

# **OCCASIONAL PAPER**

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No. 27

Monday, 3 October 2011

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## **The Arab Awakening and the New Disorders of Hope**

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### **Introduction**

In 1935 Lieutenant-Colonel Hodgen, the British political agent in Kuwait, wrote to the British Foreign Office about a new and popular form of communication in Kuwait and the other Arab monarchies along the coast of the Persian Gulf: Arabic radio broadcasts emanating from Egypt. He observed that the new form of communication ‘is not only significant’ but also ‘contains very great possibilities for both good and harm.’ ‘Let us hope,’ Hodgen concluded, ‘that it remains under proper control.’<sup>1</sup>

His warnings proved to be prophetic. In the 1950s Egyptian radio broadcasts in Arabic helped to inspire a new generation of young activists and military officers to challenge Arab autocratic regimes allied with the West in much the same way that social media and other new forms of mass media have done this year in the Arab world. Much to the surprise of Western analysts, once stable pro-Western monarchies in Egypt and Iraq fell to popular revolutions. Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia also won independence from the French in the 1950s, thanks in part to Egyptian radio broadcasts. Indeed, Great Britain and France argued that ‘controlling’ Egyptian radio broadcasts justified their historic decision to occupy the Suez Canal in Egypt in 1956.

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<sup>1</sup>Sean Foley, *The Arab Gulf States: Beyond Oil and Islam* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Press, 2010), 11.

The upheavals in the Arab world six decades ago provide a useful framework for understanding the events that have reshaped the Middle East and the Arab world since late December 2010. Just as in the 1950s, the current political upheavals were unprecedented and led by a new generation of political actors. They reflect political, socio-economic, and technological factors that had been brewing beneath the surface of Arab societies for years. Chief among these was the telecommunications revolution. It undermined the state's ability to manage the flow of information and gave individuals greater freedom to choose what to believe, bind together with new communities who share their beliefs, and to act. In particular, the new forms of communication allowed young Arabs (and some older ones too) to understand that millions of Arabs shared their frustration with the limitations of their societies and the failure of Arab states to match the socio-economic development of Turkey and other emerging Asian nations. These frustrations only grew fiercer after the onset of the 2008 global financial crisis and the rise in global food prices in 2007 and 2010.

By the start of the twenty-first century, many young Arabs had concluded that the Arab order, their states' political and social hierarchies (or *nizam*) that had been in place since World War I, was the principal impediment to realizing a better future and to regaining their dignity. In their eyes, the new system should not conform either to the Islamic one promoted by al-Qaida or the authoritarian and materialistic one promoted by most Arab governments. Instead, these Arabs sought a new one: a definitively Muslim society in which individuals could live up to their God-given potential and in which their leaders could not use the West or Islam to justify autocracy. The centrality of *nizam* is clear in the work of one of the region's popular singers, Maher Zain, and in the principal slogan demonstrators have used throughout the Arab world in 2011: '*al-sha'b yuridu isqat an-nizam*' ('The people want to overthrow the system or order').

## Roots of Revolution

To grasp how and why the Arab spring arose in the Middle East in 2011, it is important to bear in mind the key geographic and environmental characteristics of the Arab states. By any geographic standard, the Arab World is large. The distance from the Nile River in Egypt to Morocco's Atlantic Coast is approximately 3,600 kilometres, while the Arabian Peninsula covers an area about the same size as United States east of the Mississippi river plus the states of Texas and California. Less than ten percent of the region is arable, and it is difficult to count on a viable annual farm surplus outside of Egypt and Iraq. Access to water is a major issue in many Arab states, and Yemen's capital, Sana'a is expected to run out of water within a decade.<sup>2</sup> Many Arab monarchies in the Persian Gulf region have purchased substantial tracks of

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<sup>2</sup>Joyce D'Silva, 'Policies for Sustainable Agricultural Production and Consumption,' in *Global Food Insecurity*, eds. Mohamed Behnassi, Sidney Draggan, and Sanni Yaya, (New York: Springer, 2011), p.37.

agricultural land overseas, while Algeria has spent as much as two-thirds of its foreign currency earnings on food imports alone.<sup>3</sup> Even the few Arab states that have viable agricultural sectors still must import substantial quantities of food. Consequently, most Arab states are sensitive to fluctuations in the price of wheat and other international agricultural commodities.

