

Arab Spring and the Non-Arabs of West Asia



Prasanta Kumar Pradhan

Prasanta Kumar Pradhan is Associate Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi

September 7, 2012

Summary

The three non-Arab countries of West Asia - Israel, Turkey and Iran - are equally concerned about the implications of the popular uprisings in the region. Israel has been concerned about the rise of Islamists in neighbouring Egypt as well as the challenges to national security posed by the Assad-Ahmedinejad-Nasrallah trio. Turkey sees the uprisings and instability as an opportunity to step in and play a larger role in the Arab world. Prime Minister Recep Erdogan undertook an "Arab Spring tour" and has made efforts to convince Arab Leaders to adopt the Turkish model of democracy. For its part, Iran senses both an opportunity as well as a challenge from the unfolding events in the Arab world. At first, Iran claimed that the Arab uprisings have been inspired by Iran's own Islamic Revolution of 1979 and hailed the victory of the Islamists in elections as the 'Islamic awakening'. But with the protests reaching its ally Syria and given the constellation of regional and extra-regional forces intent upon a regime change in that country, Iran began to sense a challenge to its whole diplomatic position in the region. How each of these three non-Arab countries have been adapting to the Arab Spring is the focus of this Issue Brief. In general, these three countries have adopted a two pronged approach: attempts to avoid the negative consequences of the uprisings have been accompanied by efforts to derive mileage and further their interests out of the uncertainty and confusion in their neighbourhood.

Introduction

The upsurge of protests throughout the Arab world has not only left the Arab street and capitals busy and nervous, it has also made non-Arab countries equally worried. This is for the simple reason that non-Arabs are not insulated from the changes and instability taking place in the Arab world. Israel, Turkey and Iran are three non-Arab countries of West Asia who are also important regional players and have major stakes either in the status quo or in regime change in the Arab countries. Israel is concerned about the repercussions of change in its volatile neighbourhood. Iran, in contrast, encourages the protesters against the dictatorial Arab regimes. For its part, Turkey sees an opportunity to strengthen ties with the Arab countries and spread its influence.

The rise of Islamists to power in the region has been an important outcome of the Arab Spring. The protests have also attracted the attention of the major powers, which have clearly indicated through their voting record in the UN Security Council where their national interests lie. Israel and Turkey have sided with the USA and its European allies, while Iran has benefited from the stance adopted by Russia and China. The approaches of the non-Arab countries towards developments in their Arab neighbourhood have varied from criticism and cynicism to adopting extreme caution. Being neighbours with high stakes in the peace and stability of the region, these non-Arab countries can play important roles in the conflict. In this context, this Issue Brief analyses the reactions and approaches of the non-Arab countries towards the Arab Spring and their tactics of adapting to the changing regional political dynamics induced by the protests.

Israel: In favour of the *status quo*

The beginning of the protests in Egypt immediately led to anxiety in Israel. Hosni Mubarak's overthrow fuelled further nervousness and panic. The protests and subsequent regime change in Egypt have left Israel worried more than the protests in any other country since it can directly impact upon its national security. In a statement issued on January 31, 2011, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that his country's primary concern was that the crisis in Egypt could create a situation in which the Muslim Brotherhood may emerge as a major player in the country, which could worsen bilateral relations.¹ The Israeli concerns are obvious and understandable. Israel was concerned that the overthrow of the Mubarak regime may lead to the rise of the Islamists to power in Cairo, which has now turned out to be true. Israel had signed a peace treaty with Egypt in 1979, which brought it much needed relief in a hostile neighbourhood. It has been

¹ "Israel Worried About Islamic Takeover in Egypt", *Arab News*, January 31, 2011, available at <http://arabnews.com/middleeast/article248059.ece>, accessed on August 18, 2012.

worried about the possible termination of the treaty by the new regime in Cairo, a step that would adversely impact the ongoing peace process. This was highlighted by Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz when he stated: “We are worried... (that) Egypt won’t become an extremist Islamist state [sic], because that would put the whole region in danger.”² Further, Israel is also concerned that the rise of the Islamists in Egypt may contribute to further strengthening of the power of the Hamas in Palestine, both politically and ideologically. With the change in regimes, the regional political status quo might change in a way that may not be favourable for Israel. Given the remoteness of the possibility of democracy coming to the region, any major shake-up in the political systems of neighbouring countries may lead to further uncertainties. Finally, Israel is also worried that even as the attention of the world is focused on the happenings in the Arab streets, with the regional balance of power showing signs of change, Iran may use the opportunity of the shifting of the regional balance of power to emerge as a nuclear weapons power.³

