

American Foreign Policy Council



MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

COUNTRIES

Iran
Iraq
Syria
Lebanon
Israel
Palestinian Authority
Jordan
Saudi Arabia
Bahrain
Qatar
United Arab Emirates
Kuwait
Yemen
Egypt
Libya
Tunisia
Algeria
Morocco

Regional Summary

For the Middle East and North Africa, arguably the global epicenter of Islamist activity, the past year has been one marked by dramatic change. Since the start of 2011, the so-called “Arab Spring” has fundamentally altered the region, injecting dynamism into its traditionally-stagnant politics. In the process, however, it also has presented heretofore unimagined opportunities for Islamist groups and political parties to expand their popularity and gain power.

Practically all regional regimes have been affected by this trend, albeit in different ways. The twenty-three-year rule of Tunisian strongman Zin el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia was the first to end as a result of sustained domestic pressure, in the process providing inspiration to opposition forces elsewhere. Egypt was the next to follow suit, with the three-decade-long regime of

Hosni Mubarak coming to an end in February 2011 as a result of widespread anti-regime ferment. Notably, in both countries, ascendant Islamist forces (Tunisia's *al-Nadha* and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, respectively) are now gaining greater prominence in national politics, aided by the political disorder that has followed the overthrow of the old regimes.

To a lesser extent, the countries of Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Morocco have all been impacted by the "Arab Spring" as well, as both religious and secular opposition forces—inspired by the Tunisian and Egyptian examples—have increased their pressure on sitting regimes. Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have chosen to employ domestic and regional security forces to secure their respective monarchies and squelch serious anti-regime activism, at least temporarily. Others (in particular Jordan and Morocco) have responded to the challenge posed by reinvigorated domestic opposition in more measured fashion. All, however, have shown new willingness, in the face of this domestic ferment, to enact political and social reforms. Over time, the resulting changes—now being formulated by the respective governments—are likely to provide greater voice and political participation to Islamist opposition groups and political factions in local politics.

Not all regional states have sought to weather the "Arab Spring" peaceably, however. In Libya, domestic upheaval in the spring of 2011 was met by a harsh governmental response on the part of the Gadhafi regime, resulting in a civil war and subsequent international intervention, both of which are currently ongoing. Domestic conditions in Yemen likewise have deteriorated as a result of ongoing pitched fighting between the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh and assorted Islamist rebels. Similarly, broad-based and resilient grassroots opposition to the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria has led to significant domestic loss of life, with the Assad regime spearheading a clampdown on dissent that so far has left over a thousand dead. Notably, Syria has been aided in its repression by the Islamic Republic of Iran, which itself continues to weather significant grassroots discontent and sporadic anti-regime activism stemming from the controversial re-election of current president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June 2009.

Iran, which remains the world's most active sponsor of international terrorism, also has attempted to use the "Arab Spring" to expand its influence in the region, both ideologically (as in the case of Bahrain's Shi'a community) and operationally (through increases in its funding and political support for Islamist groups in Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories). Radical Islamist forces active in the region have sensed opportunity in the "Arab Spring" as well. In particular, the Bin Laden network's two regional franchises, al-Qaeda

in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), have shown signs of attempting to take advantage of the regional disorder to improve their geopolitical position and increase the pace of their activities in the Persian Gulf and North Africa.

Beyond the “Arab Spring,” regional politics continue to be shaped by the ongoing post-9/11 Coalition campaign in Iraq. There, a U.S. withdrawal already underway has progressively handed over security to the Iraqi military and Shi’ite-dominated coalition government in Baghdad. For the most part, this transfer of power has occurred smoothly to date. However, Islamist groups—in particular, Shi’a militias supported by neighboring Iran—remain a significant threat to the country’s stability. So do Iran’s attempts, working through militias and the country’s Shi’ite political parties, to surreptitiously influence national politics and bring Iraq more closely into its geopolitical orbit.