While there is a host of Muslim and non-Muslim peoples who live in Arab states, there is also a powerful sense of common cultural heritage and social space. Most people, including the many refugees and stateless individuals, now live in cities or large towns. Many non-Muslims utilize Arabic in their liturgy and their house of worship. The shared heritage created powerful bonds that transcend political boundaries— linkages that have been intensified by movies, radio, and other mass media. One of the most popular personalities on Egyptian radio in the 1950s was Umm Kulthum. She was a famous Egyptian singer. Her success is widely attributed to her immense talent and the fact that her work reflected the aspirations and revolutionary ideals of Arabs during that time.<sup>4</sup>

Over the last fifteen years, Arab satellite television has tapped into the same trans-Arab identity as Umm Kulthum and Egyptian radio did and in the process created a political shift as profound as was the introduction of radios in the 1930s. The framework initially centred on the rise of satellite television networks modelled on the success of the US satellite television news network, Cable News Network (CNN). The networks competed directly with existing state-controlled radio and television networks and undermined the ability of states in the Arab world to regulate the flow of information. The new media— both foreign and Arab-based— pursued their own agendas and were sometimes funded by governments or organizations that differed considerably from official voices of Arab governments. In 1999, the government of Algeria cut power to its capital, Algiers, to prevent its citizens from seeing a report on one channel, al-Jazeera.<sup>5</sup>

That network became the most important of the new Arab satellite channels. Its decision to hire Western-trained, Arabic-speaking journalists set it apart from CNN and other Western news organizations in the Middle East, whose correspondents and producers rarely speak local languages, depending instead on staffs of local translators and guides. By contrast, al-Jazeera staff could follow a story no matter where it led—whether it was ‘Bin Laden or Bush.’ The network’s broadcast theme—*al-ray wa al-ray al-akhar* (the view and the other view)—permeated its lively discussion call-in shows, which touched on a host of long taboo subjects in

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<sup>3</sup>Adam Schreck, ‘Booming Gulf Looks Overseas for Agriculture Needs,’ *Associated Press*, 16 November 2008.

<sup>4</sup>For more on Umm Kulthum, see Virginia Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup>Foley, *The Arab Gulf States*, 118.

the Arab world, including family planning, religion, political power, gender issues, and corruption.<sup>6</sup> Producers consciously picked highly controversial guests and themes that would both clash with and address Arab concerns not covered elsewhere. Moreover, the network built an online presence in Arabic and English— recognizing the desire of Arabs and even non-Arabs to ‘join’ the network’s community. By 2008, al-Jazeera’s English-language website received more than three million hits a week alone from within the United States.<sup>7</sup>

Fortunately for al-Jazeera and other new Arab satellite television networks there were many stories that their viewership wished to see. There were the usual political issues: the Arab-Israeli conflict, US support for Israel and autocratic Arab governments, the War on Terrorism, and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. But the social issues were even more important. The publication in 2002 of the *Arab Human Development Report* revealed what many Arabs had known for years: their nations were underdeveloped socially, were unable to meet either the social or economic needs of their populations, and have fallen far behind Asian nations that had once been their peers economically and socially. What’s more, explosive demographic growth since the 1950s had stretched environmental and human resources significantly. Those who lacked *wasta* (socio-economic and political connections) found that they were generally shut out of educational or employment opportunities and had little chance for advancement. The issue of *wasta* reinforced popular perceptions on three other critical issues: a) popular perceptions of official corruption and favouritism, b) the fact that most Arab leaders were old and lacked clear successors; and c) a general feeling that the Arab ‘*nizam*’ humiliated Arabs individually and collectively as nations.<sup>8</sup>

Within this environment, a widespread sense of despair and helplessness emerged among the growing ranks of Arab youth in the twenty-first century. Blocked from advancement at home, many Arabs tried to find work abroad. Those who remained did not find work or had to accept wages below the cost of living. They often had to work multiple jobs and depend on their families well into adulthood. Even educated professionals had to postpone marriage for years: it was difficult for men to buy homes in urban areas or have enough funds for the *mahr*, the dowry paid by the groom to the bride.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Naomi Sakr, *Satellite Realms: Transnational Television, Globalization, and the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 119.

