

# The New Middle East Will Test Europe

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In 2011, the long-awaited Arab Spring reasserted the Greater Middle East as history's geographic pivot—a region, that is, where conflicts, fueled by intense sectarian passions, have an inescapable effect on all major powers. In a sense, the revolutions helped turn the page on September 11, 2001. For Europe, as well as for the United States and others, they served as a reminder that there is more to the region's volatility than the threat of global terrorism and the wars waged in Afghanistan and Iran over the past decade.

After 800 years of Islamic decline and abuse of the people by their rulers, and of the rulers by their foreign conquerors or sponsors, the long term is running out of time at last. The start of the region's transition to democracy is good news, to be sure. But much will happen before the Middle East too becomes "whole and free," as the first President Bush said of Europe in 1989.

Attempts to compare the Arab uprisings to some of the more celebrated revolutions in European history are misleading. The character they displayed at birth—mostly young, passionate, spontaneous, courageous, and subtly nationalist—expressed an Arab populism that was initially neither anti- nor pro-Western, neither fundamentally religious nor secular. Even Iraq fails to figure: Regime change in Baghdad was not a catalyst for democratic reforms, as war apologists had hoped—no more than it was a catalyst for an irresistible surge of anti-Western sentiment, as critics had warned. The uprisings were a moving protest against everyone and anything that contributed to the hopelessness of the moment.

## LITTLE HELP

Yet expectations should not get too high. Building democratic stability and bringing affluence to the region constitute a historic test that could not come at a worse time, in part because Europe's (as

well as America's) ability to help is severely limited. In 2012 Europe lacks the cohesion and resources needed to do the required multitasking, namely, tasks of stabilization, reconstruction, rehabilitation, and reconciliation. Put simply, the states of Europe are broke and their union is broken. Regaining some measure of solvency and relaunching the European Union are priorities likely to remain all-absorbing for some time.

Nor can Europe depend on the United States to lead in coming years, as it did throughout the second half of the twentieth century when the goals in the Middle East were easier to define: Keep the Soviet Union out, Israel up, and the oil coming. Now conditions have become more difficult; the needs are more complex and meeting them will be more expensive. American leadership is indispensable, but it is no longer decisive and cannot remain exclusive. In short, Europeans can no longer wait for US policies to succeed before extending their support: That support is needed earlier.

This, of course, is understood. Now more than ever there is no place to hide and no time to run from the region, least of all for Europe, as a matter of historical intimacy, geographic proximity, energy dependence, and even cultural affinities. Europe has no choice but to be a power in the Middle East. And with its large and growing Muslim population, the fires lit in the freedom squares of Middle Eastern capitals in 2011 might burn wild in Europe's capitals next time. People in Tunis, Cairo, Tripoli, and elsewhere did not need to learn about Europe's past to take hold of their future, but Europeans can still remember enough of their own past to understand the future perils of revolutionary transitions.

At a first glance, Libya offers encouraging signs of Europe's improved capacity and even will to seize the moment. The posse of states that was organized to assert a right of interference in that country was authorized by the United Nations, sponsored by the United States, assisted by NATO, and approved by the Arab League—but it was initiated and led by France and Britain, a military

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duo not seen since the 1956 Anglo-French intervention in Suez.

As the example of Syria makes clear, however, these conditions will not be easily repeated. Admittedly, the intervention in Libya proved generally effective, but it fell short of being conclusive either in what it revealed or what it achieved. Instead, three persistent and limiting realities were confirmed during and since the regime change in Tripoli. First, Europe still lacks sufficient military capabilities, which, in an era of austerity, it is not likely to acquire any time soon. Even a weak Libya confirmed not only the indispensability of US power but also NATO's continued primacy among Europe's security institutions.

Second, Europe is in need of political cohesion, and in a period of institutional confusion the EU and its members cannot be expected to agree on a new leadership formula any time soon. Action in Libya took place outside rather than through the EU, and German (but also Polish) objections confirmed the EU's marginalization on foreign policy and security issues. This condition is now worsened by Britain's clash with its EU partners over the euro zone.

Third, even for oil-rich Libya democracy does not come cheap—let alone for resource-poor Egypt, Tunisia, or Yemen and others. Yet heavily indebted European powers now look more like supplicants for external aid and market access than generous donors of such aid and trade opportunities. Reconstruction in the Middle East will have to find its lead architects and major donors elsewhere than in the EU or even the West.

## LOOMING SHOCKS

In the Middle East this is hardly Europe's time; nor is the American moment announced by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton. More ominously, it is a Sarajevo moment, which means that looming dangerously ahead are shocks that will dramatize the region's "suction effect" on intra-European, trans-Atlantic, and global relations.

The list of potential shocks is long. They include the aftermath of the US-led war in Iraq, the confusion of the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, Palestinian anger should their bid for statehood recognition at the UN reach a dead end, an increasingly desperate Syrian regime, a democratic transition in Egypt seriously threatened by economic deteriora-

tion and political stalemate, a proliferation of civil wars and failed states throughout the region, and the lingering memories of 9/11 and related risks of new acts of terror.

All these issues and many more create a sense of urgency, but none is more urgent than the crisis with Iran which, for several years now, has moved its protagonists ever closer to the outcome—a nuclear Iran—that most states say they are unwilling to accept but which only the Israelis seem willing to prevent or at least delay by force.

For the past several years, Europe has been increasingly vocal about Iran, first as a threesome (France, Germany, and Great Britain) and then through the EU and with the United States. Europe's oratory, often heard with a distinctive French accent since Nicolas Sarkozy's election in 2007, has kept the military option on the table, even while favoring harsher economic sanctions.

Yet Iran is not Libya. Even away from the battlefield, the economic and political consequences of a military clash with Iran would be potentially catastrophic—including an oil supply disruption that

likely would constitute a coup de grâce for the euro zone, as well as a crippling blow to global economic recovery and national leaders whose reelection depends on it.

Under such circumstances, Europe's willingness to serve as a front for US leadership in the Gulf will fade if Washington is viewed as leading from behind an Israeli government that is itself viewed with much suspicion in Europe. A military strike would provoke immediate and angry opposition.

Single events are not predictable, noted Isaiah Berlin, but their consequences often are. In the Middle East more than anywhere else, every claim to prevision is historically impertinent. Suffice it to forecast modestly, therefore, that a changing Middle East stands as the first main stop for an orderly journey into a post-cold war, post-9/11, post-Western world order.

Events in the region will constitute a decisive dimension of global economic recovery and political stability. They will challenge the maturity of emerging powers no longer in need of Western tutelage to bid for influence and even primacy. They will also challenge Western solidarity and European unity—beginning with Iran, the most critical test ahead. ■

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