

# THE NEW ORDER IN WEST ASIA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India- West Asia

When protests erupted on Arab streets in late 2010 and in 2011, felling deeply entrenched dictators such as Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, it was certain that the changes in government would alter the regional dynamics as well. Many thought the old order rooted in “stability” (read: the decades-long unperturbed rule of single families or dictators) would be swept away by emerging democracies. Eight years later, it is evident that the Arab world has changed, but not in the way many had predicted. The structures of the old Arab world have been either destroyed or shaken, but without fundamentally altering the domestic politics in Arab countries.

There have been multiple power centres in the Arab region, at least since the second half of the 19th century when the Ottoman Sultans shifted their focus from the East to the West. The waning influence of the Ottomans in the Arab region created a vacuum which was filled by emerging regional leaders such as Muhammad Ali of Egypt, the Hashemites in central Arabia and the Mediterranean region, and the Al-Saud family in the Arabian peninsula. In post-war West Asia, Egypt remained the most influential Arab country. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan maintained its influence in the Mediterranean region, while Saudi Arabia was confined to the Arabian peninsula. When Egypt and Jordan were in relative decline, particularly after the 1967 war with Israel, Iraq rose under the leadership of the Baathists. Saddam Hussein, who became Iraq’s President in 1979, was eager to don the mantle of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the former Egyptian leader who called for pan Arabism. Hussein launched a war with revolutionary Iran in 1980 on behalf of most Arab countries. Though there were deep divisions between these countries, one point of convergence was “stability”. Neither the monarchs nor the dictators in the Arab world wanted any threats to their grip on power.

This order started to age much before the Arab protests. Hussein broke a taboo of non-aggression between Arab countries when he invaded Kuwait in 1990. And the 2003 American invasion of Iraq toppled him and buried his regime. The Arab protests expedited the changes that were already under way. Egypt went through a long period of instability starting 2011. First, a revolution brought down Mr. Mubarak and took the Muslim Brotherhood to power. And then a counter-revolution by military leader Abdel Fattah el-Sisi took the country back to square one. In the process, Egypt was beaten badly: the government lost moral authority; its regional standing weakened; and with economic problems mounting, a desperate Mr. Sisi went to the Gulf monarchs for help.

Saudi Arabia was generous in helping the Sisi regime. The Saudis were initially shocked by the fall of Mr. Mubarak, a trusted ally, and the rise to power of the Brothers, Islamist republicans and sworn enemies of the Kingdom. Both the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates wanted to get rid of Egypt’s elected government of President Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brother. They backed the 2013 counter-revolution and helped Mr. Sisi tighten his grip on power with aid. In the event, what we have now is a weaker Egypt ruled by a military dictator who’s increasingly dependent on the Saudi-UAE axis.

In the Arab world, Saudi Arabia doesn’t face a real challenge to its leadership now. The Saudis have been eager to take this leadership position. They organised a massive Arab summit in May 2017 in Riyadh which was also attended by U.S. President Donald Trump. The U.S. and the Arab nations also announced plans to create a Middle East Strategic Alliance, also referred to as the Arab NATO, which is a transnational Arab security entity under Saudi leadership. The common enemy of this bloc is Saudi Arabia’s main geopolitical and ideological rival in the

region, Iran.

Riyadh has been aggressive in taking on Iran in recent years, be it the anti-Iran campaign it is spearheading globally (in the U.S., Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman compared the Iranian regime to Hitler's Nazi rule), the increasingly high military spend, or the desire to take on Iran's proxies (interference in Lebanon's politics or the war on Yemen). Within the Arab world, Saudi Arabia has made it clear that it will not allow alternative power centres to rise, and never from its backyard. The decision to blockade Qatar, the tiny Gulf country that has disagreements with Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, could be seen against this backdrop. Besides Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Egypt had also joined the blockade, showing how dependent Cairo is on the Gulf axis. There are no doubts here: Saudi Arabia wants a united Arab front under its leadership that will contain Iran and maximise the Kingdom's interests in West Asia and North Africa.

In relative terms, Riyadh has consolidated its position among the Arab countries. But its quest to become a major regional power faces serious challenges. The problem begins with its own inexperience. Saudi Arabia has never been an effective executioner of big ideas. All these years it lay low, either behind other regional powers or under the wings of the U.S. Now, as it has started taking a leadership position, its policies have gone awry. The Qatar blockade is not reaching anywhere and the war in Yemen has been catastrophic. Besides, the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside Saudi Arabia's Istanbul consulate has been a public relations disaster.

Second, Iran is hardly a pushover. Ever since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iranians have lived under threats and with a huge sense of insecurity, which prompted them to create networks of influence across the region. Despite forging strong alliances and having a far stronger economy, Saudi Arabia has been unable to contain Iran's influence. And it may not be able to do so in the future either, unless the Americans are ready for another major war in the region.

Third, there is a third pole in today's West Asia: Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey. Turkey's 'Arab Spring' bet may not have paid off as the political Islamist parties, which are aligned to the ruling Justice and Development Party, failed to consolidate power in the rebellion-hit countries, except Tunisia. However, Turkey, which retreated from West Asia in the second half of the 19th century, is now shifting its focus back from Europe to the region. It is a major defence and economic partner of Qatar, and has a strong presence in Syria through its proxies. Turkey also used the Khashoggi murder to turn up heat on Saudi Arabia internationally. While Turkey is not aligned with Iran either, it has shown willingness to cooperate with the Iranians on matters of mutual interest — such as the Kurdistan issue and the Syrian conflict — while its ties with Saudi Arabia have steadily deteriorated.

West Asia's Muslim landscape is now tripolar: Saudi Arabia, as the leader of the Arab world, is trying to expand its influence across the region; Iran is continuing to resist what it sees as attempts to scuttle its natural rise; and Turkey is returning to a shaken region to re-establish its lost glory. This multi-directional competition, if not confrontation, will shape West Asian geopolitics in the coming years.

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