<sup>7</sup>Noam Cohen, ‘Few in U.S. See Jazeera’s Coverage of Gaza War,’ *New York Times*, January 11, 2009; Susan Stamberg, ‘Washington Correspondent Departs Al Jazeera’ (includes interview with Dave Marash), *Weekend Edition Saturday*, 5 April 2008.

<sup>8</sup>Asef Bayat, ‘Transforming the Arab World: The *Arab Human Development Report* and the Politics of Change,’ *Development and Change* 36 (6): 1225-1237.

<sup>9</sup>‘Men Brave Soaring Costs of Marriage,’ *Gulf Daily News*, 14 November 2000.

All of these challenges were made worse by the 2008 global financial crisis and the rise in global food costs in 2007 and 2010. The former depressed worldwide demand for energy, tourism, and many of the other key industries in the Arab world. It also severely curtailed employment opportunities in the chief external market for Arab workers, Europe, especially southern Europe. Rising global food prices, by contrast, made rice, wheat, corn and other daily staples out of reach for many and spurred food riots in several Arab states in early 2011.<sup>10</sup>

How to deal with these problems remained a challenge for many Arabs. While the actions of al-Qaida inspired some to embrace religious extremism as a method to change the ‘order’ in their societies, others sought to articulate grievances through technology or art. In Egypt, a generation of internet activists challenged the order of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak online, while young Egyptian poets rebelled against the order and entrenched customs— linguistic, metrical, formal, or social in Arabic writing. In 2004, Saudi businesswomen, Lubna Olayan, openly challenged the Kingdom’s powerful religious elite and their conservative and patriarchal interpretation of Islam. In her speech to the Jeddah Economic Forum, she stated that any Saudi irrespective of gender, who was serious about working, should have the opportunity to ‘find a job in the field for which he or she is best qualified.’<sup>11</sup> Olayan subsequently made similar comments outside Saudi Arabia, where she was consciously photographed not wearing the veil. Nor was she alone: criticism of Saudi religious elite arose in the Kingdom’s literature and in its first feature-length movie, *Keif al-Hal? (How goes it?)*. Critical commentary on Arab blogs, YouTube, and Facebook similarly undermined the social ‘order,’ and, most importantly, provided opportunities to young people to search out alternative voices and avenues for both self-definition and action. Indeed, a Tunisian blogger was not taken seriously by the public unless he or she had already been censored by the Tunisian government.

Another implicit criticism of the Arab order came from Turkey: Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party, or AKP. First elected to national office in 2002, the AKP doubled Turkey’s per capita income in five years and pursued a balanced policy in foreign affairs. Ankara kept close ties with the West while establishing unprecedented cultural and commercial links with traditional Turkish enemies: the Arab states, Greece, and Russia. Turkey’s refusal to aid the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the AKP’s spirited defence of Islam and democracy against apparent threats from Turkey’s secular and military elites, and Erdoğan’s

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<sup>10</sup>According to the World Bank, global food prices rose 36 percent between March 2010 and March 2011. The costs of basic commodities—like maize (74 percent) and wheat (69 percent)—rose still higher. Ian Talley, ‘World Bank: Rising Food Prices Pose an Imminent Threat,’ *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 April 2011 and World Bank, ‘Food Price Watch,’ April 2011 ([www.worldbank.org/foodcrisis/foodpricewatch/april2011](http://www.worldbank.org/foodcrisis/foodpricewatch/april2011)).

