



In brief: Arab uprisings 2011

Standard Note: SN/IA/6003

Last updated: 16 June 2011

Author: Ben Smith

Section International Affairs and Defence Section

1 Tunisia

Not only did Tunisia start the wave of uprisings known optimistically as the “Arab Spring”. It was also a microcosm of the problems present throughout the region.

Tunisia had been a police state for decades, with sham elections and widespread repression. Economically, there was growth but its fruits were not shared fairly between classes or regions, and the family and associates of the president were seen by the population as corrupt and as monopolising large sectors of the economy.

The self immolation in December 2010 of a fruit seller, angered by repression and lack of economic opportunity despite his level of education, set off massive demonstrations in Tunisia and a political earthquake in the Middle East and North Africa. In January, the president of 23 years, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, was deposed, as the security forces failed to support him.

An unstable interim government was shaken by further demonstrations but gradually implemented reforms, including dissolving the secret police and the deposed president’s RCD party. Since March, the government has not contained any members from the old regime. During May, an overnight curfew was imposed for a while, because of riots.

Originally scheduled for July 2011, the first democratic election has been postponed until October. It will create a constituent assembly that will write a new constitution and prepare for legislative elections. Nahda, a moderate Islamist party that bases itself on Turkey’s ruling party, has a good chance of being the largest single party in the assembly.

The interim government has been in financial difficulty, particularly because of a slump in tourism. At the end of May, the G8 offered a package of loans to the government to help it get through its difficulties. Some economists say that painful reforms, such as cutting subsidies, will be necessary to increase economic growth.

Tunisia has been strongly affected by the situation in Libya, with thousands of refugees crossing the border and fighting sometimes spilling over into Tunisia. Ex-President Ben Ali is in exile in Saudi Arabia, but his trial *in absentia* will begin on 20 June.

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as being up to date; the law or policies may have changed since it was last updated; and it should not be relied upon as legal or professional advice or as a substitute for it. A suitably qualified professional should be consulted if specific advice or information is required.

This information is provided subject to [our general terms and conditions](#) which are available online or may be provided on request in hard copy. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing with Members and their staff, but not with the general public.

2 Egypt

In January 2011, protesters began to occupy Cairo's central Tahrir Square. As in Tunisia, the organisation of the protests was greatly assisted by new media such as Facebook. As the protest grew, the Egyptian army declared that it would not use force against demonstrators and President Mubarak was forced to resign on 11 February. Mubarak remained in Egypt under house arrest and power passed to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF).

The SCAF made modest changes to the constitution, including allowing more party competition and restricting the government's capacity to impose states of emergency. These changes were criticised as 'patches' on the old constitution by reformists. The SCAF proposed a parliamentary election in September 2011 and a presidential election by the end of 2011. The new parliament would nominate a Constitutional Assembly which *may* produce a definitive new constitution, although this is not a requirement.

On 19 March 2011, 77% of voters decided in favour of the SCAF proposals, to the disappointment of liberal reformists, who thought that the tight timetable for elections would favour the best-organised groups: the Muslim Brotherhood and President Mubarak's National Democratic Party. Commentators suggested that Egyptians' genuine fear of disorder and economic problems was behind the strong Yes vote.

Liberal reformists in Egypt fear that the country may not be changing radically enough, and that the NDP and the Muslim Brotherhood – nominally sworn enemies – will cooperate to exclude reform. Added to this concern was a renewed tendency to arrest journalists and bloggers.

The state of the Egyptian economy is worrying, with tourism revenues falling and foreign capital being withdrawn. This has led to increases in the already high level of unemployment. The government's immediate financial crisis has been alleviated by loans from Saudi Arabia and pledges of aid from the G8 countries.

3 Yemen

Yemen has been a concern in western security circles for some time. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is based there and is thought to be the most dangerous branch of the organisation. President Saleh has been in power for 31 years, and the country is riven by sectarian, tribal and regional discord, only held together by complex patronage networks. Yemen is one of the poorest countries in the Arab world, has a high birth rate, high unemployment and a tradition of carrying weapons. The oil that has underpinned the fragile economy and funded presidential patronage will soon run out and the country's water supply will not keep up with population growth.