With the Islamists coming to power in Egypt, Israel does not seem to have any option other than to quietly accept the verdict of the people of Egypt who are determined to carry the revolution forward. Consequently, Israel welcomed the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in the elections stating that it “appreciates the democratic process in Egypt and respects the results of the presidential elections”. At the same time, it certainly has apprehensions about the ascendancy of the Muslim Brotherhood, which has been quite open about its anti-Israel sentiments as well as its close relationship with Hamas. It appears that the Israeli establishment is pondering over possible strategies to deal with the new regime in Egypt instead of being openly confrontational.

Israel has, however, reacted differently to the developments in Syria. The Bashar al Assad regime has not been very friendly towards Israel. As a result, Israel has spoken against the regime condemning the killings and violence. Unlike in the case of Egypt, Israel does not have any direct stakes in the fall of the Assad regime. But in the present situation it is worried about the combination of Assad, Ahmadinejad and Nasrallah – whom Israel labels as a “trio of terror”⁴ – posing fundamental challenges to Israel’s national security. Israel also accuses Ahmadinejad and Nasrallah of providing weapons, ammunition, training,

² “Israel Fears the Force of Arab Spring Power Shift”, *The Independent*, December 6, 2011, available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israel-fears-the-force-of-arab-spring-power-shift-6272837.html>, accessed on August 20, 2012.

³ For a discussion on the Israeli perspective on the Arab Spring see Efraim Inbar, “The 2011 Arab Uprisings and Israel’s National Security”, *Mideast Security and Policy Studies* No. 95, The Begin-Sadat Centre for Strategic Studies, Ramat Gan, February 2012.

⁴ “Situation in Syria - Statement by Amb Prosor to the UNGA”, August 3, 2012, at http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Foreign+Relations/Israel+and+the+UN/Speeches+-+statements/Situation_Syria-Amb_Prozor_UNGA_3-Aug-2012.htm

intelligence, and logistical equipment to Assad.⁵ The fall of the Assad regime may lead to a weakening of the Iranian influence and Hizbollah threat in the region, thus providing Israel with a breather.

Turkey: Opportunity to Enter the Arab World

Turkey is a major power in the region and has been following the developments in its Arab neighbourhood keenly. Libya was the first challenge faced by Turkey, and Libya proved to be a challenge because Turkey had huge financial interests in that country and enjoyed a warm relationship with the Gaddafi regime. There were around US \$15 billion worth Turkish investments in Libya and more than 25,000 Turkish citizens were working in different sectors of that country when protests erupted. Prime Minister Recep Erdogan is also a recipient of the Gaddafi International Prize for Human Rights from Libya. Because of these reasons, Turkey was initially hesitant to support the no-fly zone as proposed by the United Nations. But later, with situation going out of hand, Turkey supported UN resolutions against the Gaddafi regime.

However, unlike in the case of Libya, Turkey condemned the Mubarak regime right from the beginning and supported the opposition. Turkey aims to strengthen ties with an Egypt in which the Muslim Brotherhood is in power. Erdogan was given a warm welcome during his visit to Cairo as part of his Arab Spring tour. Turkey intends to capitalise upon the Muslim Brotherhood's views on Israel and draw Egypt closer towards it especially in the context of its own strained relationship with Israel over the Gaza Flotilla issue.

Notwithstanding its support for political change in Egypt, Turkey's cautious policy of dealing with the uprisings in the region was manifested in the studied silence that it maintained on the events in Bahrain, where Saudi and UAE forces entered under the GCC umbrella to quell the protests. Turkey looks forward to improving its trade with the oil-rich Gulf region and needs the cooperation of these countries to improve its own clout in the region.

In contrast to developments elsewhere in the region, the protests in neighbouring Syria posed an immediate challenge for Ankara. Turkey enjoyed a warm relationship with Syria; total bilateral trade stood at over US \$2.5 billion and a free trade zone agreement had also been concluded. But the protests in Syria triggered Turkish concerns about a mass exodus of refugees. As a result, it initially reacted with caution and advised Assad to initiate reforms and liberalise the draconian laws. But by the time Assad offered a national dialogue to his people, it was clearly too late for the latter to accept. With the situation slowly slipping out of control, Turkey changed its approach and began to adopt an anti-Assad stand. It now wants Assad to go, thus paving the way for peace and stability

⁵ Ibid.

in the country. This change of stand within a relatively short period to suit its national interest reflects the Turkish “preference for instrumentalism and pragmatism over a principled foreign policy”.⁶ By changing its stand, Turkey chose to side with the US and its European allies while at the same time impressing the Arabs. Syria has now suspended the free trade zone agreement with Turkey.