<sup>11</sup>‘Saudi Arabia’s Top Cleric Condemns Calls for Women’s Rights,’ *New York Times*, 22 January 2004.

denunciation of Israeli policies in Gaza solidified his and Turkey's position among Arabs. Arabs visited Turkey in unprecedented numbers and became voracious consumers of Turkish products and media. Turkish exports to Iraq, Syria, and other Arab states skyrocketed. For many Arabs, Turkey became a potential new model for a Muslim society in which citizens would no longer have to make the choice between modernity and Islam and where neither Islam nor the West could be used to justify autocracy, including military rule.<sup>12</sup>

## Maher Zain

Few artists understood the deep yearning in the Arab world for such a society more than Maher Zain, a Lebanese aeronautical engineer raised in Sweden but trained in the elite New York City music world. And he may emerge as his generation's Umm Kulthum. His 2009 debut album, *Thank You Allah*, was a surprise commercial success a year before the start of the Arab spring uprising and outshone albums by more established Arab singers. On the album's cover, Zain wears jeans, a black jacket, and a dapper cap appropriate for a rhythm and blues concert but is seated in quiet Islamic prayer. That combination is emblematic of the core messages of the album, much of which is in English: faith in Islam, God, and personal dignity are the answer to the systematic challenges facing modern Muslims. It was critical for twenty-first century Muslims to take 'ownership' of their problems and to resolve them. He also has mastered online promotion and created frameworks for his fans to 'associate' with him and act, in this case by buying his album. Not surprisingly, Zain was the first Muslim artist to reach a million fans on Facebook. Today he has three million. YouTube videos are also integral to his marketing message, and he dominated foreign album sales on Amazon.com in 2009.<sup>13</sup>

In both his videos and his songs, Zain consciously goes against the traditional formula for popular songs and videos which glamorize and revolve around the singer. Instead, Zain appears to be an ordinary person, who is no big deal except for his musical talent, which of course is given to him by God, whom he regularly thanks. But his faith is not founded on a complete renunciation of the West. In 'Awakening,' Zain calls on Muslims to reform themselves and not to fault others for their shortcomings: 'Yes, it is easy to blame everything on the West when in fact our focus should be on ourselves'; the chorus then goes on to ask, 'Is Allah satisfied?' Collective

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<sup>12</sup>For more on this issue, see Sean Foley, 'I am From Adana, Welcome to Beirut: How Identity, Soap Operas, and Trade are Transforming Turkey and the Arab World,' *The Middle East Institute (Washington, DC) Viewpoints Series*, September 2010.

<sup>13</sup>'Fans Throng to Maher Zain's Album Debut Concert at AUC,' *Daily News Egypt*, March 26, 2010. An Egyptian HR consultant told the *Daily News* that she 'loved' the 'revolutionary feel of Zain's songs.' They were neither 'the usual empty lyrics' heard on television nor the 'classical religious sermons that are not in touch with the new generation.'

social action is also an important aspect of his message. We see him in his videos singing in various situations where there are problems but where people other than Zain address them.

Equally importantly, he encourages individuals to take ownership of their problems and to confront injustice but not to do so with violence. Strikingly, in the video for the album's third song, *'Inshah Allah,'* one sees pictures of dark and menacing riot police chasing innocents and even violent torture, as Zain sings that one should never lose hope or despair because Allah is always on your side. Even more strikingly, in *'Palestine will be Free,'* we see a young school girl holding a stone in front of an Israeli tank— an image meant to invoke a very famous picture of a Palestinian child from the 1987 Palestinian Intifada holding a rock high to throw at a nearby Israeli tank. But the girl drops the rock, stands defenceless in front of the tank, and implicitly puts her faith in God that her personal will is stronger than the mighty Israeli tank. Her faith is rewarded, as the tank withdraws.

## Arab Revolutions

Within months of the release of *Thank You Allah*, millions of individuals from Morocco to Bahrain had gained the confidence to challenge their nation's governments and even their tanks. Beginning in Tunisia in December 2010, political protests over the price of food transformed into much larger events in which protestors followed a strategy remarkably similar to the one laid out in *Thank You Allah*. Protestors challenged their governments through the sheer size of their demonstrators and forced police to withdraw in a manner similar to how the girl forced the Israeli tank to leave in *'Palestine Will Be Free.'* Crowds took personal ownership of their movements and implicitly 'seized' critical symbols and holidays for themselves. They proudly flew (or wore as bandanas or face paint) their national flags, while Egyptian protestors purposely began their public challenge to their nation's police state on 25 January 2011— Egypt's national police holiday. Protestors kept civilians separated from security forces in many areas as well as cleaned Tahrir Square and other public spaces of trash.

