A New Arab Spring?

By Jon B. Alterman

Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s immunity to the protests that swept the Middle East in 2011 always seemed a little surprising. There was no obvious reason why the protests that rocked North Africa should skip Algeria. Bouteflika’s fall earlier this month, and the subsequent fall of Sudan’s Omar al-Bashir, raises an important question: Are we seeing the resolution of unfinished business from 2011, or are we seeing a second “Arab Spring”?

There are any number of parallels to 2011. In both Algeria and Sudan, young populations rose up against the only leaders they have ever known, enraged that corruption and cronyism was robbing them of their future. Protests swelled every week until they could no longer be contained. The protests in Algeria and Sudan, like the protests of 2011, were not the work of opposition politicians, because part of the rulers’ longevity was ensuring that no alternative emerged. Instead, they represented a largely spontaneous and leaderless “no” vote on the status quo. Citizens were taking a leap into the dark.

But the dissimilarities to 2011 are larger than the similarities. First, while protestors’ aspirations may be the same, their expectations are lower. It is hard now to recall the bubbling confidence then: democracy was at hand, and selfless citizens, guided by Facebook polls and patriotism, could reshape the politics of their countries. In the years that followed, Egyptians’ bitter experience with Muslim Brotherhood rule and the resurgence of jihadi groups throughout the region reinforced how uncertain democratic progress is. Looking back eight years, we see now that the 2011 protests gave birth to a single, still-struggling democracy in Tunisia while sparking still-smoldering civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. What was once considerable enthusiasm for change in Egypt and Bahrain has all but died, and the security services there came roaring back. The fall of strongmen in Algeria and Sudan did not elicit the same euphoria that the Arab Spring protests did, because crowds in the street realized how much hard work still lays ahead of them.

A changing climate has unleashed plagues of biblical proportions on Iraq in recent years. From dens of snakes attacking Iraqi villagers to a swarm of locusts descending on Baghdad, hotter and drier summers increasingly are driving pests into populated areas.

More severe winter weather is also bringing new dangers. Unusually bad flooding last December killed dozens of Iraqis and displaced tens of thousands more.

These biblical floods are also unleashing a new and entirely man-made plague. Iraq is one of the most landmine-affected countries in the world, and each year flood waters bring hundreds of pieces of unexploded ordnance to the surface. An estimated 38 million mines which were placed along the Iranian border during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s have yet to be removed, and millions more were laid during the two U.S.-led wars in Iraq. Most recently, the fight against the Islamic State group further exacerbated the problem while also halting international efforts to clear mines.

Flood waters wash away signs warning of the presence of mines, and also sweep bombs into towns and villages, causing hundreds of casualties each year. In addition to endangering human lives, the presence of mines prevents over a million Iraqi IDPs from returning safely to their homes, prolonging Iraq’s displacement crisis.

Mines also hurt Iraq’s economy. Migrating mines have rendered swaths of Iraq’s agricultural lands unusable and destroyed infrastructure. With severe winter flooding becoming the new normal in the region and millions of pieces of unexploded ordnance still buried, the plague of floating mines is set to become an annual occurrence.

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RECENT EVENT: INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENTS AND THEIR AFTERMATH

On April 5, CSIS hosted the launch of the new book, Independence Movements and Their Aftermath, which discusses self-determination movements worldwide and the factors that lead to better outcomes and worse ones. The Assistant Secretary of State for Conflict and Stabilization Operations, Dr. Denise Natali, delivered a keynote address outlining the administration’s approach to self-determination movements, and then Ambassador Peter Galbraith and Dr. Terrence Lyons joined her for a lively panel discussion moderated by Dr. Jon Alterman. The full video of the event can be found HERE.
IN CASE YOU MISSED IT
Jon Alterman delivered a keynote address entitled, “Populism and the Democratization of Injustice,” at the Columbia Global Center in Amman, Jordan, 3/2/19

Haim Malka published a new commentary, “Algeria’s Protests after Bouteflika,” which explains why ongoing demonstrations are about much more than Bouteflika’s rule, 3/29/19

Jon Alterman published an opinion piece in The Hill that discusses the generational divide in Israel that is exemplified in the country’s recent elections, 4/11/19

IN THE MEDIA
“It’s not a new thing for unions and syndicates in Egypt to see themselves as an extension of the state rather than protection from the state,” Jon Alterman told The Washington Post, 3/27/19

Jon Alterman spoke to The Washington Post about the history of U.S. military and diplomatic efforts in Iraq. 4/9/19

Speaking to AFP about recent popular protests in Sudan and Algeria, Haim Malka says, “The region will face more turbulence as citizens and regimes attempt to renegotiate the contours of the social contract,” 4/11/19

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Second, the Algerian and Sudanese militaries have asserted firm control over the situation in each country. Conditions are more akin to a military coup than a popular revolution. Militaries intervened before chaos emerged on the streets, and they are presumably prepared to act to prevent chaos from emerging.

Third, the regional enthusiasm that marked the 2011 events is absent. One reason for this is that Al Jazeera, which played such an important role framing the 2011 uprisings as a series of democratic revolutions bringing down tyrannies, is tangential to this month’s events. This is in part because Al Jazeera is less fresh and daring than it once was. But audiences also seem more skeptical of the channel’s often clear editorial line, and regional hostility to Qatar has bred resistance to the country’s flagship effort at public diplomacy. Perhaps the biggest reason is that television itself has a diminishing ability to mobilize regional solidarity, as the ubiquity of social media—which was still in its infancy in 2011—fractures audiences within and between countries and creates a certain numbness toward issues that don’t affect people’s daily lives.

Those three differences—more modest expectations, military control, and an absence of regional fervor—have diminished international interest in these events. The whole world was watching in 2011, and presidents and prime ministers rushed to embrace the protestors and give them legitimacy. Protestors were named Time magazine’s person of the year. It was a different time. Today the question on the mind of policymakers is not how to help the protestors gain control, but rather how to help ensure that their countries do not descend into chaos.

Even so, it would be a mistake to assume that the falls of Bouteflika and Bashir are merely isolated incidents. Algerian and Sudanese protestors seized on conditions that continue to prevail throughout the Arab world, and in most cases, they have not improved since the events of 2011. Corruption of every sort remains rife, economic conditions are worsening, and young people look with a combination of scepticism and malaise on the political class as both unaccountable and indifferent to their citizens’ fates.

Gone are protestors’ seemingly quick-fix solutions of political Islam or virtual democracy that inspired so much broad optimism in 2011. But the protestors’ difficulty articulating a path forward does little to blunt the anger and impatience that hundreds of millions of Arabs feel.

Governments are alert to the challenge. They are seeking to streamline governance, respond quickly to complaints, and increase transparency. Many are furiously seeking to create private sector jobs, getting young people off the street without creating a 30-year obligation of government paychecks. What they are seeking to do, though, is create generational change in the face of daily threats. It is a tall order. Increasing competitiveness often requires lower wages and longer work days, higher taxes and lower subsidies. All of those hurt in the short term, and many of those measures fall heavily on the most vulnerable.

It is unlikely that Algeria and Sudan are the harbingers of a new set of Arab uprisings sweeping the region. The conditions do not seem ripe. At the same time, they are a reminder that the seeds of future uprisings have been planted from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean. Even though they lie dormant in the soil, with a steady spring rain they can germinate quickly. ■ 4/15/19