Turkey views the Arab Spring as an opportunity to spread its influence in the region where it nurtures an ambition to play a leadership role. Ever since the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of modern secular Turkey, Ankara has looked towards the West as an inspiration and a model for both economic and political development. Its secular model of democracy and development has not been viewed favourably by the non-democratic and authoritarian rulers of the region who have tended to use Islam as a legitimising tool to continue their rule. The coming to power in Turkey of the AKP led by Erdogan has infused a mild religious content into the country’s otherwise secular foreign policy. Turkey has adopted a new “zero problem with the neighbourhood” policy intended to minimise tension with the countries of the region. But the protests have affected its relationship with Syria and Libya and, prior to the uprisings, with Israel over the Gaza Flotilla raid in May 2010. Erdogan made an “Arab Spring tour”, visiting Egypt, Tunisia and Libya and meeting their leaders and people. While Turkey neither has the resources and capabilities nor the political influence required to mediate or solve any problem in the region, it has however tried to spread the image of itself as an emerging responsible power that is concerned about the unfolding developments in the region.

During his visits, Erdogan proposed the Turkish model of democracy for the Arab countries, stating that Islam and democracy can co-exist and that the Turkish model should be followed by others in the region. Understandably, there were not many takers for this model in a region where Islam is a dominant force and secularism still a remote concept in political theory and practice. But Erdogan’s Arab Spring tour has given Turkey a window of opportunity to prove its mettle as a potential regional power with political stability and a unique model of democracy in an otherwise authoritarian neighbourhood.

Iran: In Support of the Revolution

Iran has tried to capitalise upon the instability in the Arab streets by supporting the protesters against their regimes. Iran has called for an “Islamic awakening” throughout the region. It has asserted that the protests are inspired by the Iranian Islamic revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini. By citing the Iranian revolution as an ideal model for the

⁶ Sebnem Gumuscu, “Turkey’s Reactions to the Arab Spring”, *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, May 16, 2012, available at <http://yalejournal.org/2012/05/turkeys-reactions-to-the-arab-spring/>, accessed on August 23, 2012.

Arabs, Iran has drawn a parallel between the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the protests in the Arab streets. A senior Iranian official has stated that what Iran wants to see is “the wave of the Islamic awakening resonated through the Islamic world as an export of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”⁷

When protests were at a peak in Cairo’s Tahrir Square, Iran openly supported the protesters against the Hosni Mubarak regime. When the Muslim Brotherhood emerged victorious in the Egyptian elections, Iran termed it as the ‘final stages of Islamic awakening’ and threw its support behind the Islamists. It followed this up by attempting to rebuild ties with the new regime in Cairo – a relationship that it had severed after Egypt’s signing of the peace treaty with Israel in 1979. The Iranian vice president Hamid Baqai visited Cairo in August 2012 and met President Morsi to indicate his country’s desire to build up ties with Egypt and start a fresh chapter in bilateral relations. But it is not clear how far the new Egyptian government will go in forging a robust relationship given the tremendous pressure against such a move from countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United States.

Similarly, Iran supported the protesters in Libya against the Gaddafi regime, while at the same time condemning the American and Western design of strengthening their foothold in that country. The protests in Bahrain brought another opportunity for Iran to strengthen its attack against the incumbent Arab regimes. The Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia in particular have alleged that Iran attempted to exploit its links with some Shia groups in Bahrain, although they have not been able to produce any concrete evidence to prove Iranian involvement in the protests there.⁸ Iran has also tried to internationalise the Bahrain issue by raising it at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the United Nations. And when Saudi and UAE forces entered Bahrain to quell the protests there, Iran condemned this move as an ‘intervention’. By supporting the people against their rulers, Iran thus sought to question the credibility of the regimes and attempted to undermine the legitimacy of their rule in the minds of Arab citizens.