Nor did the protestors blame the West for their problems. They put the blame (and the responsibility for change) at home: *'al-sha'b yuridu isqat an-nizam'* ('The people want to overthrow the system or order'). Critically, Tunisians defined the meaning of that phrase early in the protests. When President Ben Ali left Tunis for Saudi Arabia on 26 January, Tunisian elite hoped that a new president would lead to the end of the protests. Instead, demonstrations grew bolder. By taking this approach, Tunisians sent a clear message: the leader was only a symptom of the problem; it was the *nizam* that had to change.

My analysis, incidentally, is not meant to suggest that Maher Zain's songs or his videos caused any demonstrations: I am only suggesting that his work clearly reflected a wide-spread feeling of discontent and a desire for a different future. His awareness of that discontent and of the need for hope was an element of his popularity.

Nor is there any way that Zain could have predicted how al-Jazeera and Arab protestors would use technology or social networks. One of the defining events of the Tunisian revolution, the video of the self-immolation of a young male fruit seller, Tarek Muhammad Bouazizi, might not have come to light as quickly had a reporting team from al-Jazeera's Mubasahr television not discovered it on Facebook. They recognized that his act of self-immolation embodied the hopelessness and despair of millions of other Arabs. Al-Jazeera focused on the story long before it was noticed by other international news organizations and effectively helped fuel a revolution. Al-Jazeera went on to carry on innovative and politically influential reporting in Egypt and other Arab states experiencing protests. Perhaps most creatively the network chose to air its video live on its Facebook page. Although their reporting made them the target of harassment and attacks from state security forces, al-Jazeera's correspondents and producers also earned the public praise of US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton—a remarkable development for a network whose reporting had been harshly criticized for years by American officials.<sup>14</sup>

Al-Jazeera correspondents (and Secretary Clinton), however, were not the only individuals using social media and satellite television. For many Arabs, social action was no longer confined to watching al-Jazeera, reading a banned blogger, or listening to Maher Zain. It could now be viewing or attending rallies in person or 'virtually' through the click of a mouse. It could also involve exchanging information on how to avoid tear gas, secure interviews on Western television networks, or attend rallies in major Western cities. When networks were slowed or taken down, there were other ways to record and distribute information: SD chips, thumb drives, CDs, miniature recording devices, and cell phones.

While Egyptian bloggers have received extensive and well-deserved credit for their role in overthrowing Mubarak, the Libyan overseas community has been even more impressive in its online support of their country's revolutionary movement based in Benghazi. They rapidly mobilized a network of educated Libyans in the United States, Europe and the Arab World to promote the revolution online, defend the revolution on al-Jazeera and other international satellite channels twenty-four hours a day, and provided both funds and professional expertise to the revolution's war effort. They also bought the rights to Internet domain names related to the revolution— such as Libyafeb17.com or feb17.info—*before the official start date of the Libyan revolution: 17 February 2011*. On Facebook and other platforms, they raised funds and built

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<sup>14</sup>Toby Harnden, 'The 'Arab Spring' uprisings of 2011 are being hailed in Washington as the 'Al-Jazeera moment,' *The Telegraph (UK)*, 9 April 2011.



alliances and shared media contacts with other activists promoting reform elsewhere in the Arab world. In cooperation with both Qatar and France, Libyan rebels even launched a satellite television station to compete directly with Libyan state television, purchased weapons, and sold millions of dollars worth of Libyan oil in global petroleum markets.

Equally importantly, Libyan exiles used these various human and online political networks to gain widespread international recognition as the legitimate representatives of the Libyan people months before their military forces were in a position to either take the Libyan capital, Tripoli, or anywhere outside of Benghazi. Here it is worth noting that Western officials were sceptical about the ability of the Libyan opposition and reluctant to give up their financial, personal, and security ties to Libya's government. Italy's Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, looked at Qaddafi as a close personal friend and reportedly seriously contemplated resigning rather than support military operations against Libya. But minds in key Western capitals—including Berlusconi's in Rome—were changed by promises of oil concessions and an effective multi-tiered and multi-continent media campaign. That campaign used the Libyan government's forceful response to the February 17 Revolution to transform the regime from a useful bulwark against al-Qaeda into an organization that had to be prevented from perpetrating an unthinkable humanitarian disaster in Libya and sparking massive refugee crisis for southern Europe. Indeed, it is highly unlikely that UN Security Council Resolution 1973 would have happened without the Libyan opposition's shrewd media campaign and diplomacy.

