



Research Report

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The Arab Explosion: Questions and Options for NATO

*Florence Gaub
Sandy Guptill
Karl-Heinz Kamp
Pierre Razoux
Rolf Schwarz*

The Arab world is in uproar. What started as a social protest in one country became a wave spreading out to the entire Middle Eastern and North African region. The uprising against the regimes came as a surprise even for an institution like NATO, which is deeply involved in the area through its various partnership programs like the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI).

The volatility and fluidity make it impossible to forecast developments in the region or suggest outcomes in certain countries. What can be done, though, on the basis of the current situation, is to identify those questions with which NATO will sooner or later be confronted and to sketch some possible steps NATO could take. The following considerations provide a snapshot analysis which will be amended as events unfold. True, the reduction of complex processes down to bullet points is probably an over simplification. Nevertheless, it makes key developments transparent and contributes to understanding the bigger picture.

Characteristics of the Unrest

- Despite superficial parallels to the upheaval in Eastern Europe in 1989, the situation in the Middle East and North Africa is fundamentally different. Two different root causes appear predominant. In Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen, three states which are all very low in per-capita income, the driving forces for the unrest are socio-economic. In contrast, in countries like Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, Algeria, Bahrain and Libya the unrest is the result of long-standing political grievances over access to power (of course also enriched by socio-economic problems). However, this generalization should not underestimate other aspects like demographic, historical or tribal factors.
- Similarly, the analogy of the “Domino Effect”, where one regime after the other is likely to fall, also seems misleading. Instead, despite some mutually reinforcing effects, the disturbances came over the region almost simultaneously.
- Despite the rising level of unrest, governments are not likely to fall like this. Instead of a landslide of regime changes, many regimes will be able to stay in

power through “cosmetic” changes to appease the public. However, “cosmetic” does not mean irrelevant or simply window dressing. Instead, economic and political reforms need to be serious in order to generate new revenues for welfare and to have the mollifying effect. The point, though, is that this does not necessarily require new governments or true democracy as the current freedom-rhetoric by some Western politicians suggests.

- The current developments in the Arab world are largely a result of unfinished state building processes in these countries. They all have repressive political power but lack the tools of efficient state power (taxation, embedded political authority, popular legitimacy).
- In fact, the reasons for the sudden eruption of unrest now lie in a culmination of different trends: years of mismanagement and the lack of freedom led to a concentration of grievances; a lack of economic reforms have made the regimes even more sluggish to cope with the changes resulting from globalization; the international economic crisis reduced the opportunities of the regimes to pacify or bribe the masses with social concessions (thus the long-lasting deal in which the public gave up on political and human rights in exchange for social and economic opportunities collapsed); new media prevented the governments from controlling information.

Pertinent Questions

- How can the Alliance bring its own values in line with potential outcomes of the ongoing revolutions? For instance, in case of a military (undemocratic) takeover in Egypt or Algeria, would NATO be prepared to suspend its relations with some of the most important countries in the region - as it did with Mauretania?
- How to find the equilibrium between promoting NATO’s values on one hand and its interest in stability and predictability in the region on the other? How to balance idealism and *Realpolitik* in an era where modern tools of communication assure transparency within NATO as well as in the region concerned?
- Could Turkey, as a prominent NATO member, play a specific role in providing a bridge between the Alliance and the Arab world? Would all Allies accept Turkey as a “custodian”?
- How to react if, as a result of the upheavals, one of the MD/ICI countries is ruled by an Islamic government and which subsequently acts maliciously against its own population? Is NATO ready to accept the result of free elections if the outcomes are undemocratic regimes?
- What should NATO do if one or several of the MD/ICI countries require a NATO presence on the ground (as part of a stabilization mission)?
- Would the three classical conditions for active NATO involvement set by the former NATO Secretary General (Peace agreement, UN-SC resolution and formal invitation by parties) still be applicable in the currently evolving context?

- Would NATO be willing to support a “no fly zone” over countries or regions to prevent military forces bombing their own populations?

Options for the Alliance

Neither NATO nor “the West” have a direct role in the current wave of upheaval in the Arab world. Western political models were not the trigger for the protest and they will hardly be the solution. Nevertheless, NATO member states need to contemplate how to support these countries before they fail – probably not by marketing its own political system but by pointing to those states in the region which have managed economic and political reforms without being touched by popular protest. Moreover, not having a direct influence does not mean offering no assistance – as far as it is desired.

This particularly holds true for NATO as it engages in close cooperation with many of countries in the region. Thus the following steps would be possible or advisable:

- NATO should examine the character of specific exchanges, official visits and cooperation projects on a case-by-case basis. The Alliance should be particularly open for visits or support but should link this to the behaviour of the respective governments. Governments which use indiscriminate force against their people cannot be a cooperation partner for the Alliance. NATO’s support is not unconditional.
- In connection with the general overhaul of its partnership concepts tasked to the Alliance at the Lisbon Summit, NATO should develop a strategic vision for the Middle East. What interests does NATO have in the region and what are the Alliance’s priorities? This may not necessarily coincide with the views or preferences of all governments in the Middle East and in North Africa.
- Adapt MD/ICI partnerships according to such a vision. Of course, the preferences and priorities of each of the cooperation partners in the region have to be taken into account.
- NATO should maintain its support for the education and modernization of military and police forces (probably with the exception of Libya under Kaddafi). Exposing military or police officers to NATO structures, standards and habits provides them with insight in how responsible forces work to support the state and not the regime.
- Military-to-military communication particularly should be kept open (again, except in extreme cases). NATO’s experiences in the Balkans over the last decades have proved the positive impact of Alliance forces on the development of the military as a responsible instrument of the state.