However, Iran’s anti-Arab jibe in the wake of the Arab Spring changed in tone and tenor when protests erupted in Syria against the regime of its ally Bashar al Assad. Instead of condemning the regime and supporting the protesters, Iran appealed for a national dialogue between the government and the protesters. Syria is a friend and ally of Iran in the Levant and Assad, an Alawite Shia, has enjoyed Iran’s support. This again brings to the fore the sectarian politics that the Arab Spring has further fanned. While Iran has been protecting Assad, the Gulf Arab leaders, who successfully protected the ruler of

⁷ Cited by Naysan Rafati in “Iran and the Arab Spring”, available at http://www2.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR011/FINAL_LSE_IDEAS__IranAndArabSpring_Rafati.pdf, accessed on August 23, 2012.

⁸ See Atul Aneja, “Iran and the Arab Spring”, *The Hindu*, July 6, 2011.

Bahrain from the protests, have called for Assad's immediate removal, ending the violence and restoring peace in the country. Thus, a Shia-Sunni proxy war is being played out in Syria between Iran and its Arab rivals. For the Arabs, the fall of the Assad regime will weaken Iranian influence in the Levant and West Asia; while for Iran, Syria under Assad is an important ally to check the Israeli threat and sustain its own influence in the region. The Russian and Chinese vetoes in the UN Security Council over the resolution on Syria has come to Iran's aid for the time being, but for how long Assad's ouster can be avoided is not clear.

Non-Arabs: Not Impervious to Arab Uprisings

The reactions of the non-Arab countries of the region to the Arab Spring show their extreme concerns about developments that have been unfolding over the last more than a year. Living in a volatile region, they are worried about the regional political dynamics that have been unleashed by the Arab Spring. They have adopted a two-pronged approach to deal with the ongoing changes: trying to avoid the negative consequences of the uprisings that may directly affect them, while at the same time deriving mileage out of the uncertainty and confusion in their neighbourhood. Coincidentally, all the three non-Arab countries are important powers in the region and have the potential to influence the regional political dynamics.

Changes in regime that have accompanied the Arab Spring have affected the relationship of the region's non-Arab countries with their major Arab partners. This has made them restructure their ties with some of the new regimes. For instance, regime change in Egypt is threatening Israeli interests and security; Israel is no longer sure about the future of its relationship with Egypt under the Muslim Brotherhood. Similarly, the relationship between Turkey and Syria has been affected because of Turkey's anti-Assad stand. Iran, while trying to rebuild ties with Egypt, is uncertain about its future ties with Syria in a post-Assad scenario.

The rise of the Islamists in the recently held elections has also ignited different reactions from the non-Arab countries. Israel has been deeply concerned about the rise of the Islamists to power as it fears a renewed backlash and strengthening of the radical forces against it. It also sees a possible surge in terrorist activities in the future if the Islamists rule over the neighbouring Arab countries. In November 2011, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that the Arab spring was becoming an "Islamic, anti-western, anti-liberal, anti-Israeli, undemocratic wave".⁹ Iran, on the other hand, has been quite happy

⁹ "Binyamin Netanyahu Attacks Arab Spring Uprisings", *The Independent*, November 24, 2011, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/24/israel-netanyahu-attacks-arab-spring>, accessed on August 20, 2012.

to see the victory of the Islamists in these elections. In the past, it has called for the overthrow of the authoritarian Arab rulers and for the right Islamic principles to serve as the foundation for governance in the region. Iran feels that it is the right path for the Arab people to dethrone their despotic rulers and establish Islamic states as per the Iranian revolutionary model. Turkey, which wanted to promote the Turkish model of democracy for the rest of the region, would be watching carefully the unfolding developments in the region where the new Islamists are coming to hold the reins of power.

The role of the world's major powers in the Arab world has further complicated the situation. The three non-Arab countries enjoy different levels of political warmth with them. Iran has received some support from China and Russia. The Iranian interest in Syria has been protected by the twin vetoes exercised by China and Russia over the UN Security Council resolution against Assad. Iran would continue to vie for the support of these two powers to protect the Assad regime from a disgraceful fall. On the other hand, Turkey has sided with the US and the West. In the process, it sacrificed its relationship with the Gaddafi regime and now with Assad's regime. Israel, because of its increased insecurity, wants its Western allies to take steps to prevent the situation from worsening further. The big powers are also involved in protecting and promoting their own national interests and, in the process, have sought the help of the three non-Arab countries of the region to find a way forward. This relationship of mutual dependence has given the three non-Arab countries of the region a sense of security in an otherwise delicate situation.