Citing these two Security Council resolutions (1970 and 1973), Western leaders mobilized international support for Libya's rebels and bombed Libyan government facilities and military forces. By late August 2011, the efforts of NATO and rebels paid off when Qaddafi's forces ceded the capital, Tripoli, to the opposition.<sup>15</sup> While anti-Qaddafi forces have not won control of the entire country, their governing organization—the Transitional National Council—has won global recognition as Libya's legitimate government and is well on its way to forming a new national government and addressing the country's many needs.

Ironically, social networking could function as a tool of opposition to state authority even when it was not specifically used by individuals wishing to topple the regime. After the coups of the 1950s and 1960s, Arab leaders focused on the political makeup of their militaries and only promoted officers to positions of real authority who were seen as fully loyal to the regime. Nonetheless, Egyptian and other Arab leaders were unsure in 2011 how soldiers and officers

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<sup>15</sup>Thomas Erdbrink, 'For Libyan rebels, conquest of Gaddafi's compound is a moment to savour,' *The Washington Post*, August 24, 2011 ([http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/for-libyan-rebels-a-moment-to-celebrate/2011/08/23/gIQABkhvZJ\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/for-libyan-rebels-a-moment-to-celebrate/2011/08/23/gIQABkhvZJ_story.html)) and Shashank Joshi, 'Viewpoint: No easy endgame in Libya,' *BBC News Africa*, August 21, 2011 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14606443>).

would act if asked to shoot demonstrators. Why? Young recruits and junior officers were just as tied to social networks as Egyptian demonstrators were and a number of junior officers defected to the opposition. In Egypt, the Army leadership eventually decided that it preferred to see President Mubarak leave office than to have to issue an order that might be ignored and jeopardize the chain of command. In a sure-fire sign that Egyptian generals understood their problem, they started an Egyptian Army Facebook page shortly after Mubarak left office.<sup>16</sup>

Months later the importance of Facebook to the events in Egypt and elsewhere lives in graffiti thanking the social networking sites in Arab cities and a joke now popular among Egyptians about a chance meeting between Egypt's three last presidents— Gamal Nasser (1952-1970), Anwar Sadat (1970-1981), and Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011)— on Judgment Day. The three men start talking about their presidencies and finally get around to asking what forced them to leave office. Nasser notes that he died in office serving his country, while Sadat notes that he was assassinated by Islamist terrorists. By contrast, Mubarak says one word: 'Facebook.'

## Where Revolutions Stalled

**B**ut the new model of Arab social activism was less effective when it encountered unified autocratic elite and security forces with fewer direct ties to the larger population than Egypt or Tunisia. In these contexts, governments could use deadly force with more impunity. There are several examples of this process throughout the Arab world, but the earliest was in Bahrain. There, a Sunni monarchy, which had governed since the late eighteenth century, faced a determined social movement, mainly of Shi'a Bahrainis. They overwhelmed security forces with rallies of over 300,000 people, a remarkable number for an island with a population of only 807,000 people. They portrayed themselves as Bahrainis and adopted Manama's Pearl Square as their own Tahrir square. Although the protestors retained ties to Shi'as in other parts of the Middle East, they emphasized their movement was indigenous and not directed by foreign forces. But they demanded social and economic opportunities commensurate with their status as the island's largest religious group.<sup>17</sup>

The Bahraini government's attempt to clear Manama's Pearl Square by force on 18 February 2011, produced unsettling television images of police beating peaceful and unarmed civilians drawing fierce international criticism— not a minor issue for a kingdom that has little oil and depends on foreign investment. Unable to control demonstrators, Bahraini security forces— much of whom are Sunni— withdrew from Manama on 19 February 2011 and conceded Pearl Square to the protestors. Bahrain's Shi'as appeared to be on the verge of winning massive and

<sup>16</sup>'Egypt: Military junta launches Facebook Page,' *The Telegraph (UK)*, 17 February 2011.

