
ROUNDTABLE PRESENTATION

Dr John Munro

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AFTERMATH FROM THE ARAB SPRING

The Middle East has always been an area of conflict but for the past fifty years that conflict has been more or less contained. This was largely due to an understanding between the Arabs and the West (mainly the United States), which involved a hypocritical trade-off between the main players. The West in effect agreed to overlook what the OECD calls the “democratic deficit” of the region’s autocratic regimes in return for them keeping the oil flowing and Israel secure.

A year and a half ago, this unholy alliance began to unravel. Economic hardship was largely to blame. The Arab masses also recognized that a privileged few with connections were unfairly benefitting from the system. They were also fed up with abuse from civil servants and the internal security forces, which were more likely to act in defiance of the law than implement it.

What became known as the Arab Spring began in Tunisia on January 14, 2011, when Mohammed Bouazizi, set himself on fire and died. He had been harassed by Tunisia’s internal security forces and he had had enough. Next the movement struck Egypt; later came Libya. Syria was hit with small scale protests shortly afterwards, which has now developed into a full scale civil war that shows no sign of ending. Even the relatively prosperous Gulf state of Bahrain was not immune. Public protests broke out there as well and have continued off and on ever since.

The various uprisings had several things in common.

First, they were in the main grass roots movements of protest. They were not coups d’etat. They began almost haphazardly, taking the ruling regimes by surprise. The words “bekeffi,” “kefaya”— meaning “enough”—was on everyone’s lips. Kefaya even gave its name to a new, secular political party in Egypt.

Second, it was mainly young people who led the rebellions. Their main aim was not to seize power but simply to improve their lives.

Third, the unrest involved the middle class and included many young professionals.

Fourth, women—unusually-- were well represented in the demonstrations, most notably in Yemen and Egypt.

Fifth, social networking played an important role and young, generally well educated rebels used Facebook, blogs and Twitter to mobilize and head off the states’ more cumbersome security apparatus. A new, more sophisticated kind of political opposition had emerged.

In short, the Arab Spring had many progressive features which distinguished it from the angry, spontaneous and easily suppressed popular outbursts of the past, such as the so-called bread riots in Egypt in 1988. However, the Arab Spring was very different from, say, the fall of Communism, which was a region-wide uprising against a discredited ideology. In the Arab Spring local conditions largely shaped events and everywhere the outcome was different.

The two most important of these local conditions were religion and tribal affiliation.

With regard to religion, we must first distinguish between the two main strands of the Islamic faith: Sunni and Shia. After the death of the Prophet, some of the faithful wanted to elect a new caliph by consensus; these became known as Sunni Moslems. Another group believed that Mohammed's successor should derive from the family of the Prophet, specifically Ali; these became known as Shiites. Tension grew between the two groups and a fierce battle broke out between them at Karbala in 681. The Sunnis, led by Muwaiyyah, won and Hussein, of the Prophet's family, was martyred. This produced the main schism in Islam. Today, Sunnis constitute about 75% of all Middle Easterners; Shia 25%.

In many ways the two sects are similar. They both accept the so called five pillars of Islam:

1. To acknowledge the shihadah and recite it at least once every day: that there is only one God, Allah, and Mohammed is his messenger.
2. To make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime.
3. To fast during the holy month of Ramadan.
4. To give alms to the poor (zakat).
5. To pray five times a day in the direction of Mecca.

Where the two sects differ most markedly is in their theological orientation. Sunnis believe that since the death of the Prophet there has been a falling away from the caliphate's original purity, therefore the more extreme Sunnis, loosely referred to as Salafists, believe true Moslems should strive to regain an ideal world that has been lost. Shiites are more inclined to look forward. They believe that a twelfth imam (a sort of Messiah) will be revealed at some future date, when the world will be purified of its sinfulness.

Shiites constitute the majority in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and probably Lebanon. A significant number of Shiites also live in Pakistan and in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, which is linked to Bahrain by a causeway. Sunnis are everywhere else in the Middle East, including Turkey. However, Turkey's ten million or so minority Alevi Moslems lean towards Shiism and share an emotional (but not theological) kinship with the Alawites in neighboring Syria.

Finally, there is an ongoing debate (ishtihad) in both Sunni and Shiite Islam over what constitutes the true way. Thus, in both Sunni and, particularly, Shia Islam there are conflicting views about the meaning of "jihad," holy war, some seeing it as armed struggle, others as rhetorical persuasion. There is also debate about the status of women. Neither Sunni nor Shia Islam should be regarded as monolithic faiths. Sunnis in Saudi Arabia differ from Sunnis in Egypt. Lebanese Shia differ from those living in Iran.

As in similar situations (think of Christianity's Great Schism of 1054), religious affiliation in Islam became politicized. Today it has morphed into rivalry between Shiite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia for not just the soul of the Middle East but political influence as well.

