

## Implications of the Arab Spring for EUCOM

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The Arab region, once a predictable if unhappy collection of autocratic regimes, is experiencing tectonic political shifts that will continue for years and perhaps decades. A year into the uprisings known as the Arab Spring, three autocratic regimes have fallen in North Africa (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya), two more are teetering amidst continuing violence (Yemen, Syria), and even one of the Gulf monarchies (Bahrain) faces serious challenges from internal opponents. Meanwhile Iraq continues along a difficult path of change provoked by the 2003 invasion, struggling with sectarianism and powerful neighbors determined to influence its course. Even if no other Arab country experiences an uprising in the coming years—which seems unlikely, as several seem vulnerable to the same pressures that provoked unrest elsewhere—this means that between one third and one half of the Arab countries are undergoing significant internal change. These processes of change are likely to continue for some time because they are driven by deep shifts in Arab societies rather than by more ephemeral political or external causes.

For EUCOM, what this means is an Arab region that will be much more dynamic and less predictable, although not necessarily one more interested in conflict with Israel or the West. In fact, if over time Arab governments emerge that are more responsive to their citizens, they might be less ideological and more responsible actors in regional and world affairs. But it will take years for these countries to sort out their internal affairs, requiring patience, wisdom, and goodwill on the part of the United States in order to maximize changes of a positive outcome for US interests.

Among the most important implications of the current changes for EUCOM are:

- **A patchwork of political regimes will emerge**, including new democracies, continued authoritarian governments, and other regimes struggling between the two. While Tunisia looks to be making a fairly smooth transition to democratic government, Egypt is still struggling with the military's attempt to hold onto power and avoid accountability and Libya is beset by militias and a dearth of institutions. The outcome of ongoing struggles in Yemen and Syria is still unclear. Yet the increasingly well-informed and politically engaged citizens of these countries express a clear desire for a break from the past, and at least some of these countries are likely to move toward governments far more accountable to citizens than in the past.
- **A megatrend of a shift in power away from executive branches and toward elected legislatures** will be felt in every Arab country, even those that do not experience regime change. For decades, political life in the Arab region was characterized by executive branches of government (whether republics or monarchies) that held overwhelming power and were not freely chosen by citizens. Elected legislatures existed in most countries but were relatively powerless and judiciaries generally were not truly independent. This picture is changing due to calls for dignity, justice, and freedom; the inhabitants of Arab countries are now demanding to become citizens rather than subjects.

- **The incorporation of Islamist parties into formal politics** is ringing alarm bells in the West, but past experience in Muslim majority countries suggests that groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood adopt increasingly practical positions on domestic and foreign affairs when they are given a chance to compete freely in political systems. There is also a nascent but strengthening liberal political (and to some extent social) trend in Arab countries, meaning that Islamists will be challenged should they act against the rights of women and non-Muslims. Islamists holding actual political power will also be forced to take a more pragmatic, less ideological approach to the issue of security cooperation with the United States.
- **A preoccupation with domestic affairs** in transitioning Arab countries as they undergo repeated elections, write new constitutions, and attempt to find new models for economic growth, means a reduced emphasis on the Israel/Palestinian issue and on the United States. At the same time, elected Arab officials will be more **responsive to public opinion regarding foreign affairs**, meaning that they will be less willing to use repression to tamp down public reaction to incidents such as renewed conflict in Gaza, the West Bank, or Lebanon.
- **Rejection of relationships triangulated with Israel** is already emerging in Egypt and is likely to appear in other Arab countries as well. While in general Arab citizens, including Islamists, have no desire for actual conflict with Israel, they are deeply resentful of Israeli actions that have prevented the creation of a Palestinian state. They do not realistically expect the United States to abandon its close relationship with Israel, but they also want the United States to engage with Arab countries for their own sakes rather than primarily to promote the interests of Israel. In an era of renewed Arab pride and assertiveness, there will be increased resistance to US assistance packages linked to relations with Israel, Qualifying Industrial Zones based on Israeli content, and other such tactics.
- **The resistance narrative articulated by Iran since 2006 has become outdated**, and the reputation of the Syrian regime and Hizballah—once seen as the defenders of Arab causes against a hegemonic West—is badly tarnished. A new brand of Arab nationalism seems to be emerging, one that involves not political union among Arab states but a sense of common purpose among citizens of the countries struggling toward democratization and a renewed assertiveness in defending Arab interests.
- **Shifts in regional alliances** make it unclear who will lead the region. Turkey is prosperous, active, and admired, yet many Arabs would rather learn from the Turkish example than accept actual Turkish regional leadership. Arab heavyweights Egypt and Syria are preoccupied with internal problems for now but could exert leadership again if they are able to come up with compelling models for change. Saudi Arabia is distressed at the regional changes and hoping to keep Egypt within its orbit and rebuild relations with a post-Assad Syria, but it is unclear to what extent new regimes in Arab states will welcome Saudi leadership.