President Saleh attempted to pre-empt unrest by announcing in January that he would not seek re-election or pass power on to his son. In March, he said that he would step down by the end of 2011, a year early, and suggested that the constitution would be amended to reduce the power of the presidency.

Demonstrations continued and, on 18 March, snipers opened fire on a gathering in the capital Sanaa, killing more than 100. The attack caused a number of resignations from the government and led his half-brother, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a top army commander, to announce that he would protect the demonstrations in future. This defection led many to conclude that Saleh could not survive much longer.

Since Mohsen al-Ahmar's announcement, rival tribal leaders have been manoeuvring to take over power after Saleh's departure. Leaders of the powerful Ahmar tribe (not related to Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar) have moved armed forces towards the capital and fighting has intensified.

The Gulf Cooperation Council tried during April and May to secure agreement on a deal which would see power handed from Saleh to a transitional government involving members of opposition parties. Saleh at first indicated that he would sign the deal, but reneged at the last minute. Much diplomatic pressure failed to close the deal and, in May, GCC diplomats were trapped inside the UAE embassy for several hours by pro-government demonstrators. After this incident, the GCC abandoned its attempts.

On 2 June a rocket attack on the president's mosque injured Saleh and killed a number of his staff. He was evacuated to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment. It is unclear how severe the injuries were and whether Saleh would be able to return and resume the presidency. Meanwhile, violence increased within Yemen. The Saleh camp retained powerful support in the country despite his difficulties. Saleh's eldest son, Ahmed Ali, and his nephews are also positioning themselves for the succession from positions of power within the armed forces. General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar appears to be waiting to see how the stand-off between the Ahmars and the Salehs turns out.

Pro-democracy protesters look increasingly irrelevant in this power struggle between the elites of powerful tribes.

4 Bahrain

Bahrain is a Shia-majority country ruled by a Sunni monarchy. While it has experimented with some liberalisation, the monarchy retains political control.

After demonstrations led by Bahrain's Shia, martial law was declared on March 15. On the announcement, several hundred Saudi and other Gulf State armed personnel moved into Bahrain, in a display of support for the Sunni monarchy. Martial law was lifted in June.

Hundreds of protesters, opposition leaders, human rights activists and lawyers have been detained since emergency rule was imposed. There were about 30 deaths due to the disturbances. Four Shiite protesters have been sentenced to death, and dozens of medics who helped injured protesters were arrested. They have been charged with possessing weapons, spreading false news and seeking to overthrow the state, and allege that torture has been used.

Critics of western policy say that condemnations of the Bahraini government's actions were muted because of the west's support for the oil-rich Gulf monarchies.

5 Libya

Muammar Qaddafi has controlled Libya since 1969, when he assumed power in a military coup at the age of 27. The arrest of a well-known lawyer and human rights campaigner is thought to have sparked the unrest on 15 February 2011. The unrest was met with an armed response almost immediately, with live fire used against protesters on 17 February and even machine guns and anti-aircraft artillery allegedly used against demonstrators a few days later, particularly in the opposition's stronghold of Benghazi in the west of the country.

The threatened massacre that was the motive for seeking a United Nations Security Council resolution to protect civilians was credible. The International Criminal Court has evidence for 500-700 deaths in February alone.

Following a diplomatic “triumph” for France and the UK at the UN Security Council, military action was authorised to protect civilians. The wording of the resolution was very broad, and its interpretation quickly became controversial. Intensification of the campaign could undermine political support for it, with China and Russia urging a ceasefire and Italian support uncertain.

The United States military led the action at first but after Libyan air defences were destroyed, European NATO members took the lead. Military action has halted the advance of Libyan government forces and prevented the overthrow of Benghazi, Misrata and other rebel-held towns. Observers worry, however, that the situation is now a stalemate. There have been calls for more ground strikes but there is dissent within NATO about the level of contributions from some member states and there is also concern to maintain the support of other Arab countries for the action.

The outcome of the conflict is still far from certain. If Colonel Qaddafi is killed, would the remains of his regime hand over power to the Transitional National Council in the east? Is a negotiated settlement possible? Could a prolonged stalemate lead to effective partition? That could leave a rogue state in the west, promoting attacks on western targets. What would the Transitional National Council do if they gained control?