For example, tension between Shiites and Sunnis is at the root of the recent troubles in Bahrain. In Bahrain, Shiites constitute approximately 65%-70% of the population but the ruling family is Sunni, headed by King Hamid bin Issa Al Khalifa. Although most Bahraini Shiites are hardly impoverished, they certainly suffer discrimination. Trouble, which broke out last year, has been ruthlessly put down by the regime with the assistance of Saudi Arabia.

The same sectarian rivalry colors the politics of Iraq, which is mainly made up of Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds. The latter are also Sunni but speak Kurdish rather than Arabic.

In Iraq, tribalism also plays an important role. Saddam Hussein, a Sunni Moslem, besides carrying out vendettas against Shiites, also tried to suppress the tribes in the interests of national unity. However, since the US-led invasion there has been a resurgence of tribalism in Iraq, largely due to the US military working with tribal leaders in security matters rather than with the only intermittently reliable, Shiite Prime Minister, Nuri Al Malaki. But to be fair, Al Malaki is not only constrained by the multi-sectarian framework of his coalition government but by tribal factions in his own bloc as well. Some he can count on; others he can't.

As for the Kurds, they are scattered across the borders of Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Long victimized, by the rulers of these states, especially by successive Turkish regimes, they dream of one day having their own independent state, or at least the freedom to enjoy their cultural exceptionalism. In northern Iraq, the Kurds are largely split between two tribes once at odds with one another but now more or less united: Massoud Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The other major Kurdish grouping is the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). It too has a presence in Iraq but the movement is more widely based in Syria and has a strong following in Turkey, where their leader, Abdullah Ocalan, is currently in prison. The PKK is also factionalized along tribal lines.

In Libya, although there is a new centralized authority in Tripoli, real power resides with tribal militias, notably between those clustered around Benghazi in the east and Tripoli in the west; to the south the government has virtually no authority at all.

Lebanon is fractured not just along religious lines but tribal lines as well. The government is made up of representatives of different religions, their numerical strengths legitimized by a 1943 National Pact, which was based on the results of a census conducted during the French mandate in 1930. It prescribed a Maronite Christian president, a Sunni Prime Minister and a Shiite Speaker of the House. The Druse, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics and other sects are also recognized with lesser portfolios. Since 1930, the relative strengths of the three main religions has undoubtedly changed and many believe Shiites now constitute the majority, therefore a new constitution should reflect that change. This was one of the main factors which fuelled Lebanon's 25-year civil war that lasted between 1975 and 1990.

Within each of Lebanon's religious groupings there are also tribal factions. Therefore, we should distinguish between Shiites who come from the South and those who come from the Beqaa. Until recently, those from the South lived in something like medieval servitude under a handful of powerful landlords: they were primarily agricultural laborers engaged in the cultivation of tobacco. The Shiites in the Beka'a belonged to tribes, each of which followed its own traditions. Some educated their children (even enrolling them in Christian schools) and encouraged them to emigrate; others preferred their children to stay at home and engage in local economic activities, mostly farming but also smuggling and hashish cultivation.

Tribalism plays an important role in the present Lebanese government. While it is dominated by Shiite Hezbollah, it also relies for support from the tribal bloc of the Maronite Christian General Michel Aoun, (who, ironically, previously fought against the Syrian presence in Lebanon and now supports it). His group has been rewarded with several seats in the cabinet, including the energy portfolio, which is held by Aoun's son-in-law, Gibran Bassil.

In Syria, both religion and tribal allegiances exert a powerful influence. The population is predominantly Sunni (approximately 70%), with sizeable Christian and Druse communities, but the government is dominated by the minority Alawites, an obscure offshoot of Shiism.

The regime is led by President Bashar Al Assad, who succeeded his father, Hafez. Although it is said that the regime follows a secular, Baath Socialist line, it is perhaps best understood as being a closely knit family mafia, supported by the shabiha, a band of mainly Alawite thugs, as well as government forces. (Where the main power lies is the subject of some debate. Is Bashar a puppet manipulated by his family or is he a powerful force in his own right? What we do know is that Anisa Makhoul, Bashar's mother and widow of the former president Hafez al Assad, exercises considerable authority. Rami, her nephew, is certainly the richest man in Syria. He has wide ranging business interests, including Syria's cell phone network, duty free shops, supermarkets and banks. Bashar's younger brother Maher heads the internal security forces and is well known for his ruthlessness. Bushra, Bashar's older sister, also has considerable influence and is said to have mediated successfully in serious family disputes. She is the widow of Atef Shawkat, who until his recent assassination was head of Syrian intelligence. Around this core are several key figures of varying degrees of loyalty. Some, such as Nawaz Fares, Syria's ambassador to Baghdad, a Sunni, have already defected. His departure to Iraq was facilitated by his role as leader of the Uqaydat tribe, which straddles the Syria-Iraq border: another reminder of how tribal affiliation complicates the politics of the region.

