

## MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

## The Earthquake

by Jon B. Alterman

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Egypt is not Tunisia. When Tunisian President Zine El-Abidine Bin Ali fled Tunis on January 14, it was a curiosity in the Middle East. Tunisia had long nurtured pretensions of being more European than Arab, and its relatively small population cast a scant shadow on the Arab world. Its businessmen seemed more comfortable in Paris than Cairo, and Bin Ali had done little to win either the affection or scorn of his fellow Arab leaders. In the broader scope of Arab life, Tunisia didn't much matter.

When Hosni Mubarak resigned on February 11, it was an earthquake that shook the entire region, and shakes it still. Egypt had long ago lost its mantle as the leader of the Arab world, but it was certainly its center of gravity. How Egypt emerges from its current uncertainty will shape the coming decades in the entire Middle East.

For hundreds of millions of Arabs, Tunisia is a distant relative, but Egypt is an intimate. Egyptians are everywhere in the Middle East, serving in roles ranging from physicians to schoolteachers to laborers. Egyptian actors dominate the cinema, Egyptian singers dominate the airwaves, and Egyptian writers and editors dominate the newsrooms. The traffic is not all one way. Arabs flock to Egypt for business and pleasure, filling hotels by day and the clubs at night.

Mubarak's departure from power cast doubt over the certitudes that had ruled the Arab world for decades. In three decades of rule, Mubarak had prized stability over all else. What he lacked in creativity he made up for in predictability. Among the elders in the Arab world, Mubarak was one of the few genuine peers, a wily survivor who guided his country through regional wars and a terrorist insurgency. More importantly, he guided Egypt back into the Arab fold after his predecessor's peace with Israel had made Egypt a pariah.

As Arab leaders charted their course through the challenges of the last two decades, Egypt played a central role. Hosni Mubarak was at the front of co-

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## Mixed Signals

In the battle for Internet freedom in the Middle East, the United States is fighting on both sides.

On the one hand, democracy advocates train here. The Congressionally-funded National Democratic Institute recently helped develop "Aswat," a web portal for Arab dissidents. The U.S. government-funded International Republican Institute has led similar initiatives, training over 1,000 Egyptians to employ social media during political campaigns. In March 2010, the director of the Egyptian Democratic Academy traveled to Washington, D.C. for an intensive course on social media, and later that year, his organization used social media to document government-sponsored election fraud during Egypt's November elections.

Yet, U.S. companies are also supplying much of the technology used for internet censorship. Boeing-owned, California-based Narus provides Telecom Egypt and Saudi Telecom with "deep packet inspection" software, which enables online eavesdropping and location detection. Syrian ISPs have adapted Squid, an open-source software package funded by the National Science Foundation, to block opposition web content, while five GCC states use U.S.-produced McAfee SmartFilter Technology to block unwanted websites, including those that express political dissent.

This mixed messaging goes all the way to the top. Secretary Clinton has called for a "global commitment to internet freedom"; yet Republicans complain that the State Department has not yet spent the \$30 million Congress appropriated in 2009 to combat internet censorship. ■JN

## CSIS Gulf Roundtable Event on Bahrain

The unrest raging in Bahrain is hardly surprising. The Bahraini uprising feeds on old political tensions, according to Kristin Smith Diwan, professor of international relations at American University's School of International Service, and is part of a genuine call for more representative government. Fred Wehrey, senior policy analyst at the RAND Corporation, believes the discontent is more narrowly rooted in the struggle between Sunni rulers and the Shi'a opposition. Shi'a are the majority of Bahrain's inhabitants and suffer the lion's share of political and economic hardship. Both scholars agree that domestic and regional dynamics preclude meaningful political reforms. They shared their insights at a Gulf Roundtable hosted by the Middle East Program. Click [HERE](#) to learn more about the event. ■

alition efforts to push Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait in 1991, and his reluctance to attack Saddam in 2003 was an important barometer of Arab thinking. Mubarak's carefully modulated approach to Israel—keeping a lid on Gaza while maintaining a distance from Israelis until the Palestinians received their due—met with favor across the region. Gulf Arabs also welcomed Mubarak's outspoken alarm at Iran's alleged activities in Egypt. To them, it showed his acumen. He was a strategist, and he knew the world was full of enemies.

Mubarak's sudden departure from the scene leaves a void, and it is one that Arabs fear will be filled by someone hostile to their interests. It is here that Arab disunity rears its head. If one believes the chatter on Cairo streets, the Qataris are behind the Muslim Brotherhood, the Saudis are supporting the even more orthodox Salafis, the Israelis are comfortable with the military and the remnants of the National Democratic Party, and so on. There is not a widespread assessment of who the Iranians are supporting, but little doubt that the Iranians are pursuing their own interests.

The stakes are surely high enough to provoke outside interest. If Egyptian policy lurches in a different direction, it would reorder the political environment from Morocco to the Gulf. An Egypt more hostile to the United States would force many countries to rebalance their relations with the United States; an Egypt less reluctant to skirmish with Israel would cause them to rethink their position vis-à-vis Israel. Similarly, an Egypt that nurtured radicalism would be a fount of radicalism throughout the region. The outbreak of proxy battles in Egypt would be destabilizing, as well, threatening to bring the turmoil of Lebanon to a country of more than 80 million people.

Perhaps most frightening, especially to many of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, is a period in which an introspective Egypt is simply absent from regional affairs. If that were to happen, many of the GCC states would feel exposed. They have long feared Iran, and they have little trust in a Shi'a-led Iraq. Coordinating with Israel is beyond the pale. The populous North African countries of Morocco and Algeria are too remote physically and emotionally to give them much confidence. Without Egypt they would feel vulnerable, left to rely only on a U.S. government that they view to be incompetent in Iraq, ineffective in Afghanistan, and recklessly chasing engagement with Iran. At issue is Egypt's weight more than its military capacity. Without it, many Arab leaders fear they can be picked off one by one.

For all of the regional importance of Egypt, however, the world is sitting on its hands, waiting to see how things play out. There have been no major investments, no major tranches of new aid, and no new partnerships. Yet, the Egyptian economy is perched on the brink of failure, with the sudden convergence of anemic tourism receipts, rising commodity prices, collapsing foreign investment and capital flight. While the economy has not yet gone into free fall, economic weakness could become evident by summer, when election campaigns are underway. In that way, Egypt would be entering its period of maximal political openness at a time of maximal economic disorder.

Those who pine for a moderate Egypt need to help create one. Each has different tools. For the United States, announcing the resumption of negotiations over a free trade agreement would send a signal of confidence for where Egypt is headed—and focus U.S.-Egyptian discussions during a period when Egyptian bureaucrats are unsure of their future. U.S. companies should invest in training young Egyptians for high-quality jobs. Surely the energy and creativity of the youths' protests suggests a talent pool worth exploiting on the world stage. The GCC states, benefitting from high oil prices, should invest in Egypt, and especially in sectors that create jobs.

A GCC foreign minister commented privately this month that it would cost "tens and tens and tens of billions of dollars" to save Egypt, but the cost of losing Egypt was even greater. The words are true. The actions haven't yet followed. ■4/27/2011

## Links of Interest

C-SPAN [interviewed](#) Jon Alterman on the regional unrest.

*The Washington Post* quoted Jon Alterman in "[White House appears reluctant to take hard line with Arab Monarchies.](#)"

Reuters quoted Jon Alterman in "[Little U.S. can do to halt Syria violence.](#)"

The CSIS Middle East Program published a report on the domestic implications of water scarcity in Saudi Arabia. Click [HERE](#) to read the report.

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