6 Syria

Syria has deep religious divisions; the Sunni Islamic majority resents rule by the Alawite minority, an offshoot of Shia Islam. The country also has a record of brutal repression, including the massacre of Hama in 1982, where some 10,000 people were killed to crush a Sunni Islamist revolt against the rule of the current president’s father, Hafez al-Assad. Both the west and Syria’s neighbours fear the consequences of a collapse of the regime, given Syria’s strategic location bordering Iraq, Lebanon and Israel and the Assad regime’s close ties with Iran and Hizbollah.

Protests began in March 2011, with the release of political prisoners demanded. Demonstrations in the southern town of Deraa were harshly put down, leading to several deaths. This sparked further unrest. President Bashar al-Assad dismissed his cabinet, announced some reforms and, in April, lifted the state of emergency. However, violence continued to increase, with the army deploying tanks and other heavy weaponry to quell it. The number of deaths due to the uprising is now estimated at more than 1,000.

Western governments at first refrained from imposing sanctions personally on Bashar al-Assad in the hope that he could be coaxed towards choosing to open up the political system. These hopes have now faded and sanctions have been imposed by both the US and the EU on President Assad and members of his family.

The regime may last only as long as the armed forces remain loyal. The death of some 120 soldiers in the northern town of Jisr al-Shoughour could have been the result of retaliation against mutinying armed forces, or of a more organised armed insurrection against the government. The government retook the area with extreme force, described by the US State Department as “absolutely revolting”.

7 Others

7.1 Algeria

While there have been some sporadic demonstrations in Algeria they have not gained much momentum. There have been minor reforms, including the lifting of the 19-year state of emergency in February. The real reason for the relative quiet may go back to 1991, when a military-backed government cancelled the second round of an election because Islamists were heading for victory. The civil war which followed killed some 200,000 people and left Algerian society traumatised.

7.2 Morocco

Morocco is a relatively open society, compared with the likes of Egypt under Mubarak, and the monarchy enjoys widespread support. Large demonstrations took place in February, criticising corruption and the royal family's business interests, and calling for reforms. There were no deaths directly attributed to the unrest. King Mohammed VI responded by setting up a committee to consider reforms.

7.3 Jordan

Mainly peaceful demonstrations started in January 2011, leading to one death and some injuries. King Abdullah of Jordan responded by dismissing his government. This was habitual for Jordan; the government had only been appointed in 2010 and the new Prime Minister had held the post before.

The King promised to increase consultation and introduce other reforms. On 11 June, King Abdullah promised to relinquish the monarchy's right to appoint governments and that these would be drawn from the majority in parliament. He did not make it clear when this major reform would take place. Loyalty to the monarchy in Jordan is thought to be solid.

7.4 Saudi Arabia

While Saudi Arabia is a repressive and very conservative Islamist regime, the monarchy enjoys a certain level of legitimacy because of its credentials as keeper of the holy places of Mecca and Medina and, perhaps more importantly, because it is able to spend vast amounts of money.

Faced with some unrest, particularly in the largely-Shia east of the county, the Sunni monarch announced additional spending of \$93 billion in March, along with an anti-corruption drive. At the same time he outlawed criticism of the Saudi religious establishment.

8 Effect of the uprisings

The Arab world had, until now, not benefitted from a worldwide move towards democracy, left behind by other regions such as Africa and South America. The uprisings have proved wrong any assumption that there was a cultural reason for this, and Arab peoples have shown that they too want rights, dignity and participative government.

Western governments were caught off guard by these developments, initially supporting old allies such as Ben Ali in Tunisia. They adjusted their policy to support the uprisings after the scale of the change became clear.

The uprisings have had very little to do with groups such as al-Qaeda and many hope that these groups will be further marginalised by mass movements towards democracy.

It is not clear what governments the region will get, in the end. Islamist parties, excluded from the political process by most of the old regimes, will certainly benefit from change but many of them are relatively moderate, certainly in comparison with the monarchy in Saudi Arabia, which the west has no problem in supporting. The outlook for Israel's peace treaties with its neighbours Egypt and Jordan is in question, as they are not widely popular with those countries' populations.