Although the Assad clique was never popular, it did have credibility, having brought stability to Syria, which allowed the country's Sunni bourgeois merchant class to prosper and its minority Christians and Druse to feel secure. Even so, the majority of Sunnis felt badly done to and had little liking for the Assad regime. In 1982 they rebelled in Homs, their main power base, where they were ruthlessly put down by Hafez Al Assad, who massacred an estimated 18-20,000 and destroyed a large part of the city. Now the Sunnis are rebelling again, this time with open support from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey and with more shadowy assistance - mainly logistical - from the West.

That the West has become involved in the Syrian conflict has more to do with regional politics than humanitarian concern, in spite of the West's protestations to the contrary. Almost alone among the Arab states, Syria has established good relations with nuclear-armed Iran, which has provoked opposition from both the West and Israel. Although the Alawite religion is an offshoot of Shia Islam, the alliance with Iran has less to do with religious solidarity than political opportunism. It was said, when Hafez Al Assad was alive, that war with Israel would be impossible without Egypt (because of its strong military) and no peace without Syria (because of its covert mischief-making). In short, Syria has customarily played the role of regional spoiler and an alliance with Iran—which has declared its implacable commitment to the destruction of Israel—was well suited to Syria's foreign policy designs.

Syria also has good relations with Russia and (to a lesser degree) China, both of whom find their alliance with Syria (and by extension Iran) gives them leverage in Middle Eastern affairs. Hence their continuing support for the Assad regime.

How the civil war in Syria turns out is still difficult to predict. At the moment, Syria has overwhelming fire power but the rebels - now generally referred to as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) - now waging an effective guerrilla campaign. The FSA is made up of mainly Syrian Sunni Moslems but also includes a bewildering array of foreign fighters financed mainly by wealthy individuals and organizations in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE.

At present there are two outside political structures attempting to mediate:

1. The Friends of Syria, which meets occasionally in Istanbul, and is made up of mainly western powers but significantly not Syria's main backers, Russia and China. They have pledged financial support for a mediated solution but so far they have had little impact.
2. The Syrian National Council (SNC), which is made up of generally well meaning Syrian exiles of limited authority. Initially, the group met in Istanbul but has since met in Cairo and Qatar, whose governments would like to influence its deliberations. The SNC was originally headed by a Sorbonne professor, Burhan Ghalioun. He has since been moved aside in favor of Abdelbassit Sayda, a Kurdish exile living in Sweden, a curious choice as very few Syrians would back a Kurdish-led organization with any degree of enthusiasm. Supported primarily by France and Turkey, the SNC is dominated by Islamists but at their last meeting, France and Turkey promoted a breakaway group, backed by France and Russia headed by Manaf Tlass, the first major defector from Assad's circle. Its chances for success are regarded as slim.

Hopes of a negotiated settlement under UN auspices have now virtually collapsed. Originally, Kofi Annan headed a group of UN negotiators backed by the West, Russia, China and the Arab League but it was undermanned and ultimately ineffectual. Since then, the veteran Algerian negotiator, Lakhdar Brahimi, has taken over but he has been keen not to raise any hopes. Iran is now openly backing the Assad regime, though it denies that its help amounts to military intervention. China and Russia continue their support, though more circumspectly. Russia is a longtime ally and an important arms provider; it also has a major naval base at Tartous. Also, there are tens of thousands Russian nationals living in Syria. Perhaps most importantly, Russia is keen to curtail the growing power of the Islamists, who threaten the stability of Chechnya and the Caucasus as a whole. Ominously, the UN has reported numerous sightings of Chechens and other Central Asian nationals fighting on behalf of the rebels.

There are two basic problems with regard to resolving the war in Syria: a military campaign to topple the Assad regime would be hugely complicated as well as costly, especially as it is known that the government has stockpiled chemical weapons. On the other hand, if left to fester, Syria will likely fall into further chaos, creating a political vacuum to be filled, most probably, by an Islamist regime, or worse, Islamist regimes. There are now numerous Al Qaeda sympathizers coming into Syria across its increasingly porous borders, some through Iraq but also from the Gulf via Turkey. Collectively, the FSA would probably favor some form of Islamist governance but it is hardly united, being torn over matters of inclusiveness and degrees of Islamic purity.

What happens in Syria will likely have an impact on Lebanon. Indeed, the traditional political view in Syria is that the two countries should never have been separated after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire. Also, Lebanon's Shiite community has long maintained ties with Iran, initially religious but increasingly political. Therefore, Syria was able to facilitate Iran's foreign policy designs by channelling money and arms to Iran's closest political ally in Lebanon, Hezbollah, which were used to attack Israel.

