya, it would seem that the Arab Spring has encountered major setbacks sufficient to suggest an impending Autumn – a drawback to any sense of progress towards democratisation and a greater concern with human rights. Even so, this may not necessarily be the case for two reasons. One is the acceptance by the military forces currently in control in Egypt that they had to respond to public pressure to detain key members of the Mubarak family. The second is the pace of protest in Syria. While there is a real prospect of a long civil war in Libya, with all the human costs, it may be that the future of the Arab Spring will focus primarily on Syria rather than Libya. If there is rapid reform in that country, then, what began in Tunisia nearly four months ago, could still have a positive impact right across the region.

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