

## **The Burning Middle East: Revolution Or Power-Grab?**

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***Forerunner, "WorldWatch," January-February 2011***

From above, the Middle East and North Africa appear to be experiencing a regional revolution. The forced resignations of the presidents of Tunisia and Egypt, along with anti-government violence in Libya and popular protests across the region, give the impression that a wave of repressive, aging regimes in the Muslim world are likely to be overthrown by Facebook-fueled rebellions. While some broad similarities exist in the nations currently experiencing unrest, the details reveal sizeable differences, both in terms of causes as well as the effect—if any—in the international order.

Throughout the Arab world, high unemployment—especially among the youth—along with rising prices of food and energy, a lack of housing, oppressive police states, and no political or judicial redress of grievances are common complaints against the existing orders. After decades of corruption and crony capitalism, the populations of poor and rich nations alike are demonstrating their displeasure, hoping for a change. These are the commonalities. However, though these protests will undoubtedly leave their mark for years to come, the region as a whole is not experiencing a true revolution, for the circumstances in each affected country are unique, and the protestors typically deeply divided among themselves.

The unrest in Tunisia and Egypt was largely focused on the leaders of the regimes rather than the regimes themselves. The presidents of Tunisia and Egypt are gone, but the regimes that they represented have survived essentially intact. King Abdullah of Jordan sacked his government and appointed a new prime minister to defray public anger, but little else has changed. At this point, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi is in the greatest danger of violent overthrow, but in the absence of outside intervention, he could overpower the opposition and remain at the helm.

While the amount of unrest has been substantial, the overall geopolitical effects have thus far been minimal. With the military-backed regime in Egypt still intact, its peace accord with Israel—a cornerstone of security for the Jewish state—is unchanged, and Israel is not facing a hostile southern neighbor. The greatest shock to the international system has been the disruption of Libya's oil output: 1.5 million barrels per day go to Europe, via Italy, and oil prices have responded accordingly.

The demonstrations in Cairo and the violence in Libya have captured the media spotlight, but more is happening in the broader region than is immediately apparent—much more than simply popular protests against oppressive regimes. Ultimately, the issue of greatest importance is not why this turmoil is taking place, but who stands to gain the most.

The United States, currently in a weak political state, is scheduled to withdraw all combat personnel from Iraq in 2011, causing a major shift in the dynamics of the Persian Gulf. The U.S. military presence in Iraq has been keeping Iran's rise in check, but its withdrawal will facilitate Tehran's stepping into the role of regional hegemon—even without nuclear weapons. In the 1980s, Saddam Hussein's Iraq fought a brutal war with Iran, and by keeping its neighbor weak, Iran is doing its utmost to ensure that does not happen again. When the U.S. invaded Iraq (with the "help" of Iranian intelligence), destroyed its army, and overthrew the Ba'ath Party, it removed the largest counterweight to Iran's power and influence.

As U.S. power in Iraq withdraws, Iran's influence increases. Iran is a majority Shiite country, and as it rises, so does its influence among Shiite populations in other countries. For example, through its proxy, Hezbollah (a Shiite Islamist movement), Tehran has already collapsed the coalition government of Lebanon. While the U.S. has tried to broker a power-sharing agreement in Iraq wherein Sunnis, Shia, and Kurds would all be represented, the Shia have received substantial support from Iran, dramatically shifting the balance of power within the nascent government. Once the U.S. exits the country, Iraq—without a strong military or a government able to impose its will on the people—could become essentially a satellite of Iran.

Persian Gulf nations are reading the handwriting on the wall, recognizing that they will have to come to terms with the post-American constellation of powers. Several Gulf States are particularly concerned due to their majority Shiite populations that—they fear—could be influenced by Iran to overthrow the minority Sunni regimes, destroy the infrastructure of competing oil companies, or otherwise wreak havoc. These States feel pressured either to reach an understanding with Iran directly or to make concessions to the (largely Shiite) protestors, which will strengthen the rebels' position—and hence Iran's. As Stratfor's George Friedman notes, ". . . the Iranians do not have to invade anyone to change the regional balance of power decisively."<sup>1</sup>

Of particular interest is the tiny island-nation of Bahrain, where the Shiite majority has long struggled against the ruling Sunni monarchy. Part of Bahrain's significance is that it is home to the U.S. Fifth Fleet. Another element is that it links via causeway to a heavily Shiite area of Saudi Arabia. The Saudis fear that a regime change in Bahrain—or even significant political concessions to the Shia—will carry over into its own Shiite population (approximately 20%), which resides mainly in the oil-rich areas of the country. While a demand for democracy sounds beautiful to Western liberals, the local reality is that it would mean an empowering of the Shia, and by extension, an empowering of Iran. Though the specifics differ, there are similar concerns of Shiite power increasing in Kuwait and Yemen.

The current uprisings in the Arab world were sparked by an unemployed, university-educated Tunisian committing self-immolation. They have been fueled by decades of resentment against the ruling class. Though Iran did not instigate these things, it is well-positioned to use the climate of unrest to strengthen its position and expand its sphere of influence. Globally, the stakes are high, since approximately 10 million barrels of oil per day originate where Iran is becoming more assertive.