Shiite Hezbollah is both a political party and a militia. Alone among Lebanon's other political parties it is allowed to maintain a well-armed militia (which is more powerful than the regular Lebanese army). This arrangement was agreed to under the terms of the 1989 Taif agreement, which brought Lebanon's civil war to an end and gave legitimacy to a Syrian peace-keeping presence in Lebanon. But in 2005, Syria and its proxy Hezbollah, were implicated in the murder of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, father of the current Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, who was actively seeking international support for Syria's withdrawal from his country. Hariri's assassination prompted UN Resolution 1559, shortly afterwards, which obliged all foreign forces to leave Lebanon, i.e. Syria, but also Israel, which was occupying an area in South Lebanon. At present, a UN tribunal continues to investigate Hariri's death but it is making very slow progress because of delaying tactics undertaken by Lebanon's Syria supporters.

So far, Lebanon has been able to stay out of the Syrian conflict. Memories of its own, long civil war still linger and no one wants to take the blame for restarting it. However, a wild card is the 450,000 or so Palestinian refugees living in camps in Lebanon. Essentially stateless, they have limited opportunities for work in Lebanon and are unable to emigrate. They spend their time praying, procreating and learning to fight. Mainly Sunnis, their sympathies are torn between Syria for its stance against Israel and their co-religionists in the SFA. So far, they have not been drawn into the conflict but they remain a regional time bomb.

If Syria were to break up, the tenuous peace that presently exists in Lebanon would come under pressure. The Taif agreement that ended the civil war was supposed to regulate if not resolve Lebanon's constitutional issues but it never really took hold. Factional rivalries remained and they burst out with renewed vigor after Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination. This prompted both pro- and anti-Syria demonstrations, from which emerged two roughly equal blocs: the pro-Syrian March 8 alliance, which presently holds a slim majority in parliament over the anti-Syrian March 14 alliance.

At present, the Lebanese government is trying not to be drawn into Syria's civil war. The Hezbollah-dominated, pro-Syrian alliance continues to back the Assad regime; the anti-Syrian alliance does not. So far, both the March 8 and the March 14 alliances are united in refusing to compromise Lebanon's neutrality but it is becoming increasingly difficult for each side to rein in its more passionate supporters. Moreover, the events in Syria are having a negative impact on Lebanon's economy, which makes the situation even more inflammable. This summer, for example, Gulf Arabs and Saudis were advised not to stay in Lebanon, where they traditionally vacation in the Lebanese mountains to escape the Gulf heat.

Although Egypt is not directly implicated in the events in Syria, it could be drawn in. In Egypt, the Arab Spring resulted in the removal from power of Hosni Mubarak, his two sons Ala'a and Gamal, and their cronies. They were first replaced by an interim government made up of military men, led by former army chief-of-staff Field Marshall Mohammed Hussein Tantawi, who was well known and appreciated in Washington. This group, known as the Security Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), has said it is committed to democracy and the restoration of civilian rule but doubts remain over its intentions.

True, it did oversee parliamentary elections but when they produced an overwhelming Islamist majority, they pressured the judiciary to declare it unconstitutional. On the other hand, SCAF also supervised a reasonably fair presidential election, which was won by Mohammed El Morsi, an American educated engineer, backed by the Moslem Brothers (the Ikhwan Muslimin). He refused to accept SCAF's dissolution of parliament and there was a clash of wills between the Brotherhood and the military. Fortunately, both sides realized that much was at stake and the military quietly backed down.

It seems unlikely that the military will cheerfully step aside entirely. It has too much to lose. It plays a crucial role in Egypt's economy, being involved in a wide range of activities, including munitions and textile manufacturing, real estate, potato farming and supermarkets. The actual extent of the army's involvement has always been a state secret, so few know how big their stake actually is but it has variously been estimated by some to be as high as 35% of GDP.

What is encouraging, however, is that President Morsi is turning out to be a clever politician and is quietly asserting his authority over the military without alienating them. He has removed from office Field Marshall Mohammed El Tantawi and replaced him with a less slavish courtier to American interests, Abdel Fatah El Seisy. Morsi has also quietly removed other senior military figures and appointed Brotherhood members to several key governorships, another move which boosts his authority. What we are witnessing in Egypt appears to be a quiet takeover by the Moslem Brothers, who so far have handled their newly won power with considerable finesse.

Finally, the so called Peace Process. Israelis see it as, primarily, a security issue. For the Arabs it is now more about cultural assertiveness and the restoration of Arab pride. What happens in Syria, Lebanon and

Egypt—and by extension Turkey, Jordan and Iraq—could all have repercussions for Israel and the Palestinians.

