

## **US AND THE MIDDLE EAST: FUTURE PROSPECTS**

di Giulio Brigante Colonna

*July 2011*

The chain of events that has led to the popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa is changing the geopolitical balance of power in the region. From a situation centered on the stabilizing forces of Egypt and Saudi Arabia (US allies) the region is moving towards a period of uncertainty where US influence will be reduced. Moreover, the US government has to deal with domestic problems ranging from the economic crisis, mounting public debt and the war weariness of the American public that call for a reassessment of US interests abroad. The question is: will the US be able to shape the changing events in the Middle East to its favor given these objective difficulties?

The way events will turn out in many Middle Eastern countries is still uncertain, while the situation in Tunisia and Egypt seems to have somewhat stabilized the same is not true for important players such as Syria and Yemen. Bashar Assad is crushing a popular rebellion with force, causing tensions with neighboring Turkey, but for now the economic elite and upper classes have stood by him. Despite its international isolation and ties to Iran, no regional power wants to see the fall of the Syrian regime (not even Israel) for fear of the instability that would follow. The popular protests in Yemen have sparked an internal power struggle where opposing tribes (mainly the Ahmar clan) are trying to oust President Saleh from power. Given Yemen's fragmented tribal society the fighting could very easily break out into a civil war. This instability threatens Yemen's neighbors (mainly Saudi Arabia) and could fuel the terrorist groups operating from its territory, mainly the powerful Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Many questions remain on the future of the Israeli Palestinian conflict, the stability of Lebanon and Bahrain and the ability of Egypt and Saudi Arabia to maintain their role as regional powers. Saudi Arabia has managed to quell the unrest in Bahrain and prevent it from influencing its own Shiite minority but events in Yemen could represent an even greater destabilizing factor for the oil producing giant. The emergence of Iran as an important regional actor is threatening the Fahd monarchy and its role in the new emerging Middle East. Perhaps most important is how Egypt will emerge from the protests and the role the army will play. A major question mark remains on the influence the Muslim Brotherhood will have in a future elected government. Egypt has played a stabilizing role in the region ever since the 1979 Camp David peace treaty with Israel. What remains to be seen is what will change in Egypt's foreign policy; if this treaty will be upheld (as the army has declared) and how its regional posture will change vis a vis the Arab countries and Gaza in particular. Moving further West, the future of Libya remains very uncertain. European countries (mainly the UK and France) are leading the NATO campaign while the US has adopted a more

marginal role having declared they have more pressing interests elsewhere in the region. It remains to be seen if the scenario emerging from the “Arab spring” will change the regional balance of power and what effect this will have on stability.

In the midst of this unrest, President Obama has announced the pace of withdrawal from Afghanistan: 10,000 troops by the end of 2011 and 23,000 by the end of 2012. This decision will probably lead to a larger drawdown by 2014 with a shift to a counterterrorism strategy to target Al Qaida cells in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The real problem here is the need for a political settlement with the Taliban that can create stability after ISAF forces leave the country in 2014. US-Pakistani relations have been hurt by the May 2nd raid in Abbottabad that killed Osama bin Laden and will need much diplomatic effort to reconcile. The situation seems more stable in Iraq where the remaining US troops are set to withdraw by the end of 2011. They will leave a country that is more stable (even though ethnic tensions persist) with a ruling elite that has, however, developed strong ties to Iran.

The United States has always seen the Middle East as an area of high strategic interest because of the massive energy supplies that fuel the Western economy and for geopolitical reasons. Ever since the end of Soviet influence in the region, the US has designed its policy around Israel with the strong support of two important regional powers: Egypt and Saudi Arabia. As already mentioned, the 1979 Camp David peace treaty protected Israel’s southern border and the following peace treaty with Jordan (1994) protected its eastern flank leaving unresolved issues with Lebanon and Syria. The Islamic revolution in Iran (1979) was a big blow to US regional dominance as a markedly hostile regime developed from what was previously one of its best allies. Since then, a major priority for the US has been to counter Tehran’s influence in the region. Tehran has developed strong ties with Syria and with proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon. Moreover, with Iran’s regional influence spreading to Iraq, the real winner of the “Arab spring” could well be Tehran. Much will depend on how events will play out in Syria. What is certain is that for now, the revolts that have sparked across the region have not led to real revolutions, with the exception of Tunisia where a democratic process seems to be underway, in other countries power has merely changed hands.

The United States is limited in the way it can exert power to influence events in the Middle East for a number of reasons. The first is a consequence of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US is losing much of its positive appeal and image amongst the Arab people. Second, but perhaps most important, are the consequences of the financial crisis and the strains on Government budgets. The US will have to adopt measures aimed at reducing its deficit and this will have an effect on its foreign policy. Third is public opinion at home; last year’s mid-term elections have shown that the US public is worried more about the state of its economy than the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Furthermore, after the death of Osama Bin Laden, many feel that the main goal has been accomplished.

In the future the US geopolitical influence on the Middle East will diminish. What the US can do to counter this trend is to guide and favor the emergence of pragmatic and democracy-oriented leaderships in those countries that have historically been its allies: mainly Egypt and Saudi Arabia. US foreign policy must reconcile the need to have friendly governments that cooperate in countering terrorism with the legitimate aspiration of the populations that want more openness and greater transparency in the political process. This is by far the greatest challenge ahead but having accountable and responsive governments is the greatest guarantee for regional stability.