<sup>17</sup>Michael Slackman and Nadimi Audi, 'Protestors in Bahrain Demand More Changes,' *New York Times*, 26 February 2011.

unprecedented concessions from Bahrain's ruling Sunni monarchy.<sup>18</sup> The events in Bahrain, however, were not limited to the island. To begin with, there is a causeway that connects Bahrain to the oil-rich Eastern province of Saudi Arabia. The island is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council or GCC— an organization comprised of six Sunni Arab monarchies in the Persian Gulf region: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. For the GCC, the Bahraini mass political movement— no matter how much it declared that it was non-sectarian— was a Shi'a movement. It was also a strategic nightmare worse than Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Not only was the future viability of a GCC monarchy now seriously in question— which implicitly threatened all the GCC monarchies— but the success of the Bahraini Shi'a might embolden the GCC's external enemies (Iran, Iraq, and Hezbollah) to aid populations in the GCC with long-standing grievances. Large demonstrations akin to those in Bahrain had already taken place in Oman, where Sultan Qaboos was powerless to put a damper on anger at corrupt officials. Even more ominously, there were demonstrations among the Shi'a in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. Another factor complicating the situation for GCC governments was the expatriate workers. They were already a political issue in Bahrain, where a troubling video had surfaced on YouTube of Shi'a men viciously beating Indian migrant workers. If such incidents proliferated and expatriates had to leave the GCC quickly, it could start a massive regional humanitarian crisis.<sup>19</sup>

Under these circumstances, the GCC states spent as much money as possible and sought to aid the governments in most trouble, Bahrain and Oman. The GCC governments raised salaries, pledged billions of dollars to help their citizens, and offered a financial rescue plan to Bahrain and Oman. On 15 March, a GCC military force crossed the causeway from Saudi Arabia into Bahrain. With the benefit of GCC assistance, Bahraini security forces could crush the public demonstrations, impose martial law, and level the centre of the Bahraini protests: Pearl Square. Bahrainis of all ages, including teenage girls, were arrested and were charged with a host of crimes. Hundreds of university professors, oil workers, and others lost jobs. Further strengthening the position of the Bahraini government and the GCC generally was the situation in Syria, which had very close ties to Iran. It would be much harder for Tehran to criticize Bahrain about repressing democratic protestors when its own forces were reportedly involved in similar operations in another Arab state.

But the actions (and the improved regional position) carried a steep price: blood had been spilled, the reputation of the Kingdom (and the GCC) had been tainted, and communal tensions had risen

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<sup>18</sup> 'Bahrain Unrest: Army Withdraws From Capital Manama,' 19 February 2011, *BBC News Online*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/world-middle-east-12513305>.

<sup>19</sup> Aniq Haider, 'Worker in ICU after Assault,' *Gulf Daily News*, 19 April 2011. The video is at [http://www.youtube.com/verify\\_controversy?next\\_url=http%3A//www.youtube.com/watch%3Fv%3DYjKGajcRRR8](http://www.youtube.com/verify_controversy?next_url=http%3A//www.youtube.com/watch%3Fv%3DYjKGajcRRR8).

to a fever pitch in the island and the wider Gulf.<sup>20</sup> Despite their support of Syrian leaders, national leaders in Iran and Iraq, including the Grand Ayatollah Sistani, who has a wide following in Bahrain, condemned the crackdown on the island. They registered their anger by cooperating in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to squash Riyadh's plans to increase global oil production. Even more ominous for Bahrain and other GCC governments was the fact that Bahraini Shi'a greeted the lifting of martial law in June with fresh protests and have refused to either re-enter the political process or cooperate with government-sponsored plans for national reconciliation. Ultimately, the security clampdown had not extinguished the desire of Bahraini Shi'a to resist the Sunni monarchy.