Currently, a formal resolution to the Israel-Palestinian issue is predicated on the so called “road map,” drawn up and supported by the “Quartet,” which includes the US, UN, EU and Russia. It has four main points:

1. Two contiguous democratic states at peace within secure borders.
2. The Palestinian state should approximate its pre-1967 borders.
3. Jerusalem to be a shared capital.
4. The right of return or compensation for displaced Palestinians.

In 2002, this vision for the future was endorsed by all 21 states of the Arab League and in return the Arabs agreed not just to accept Israel’s right to exist but for it to live in peace within secure borders.

Neither Israel nor the Palestinians respected this arrangement from the beginning: Israel did not stop building illegal settlements; the Palestinians did not give up their armed struggle. Hamas, an extremist Islamic faction, which had come to power in Gaza, continued its military activity, receiving covert support from Iran and elsewhere. At present the Palestinian administration is divided between Gaza’s Hamas, led by Prime Minister Ismail Haniyah, and the West Bank’s less militant, more secular, Palestine National Authority, which is dominated by Fatah and led by Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas. Attacks against Israel from both Gaza and the West Bank have been reduced considerably but settlement building in the West Bank has accelerated. (A recent example is Migron, built on Palestinian private land. A group of Palestinians went to Israel’s Supreme Court to stop it and won their case. The settlers were told to evacuate the land by August 1 yet they have made only a token withdrawal. Israel also has plans to build a full scale Israeli university in the occupied West Bank).

A so-called defensive wall snakes its way through the West Bank making free movement for Palestinians either difficult or impossible. Israel says it is for defense but it also appears to be a land grab. The West is caught in a bind. On the one hand, it supports the moderate government of Mahmoud Abbas both diplomatically and financially and is holding Hamas at arms’ length. For progress to be made the two factions will have to coordinate more closely. However, since the Arab Spring the political dynamic may have changed, making a working partnership less likely. Mr. Abbas, who rules by edict, is far from popular and has little to show for his willingness to act as a partner for peace with Israel. If the Islamists are seen to be gaining the upper hand in Syria as well as in Egypt, Jordan and elsewhere, his authority will likely be further undermined.

It is difficult to measure whether the Arab Spring has had much impact on the peace process. So far, there is little tangible evidence of any concerted pressure on Israel. However, Egypt now appears to be pursuing a more independent line. In response to local pressure, the Egyptian military has relaxed its border control with Gaza at Rafaa. While Mubarak was in power he made sure that the many tunnels under the border which served as a conduit for smuggling merchandise and arms (mainly from Libya) were effectively monitored. Now Israel fears that under an Islamist regime this control may be relaxed. There have already been armed clashes at the Rafaa crossing, resulting in the deaths of five Egyptian policemen. This provoked mass anti-Israeli demonstrations in Cairo, which resulted in the evacuation of the Israeli embassy.

More recently, two Egyptian state oil companies - Egyptian Natural Gas Holding Co. and Egypt General Petroleum Co - which since 2008 have been pumping gas to Israel, suddenly turned the tap off. The

Egyptian government has since reneged on its gas treaty with Israel and has shown no desire to negotiate its resumption.

Also, the Sinai is less closely monitored than it was under Mubarak and there are persistent reports that the Bedouin there, now more heavily armed thanks to the ineffectual security situation in Libya, are becoming radicalized by Al Qaeda. In July, there was yet another sabotage attack on the gas pipeline that supplies Israel and Jordan with Egypt's natural gas. In the past, Egypt would not have sent a large military force into the Sinai without coordinating closely with Israel. This time Egypt acted more or less independently, apparently consulting with Israel and the US only after the event.

While Israel may come under increased pressure as a result of political changes in the region, for the moment at least this is unlikely to be translated into military action. In fact, al Morsi has surprised many by keeping Gaza's Hamas at arms length. Uppermost in most Arab minds is simply to improve their economic condition. Hence, in Egypt, besides meetings with top US officials, mainly in a bid to secure debt relief and further loans, President Morsi's earliest diplomatic initiative was to visit China with a view to drumming up aid and trade. More controversial was his brief stopover in Tehran to address the conference of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). There he upset his hosts by refusing to support Mr Assad's beleaguered regime but simultaneously tried to reassure Iran that Egypt was nonetheless a true friend. In a move, bound to create upset in the United States, Morsi has since pointed to the obvious by saying that any settlement to the crisis would have to take into account Iran's interests. He therefore proposed a new team of mediators made up of representatives from Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Egypt. It is a proposal unlikely to take hold but is another indication of Egypt seeking a new independent role in the Middle East.

So far, Israel's policy with regard to these new threats remains outwardly unchanged. To make use of Ehud Barak's metaphor, they still see themselves inhabiting a villa in a jungle, so they must be vigilant and prepared to ward off unwelcome intruders. Nor, it seems, has Israel made up its mind how to tackle Iran's nuclear program, other than to speak noisily about "red lines." So far, Israel's instinctively aggressive posture towards Iran appears to have been reined in by the US, which continues to hope that economic sanctions and under-the-radar cyber attacks will prove to be an adequate deterrent. Polls in Israel also suggest that there is little stomach for a full scale attack against Iran, a view endorsed by several well respected figures in Israel's intelligence community.

Whether Israel will continue to heed international pressure or attack Iran remains to be seen. In recent years Israel has become increasingly belligerent and Prime Minister Netanyahu, who remains relatively popular at home, has swung his Likud party further to the right, partly from instinct but also in order to keep his right-wing parliamentary coalition together. Foremost among his supporters are his Defense Minister Ehud Barak and his Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, whom even ardent Zionists have labeled a racist. Also, Netanyahu's interior minister, Eli Yishai, has recently accentuated Israel's swing towards racial extremism, defending his country's policy of refusing refuge to South Sudanese fleeing their worn torn country on the grounds that Israel is for "white people" only. This conveniently overlooks the fact that there are sizable minorities of Ethiopians already living there.

The largest pro-Israeli lobby in the US, AIPAC, continues its wholehearted support for Netanyahu but AIPAC's admittedly much tinier rival, the J Street Lobby is less enthusiastic. It believes that the greatest threat to Israel's existence is not from outside aggressors, nor from Arabs living in Israel and the Occupied Territories. It comes from a demographic imbalance, which Israeli historian Benny Morris identifies as Israel's primary, existential threat. This was also recognized by no less a fervent militarist than Ben Gurion, who counseled against annexing the West Bank after the 1967 war, because if it did, Israel would be unable to remain both Jewish and democratic.

Demographers differ over the date when Arabs will outnumber Jews in Israel and the Occupied Territories. But all agree it will be well within the lifetime of the majority of Israelis living today.

Unfortunately, this “existential” threat has not led to an increased willingness on the part of Israel to negotiate with the Palestinians. On the contrary, the present trend seems to suggest that most Israelis are more comfortable living in an apartheid regime than reaching out to the peace-makers.

Finally, a look at the way the Arab Spring has raised the profile of two states: tiny Qatar and Turkey.

1. The present ruler of Qatar, Sheikh Hamid ibn Khalifa Al Thani and his family are open - albeit guardedly - to western ways. Witness their enthusiasm for western style educational institutions and their tolerance for the increasingly popular and independently minded Al Jazeera television channel. Qatar also sided with the West in regulating the situation in Libya, providing military and diplomatic support for the NATO-led invasion. Though tiny, Qatar has huge revenues from its natural gas reserves, which also enable it to exert considerable influence worldwide. Consider its economic importance only to the UK property market. Qatar has bought up several prime real estate properties in London, including Harrods and the Chelsea Barracks and financed the construction of the iconic Shard land mark.

While Qatar insists it wants to be friends with everyone, it also emphasizes its strong commitment to Islamic values. Hence, it offered safe haven for the Hamas leadership when they decamped from their headquarters in Damascus. Qatar is also said to have provided funds for at least one of the Islamist parties (Rafala al-Sahati) which contested Libya’s recent elections and in Syria it is openly supporting the FSA. Whether Qatar will be able to maintain its delicate balancing act between East and West remains to be seen.

2. Most interesting is the enhanced international status of Turkey, which is seeking to supplement its growing economic clout with a more prominent diplomatic role. The man responsible for formulating Turkey’s foreign policy is Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, whose 2001 book “Strategic Depth” built on Ataturk’s dictum of “peace at home and peace abroad,” recasting it as “zero problems with the neighbors.” This meant, among other things, that Turkey should maintain a strong military and deploy it wisely. Hence, Turkey’s cautious involvement in Libya. It joined the NATO initiative only when the conflict was well under way and then in a non-combat role. Overall, according to Mr. Davitoglu, as articulated in his recent address to the Turkish parliament, Turkey’s main foreign policy aim is to be the “owner, pioneer and servant of the Middle East.”

If Turkey is to realize this ambition, it must tread carefully. After World War I, in 1923, when it lost its empire and the secularizing Ataturk had come to power, Turkey’s initial orientation was towards Europe. In 1952 it joined NATO, where its huge army on the border with the former Soviet Union made it the West’s vital ally during the Cold War. Later, Turkey focused on joining the EU. But in the face of opposition from many EU members who believe that the EU should be a Christian club and that Turkey is anyway too big a mouthful to digest, Turkey began to re-orient its foreign policy - quite literally - eastwards, a policy which according to a recent Pew research poll, is supported by the majority of the Turkish population.

In recent years Turkey has sought to win friends throughout the Middle East, mediating between Saudi Arabia and Iran over Iraq and between the West and Iran over the imposition of economic sanctions designed to stop Iran’s nuclear program. In 2011, Turkey also announced the establishment of a free trade zone between Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Jordan.