Few nations are more acutely aware of Bahrain's public relations challenges than the United States, whose Fifth Naval Fleet is based on the island. Throughout the early weeks of 2011, the US and other Western leaders had difficulty determining how to use their financial and political influence in the Arab world. They had already seen that US power and opinions could have unintended consequences. For instance, WikiLeaks' unauthorized release of classified US diplomatic cables helped convince Tunisians that Washington did not think highly of Tunisian President Ben Ali or his government and would not intervene to protect either in a political crisis. Ironically, that realization would play a powerful role in the Tunisian revolution.<sup>21</sup>

Eventually, US diplomats were able to get a firmer footing on events following the fall of Mubarak, building on President Obama's experience in Asia and desire to pursue creative diplomatic solutions. Not only has the President pushed Arabs to look at Muslim nations in Southeast Asia as guides for their future democracies,<sup>22</sup> but he and other Western European leaders also achieved a diplomatic triumph when they convinced the Arab League to endorse the UN Security Council Resolution authorizing a no-fly zone to be established over one of its member states, Libya.<sup>23</sup> Even more importantly, the absence of widespread public reaction in Arab states to Bin Laden's death signalled a positive long-term shift for Washington in the region. Many Arabs had already grown weary of his vision and understood that the success of non-violent movements had eviscerated al-Qaeda's core argument: its vision of puritanical Islam and violence were the only way for Arabs to defeat America, the region's dictators, and regain their dignity and freedom.

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<sup>20</sup>Martin Chulov, 'Bahrain Destroys Pearl Roundabout,' *The Guardian* (UK), 18 March 2011.

<sup>21</sup>Scott Shane, 'Cables from American Diplomats Portray U.S. Ambivalence on Tunisia,' *New York Times*, 16 January 2011.

<sup>22</sup>David Ignatius, 'Barack Obama Sees Egypt But Remembers Indonesia,' *The Daily Star*, 5 February 2011.

<sup>23</sup>Clifford Krauss, 'For Qatar, Libyan Intervention May Be a Turning Point,' *New York Times*, 3 April 2011.

While Obama's May 2011 speech on the Arab Awakening and his ongoing efforts to mediate between Israelis and Palestinians have not been well received in the region, key groups empowered by the new political order in the region, such as Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, have signalled their openness to working with Washington. A leading member of the Brotherhood recently noted in a speech in Kuala Lumpur that 'whoever supported Mubarak will not necessarily be our enemy' and laid out a political programme consistent with traditional American values: democratic and inclusive political structures, the rule of law, religious equality, official transparency, free markets, and civilian control of the military. He also expressed his scepticism regarding the viability of mass peaceful demonstrations on Israel's borders modelled on those that had brought down Mubarak earlier in the year. One has seen similar signs of restraint among Islamic parties in both Jordan and Lebanon. For the United States, which is now recovering from the aftermath of the invasions of two Muslim states, the ongoing war on terrorism and unpopular votes against the Palestinians at the United Nations, these developments are major accomplishments whose importance should not be diminished.

## Conclusion

The most daunting challenge facing Arabs and American policy makers in the Middle East is how to properly respond to the core demand of Arab protesters: '*al-sha'b yuridu isqat an-nizam*' Again, the word 'system' does not mean a regime or even a group of leaders. Instead, it embodies the political and social orders of society. To address this demand, Arab emirs, presidents, kings, and sultans do not necessarily have to follow the leaders of Egypt, Libya and Tunisia into retirement. But these rulers will have to find ways to maintain their privileges while reforming or abolishing the institutions which have maintained their authority in the past. That will not be easy but there is hope.

It is worth remembering that flags are powerful symbols of governments and that millions of individuals in Libya registered their disgust with Colonel Gaddafi's regime by abandoning his green flag in favour of the red, black and green one flown by the government he toppled 41 years ago. By contrast, Shi'a opposition protesters in Bahrain have retained the same red and white flag used by the Sunni monarchy, even while calling for fundamental reforms in how the monarchy operates. The commitment of Bahrainis to use the same flag bodes well for the future of even the region's seemingly most endangered monarchy.

For decades, the Middle East has been known as a region of political disorder. But in the future the region may conceivably be characterized by a 'new' disorder that is hopeful, democratic and,

in the words of Michel Foucault, a place where ‘a large number of possible orders glitter separately.’<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York and London: Routledge Press, 2002), XIX.