With regard to Turkey’s courtship of its Arab neighbors, one should not under-estimate the hugely popular Turkish soap operas such as “Noor”, “The Sultan’s Harem” and the “Magnificent Century”, dubbed in colloquial Arabic and shown at prime time throughout the Arab world. Essentially, they portray an idealized picture of Ottoman rule with more flesh than you would find in their Arab equivalents, laced with family intrigue. Also, they tend to portray strong, capable women who have the courage to walk out on overbearing husbands without suffering the consequences. Overall, their effect is

to remind the Arabs of their rich cultural heritage and simultaneously that Islam and modernity can co-exist.

The US has also encouraged Turkey to become more actively involved with its Arab neighbors, hoping that the mild Islamism of Turkey's ruling AK or Freedom and Justice Party (in power since 2003) might become a template for new governments in the region.

This is happening when Saudi Arabia, which used to be the region's main power-player, is beginning to lose some of its influence. The leaders of Saudi Arabia are now old and infirm. King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud can barely walk; the former conservative and highly influential Crown Prince and Interior Minister, Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz, has just died. He has been replaced by his brother, another conservative, colorless septuagenarian. Prince Saud al-Faisal is sick and the next generation may be less pliant to America's will. Already the most influential member of the royal family of the younger generation, Prince Faisal Al Turki, is warning that Saudi Arabia might pursue a more independent line. He announced in a recent op-ed article in the "New York Times" that the kingdom would have to rethink its relations with the US if it were to veto Palestinian statehood at the UN. Such cracks in the once solid US-Saudi axis can only boost Turkey's importance.

Qatar also seems to recognize Turkey's increasingly important role, judging by the increase of their bilateral visits. Since 2001 several important agreements have been signed between the two with regard to economic investment, double taxation and military co-operation. Particularly noteworthy are the close personal ties between Turkey and Tunisia, where the ideologically friendly An Nahda party constitutes the majority in the newly formed government.

The foreign policy orientation of both Qatar and Turkey sits well with US policy for the region. However, Turkey also values its independence and does not want to be seen as a western proxy. When the US Congress passed a non-binding resolution two years ago affirming that the World War I massacre of Armenians was "genocide," Turkey reacted angrily and called in the US ambassador for a dressing down. Turkey's newly independent line was demonstrated most forcefully when in 2011 it sided with the BRICS, refusing to toe the line with the US to impose sanctions on Iran. On that occasion, Turkey sided with Brazil, China and Russia and voted against sanctions.

Turkey's increasingly independent stance has also meant a cooling of its relations with Israel. Turkey and Israel once had close military ties and even staged joint military exercises. More recently, their relationship has turned sour. Erdogan openly walked out on the Israel delegation at Davos in 2009 over Israeli attacks on Gaza. Later, when Israel refused to apologize to Turkey for the attack on the flotilla of Turkish peace activists bound for Gaza, in early 2012, Turkey broke off diplomatic relations.

Turkey's more aggressive foreign policy is also reflected in its pursuit of the repatriation of artefacts important to its cultural heritage, such as the reputed sarcophagus of Alexander the Great, presently housed in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin.

Insiders in Turkey attribute this heightened assertiveness partly to Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan's determination to recapture some of the lost glory of the Ottoman Empire. Like the late Charles de Gaulle, he seems to identify personally both with his country's cultural heritage and its foreign policy. That is why Mr. Erdogan appeared to be more than diplomatically aggrieved when President Assad, with whom he thought he had a close personal understanding, refused to follow his advice and co-operate with Kofi Annan's UN peace initiative. After the shooting down of a Turkish fighter over Syria, which Turkey described as an act of war, the relationship between the two countries turned from cool to frigid and there has since been a break in diplomatic relations.

While Mr. Erdoğan may be personally aggrieved with President Assad and eager to remain friends with Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the hardening of Turkey's stance vis-à-vis Syria is also influenced by Turkey's

awkward relations with the Kurds. Initially, Turkey's ruling AK party was quite tolerant towards the 13 million or so Kurds on its soil and even admitted that the government had made mistakes when dealing with them. Since then, its position has hardened. It now worries that if Syria falls apart, the more militant Kurds, notably the PKK and its sympathizers, might find safe haven there and cause trouble. So far there is no united stand among the Kurds living in Syria: some groups still support President Assad; others the FSA.

Finally, it should be noted that Turkey's increasingly important role in the Middle East is matched by a decline in the regional influence of and support for the United States. The US lost considerable credibility during the Arab Spring, in Egypt, for example, because it refused to commit itself on behalf of the rebels until it was absolutely sure that the Mubarak clique was finished. Most Arabs are now acutely aware of the discrepancy between the democratic sentiments expressed by President Obama in his 2009 Cairo University address, entitled, ironically, "A New Beginning" - and American practice, especially with regard to the Palestinians.

There is also a growing conviction among Arabs that the West—particularly the US—is viscerally anti-Moslem. Events such as the recent airing of the defamatory YouTube clip about the Prophet, which led to widespread unrest in Benghazi, Cairo, Yemen and elsewhere, only serves to underline that view. The fact that the film (if it actually exists) was made by a disaffected, expatriate Egyptian Copt with extremist views is lost on the Arab masses. The majority seem to believe it is a true reflection of official US government attitudes.

Nor do Arabs believe - as they once did - that the US will pressure Israel to pursue a more balanced foreign policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians. They now recognize - somewhat belatedly - that the US and Israel are joined at the hip and America's support for Israel is closely intertwined with US domestic politics. Arabs noted with dismay that less than a year ago, Netanyahu was greeted with rapturous applause by the US Congress, which has since cut off its \$200 million aid to the Palestinians for daring to seek nationhood at the UN. It was also noted that the US left its \$3 billion aid package to Israel untouched, despite massive US cuts in the US defence budget elsewhere.

To sum up: while the Arab Spring may have changed the Middle East, much remains the same. It would be rash to predict what happens next as there is no history of democracy in the Middle East. The likelihood is that the Islamists will become a stronger force to reckon with but that does not necessarily mean increased support for Al Qaeda. Nor should we expect greater enthusiasm for secularism either. There is the danger of increased chaos if the Arab regimes fail to address the pressing economic needs of their people, which might fuel nostalgia for autocratic rule, though that seems unlikely. All we can safely say that now the genie of democracy has been let out of the bottle it will be hard to stuff it back in again. That is the fundamental change.

Dr. John Munro has spent most of his professional life in the Middle East as a professor and administrator at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and the American University in Cairo (AUC). He is also a

freelance journalist and before his formal retirement served as a fulltime political and media advisor to the European Commission in Cairo. Later he was appointed part-time visiting professor at the University of Malta in an EU-funded MA program, teaching Human Rights and Democratization. He is the author of several books about the Middle East, including histories of Syrian Desert transport, the American University of Beirut and Lebanon under the presidency of Amin Gemayel. His latest publication is a selection of photographs from the archives of the American Colony in Jerusalem, entitled “From the Nile to the Euphrates,” (2010) for which he provided an introduction and text.

ADDENDUM

Finally a brief word about the current gas and oil situation. Experts have said that there is enough oil and natural gas in the Mediterranean Basin to last as much as 200 years and there is a distribution network in place: the Arab Gas Pipeline which links, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan Israel, Gaza and Egypt; plans also exist to add links to Turkey and Iraq. Cyprus, however, is not a part of it. Until very recently, Israel had an agreement with Egypt for importing natural gas but this has just been cancelled unilaterally by Egypt. Previously, the line had been sabotaged on several occasions by Sinai Bedouins but in late April, Egyptian state-run GASCO shut down the line altogether. Shaul Mofaz said this marked a new low in relations between the two states but Netanyahu has sought to play down the dispute. But it does highlight the precariousness of Israel’s energy supply. However, Israel does have an agreement with the US firm Noble to exploit its Tamar and Leviathan fields and new, lesser fields nearby.

It should also be noted that the Arab contracting firm, CCC, has a 13 year-old agreement with British Gas Co. and the Palestine Investment Fund to exploit offshore Gaza finds. Lebanon is also involved in a dispute over the extent of its territorial waters, which threatens to hamper Israeli drilling and Israeli drones regularly cruise over the area to monitor Hezbollah activity. Israel would have liked to negotiate directly with Lebanon over the issue but technically the two nations are at war, so Lebanon has submitted its case to the UN instead. The dispute is still unresolved.

Greece, it should also be noted, has ambitions to become a major oil and gas distribution hub and Russia has already entered into exploratory talks with the Greek government to this end. Greece is well placed to facilitate distribution of oil and gas from Azerbaijan, for example, and is already a partner in the ITGI pipeline, which also involves Turkey and Italy. But taking into account Greece’s economic situation, coupled with the results of the recent elections, which produced no clear result, has cast a shadow over future development.

Finally, Turkey casts a shadow over the entire region. Its state-operated Turkish Petroleum Corporation has already begun drilling in the waters off the coast of the breakaway Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and has become increasingly alarmed with Cyprus’ cozying up to Israel. In a bid to shore up Turkey’s alliances with Russia and Iran, visits have been made to both places for talks with Medvedev.

In short, everywhere uncertainty reigns. With whom would Cyprus’ best interests be served? Israel looks like the best bet—as long as one does not look too closely at the details. It has the full backing of the US and recently diplomatic ties have improved. But with Cyprus having problems with Turkey and Turkey’s growing hostility to Israel, coupled with its improved relations with the Arabs, it might not be the best option.