

The Long Spring to Thaw the Arab Cold War

Written by J. Dana Stuster

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J. DANA STUSTER, JUL 24 2011

Six months ago, when populist revolts toppled dictators in Tunisia and Egypt, commentators scrambled for an appropriate analogy. It's a "Prague-turned-Arab Spring," a "Velvet-turned-Jasmine Revolution," wrote some, "the Berlin Wall of the Middle East is falling!"[1] To others, it was a reiteration of the wave of collapsed revolutions in Europe in 1848, or it was France in 1789, or in 1830.[2] The comparisons tended to be ethnocentrically skewed towards Europe, and without meaning to speak for the various authors, this is not necessarily a fault: the purpose of an analogy is, after all, to make something familiar.

The hazard of the analogy is that it does this by simplification. At its best, an analogy can elucidate a complicated situation; at its worst, it can cloud judgment with preconceived notions. British diplomat and politician Anthony Eden was reviled for his infamous strategy of appeasement as foreign secretary in the years preceding World War II. As prime minister in 1956 during the Suez Crisis, and not wishing to repeat the mistakes of twenty years prior, he marshaled the forces of France and Israel and launched a military action that ended with a four-month occupation of the Sinai Peninsula. Eden considered Nasir analogous to Hitler – a fact reiterated in the titles of his memoirs, the first, *Facing the Dictators*, and the last, *Full Circle* – and this prejudice caused Eden to mistake the pangs of decolonization for the advances of an ambitious and expansionist empire.

With this very much in mind, I proposed last March that in at least one respect, the Arab Spring should be compared to the Nasirist Arab revolutions of the 1950s and 1960s. [3] The comparison is not terribly apt in what has happened to date, though there have been moments of similarity, but is relevant in what may follow.

The revolutions in the Middle East more than half a century ago catalyzed what Malcolm Kerr called the Arab Cold War, a dynamic of distrust, suspicion, and proxy warfare between the revolutionary states and the conservative monarchies of the region. In the intervening decades, the alignment of the states in this polarized system shifted; Egypt became increasingly statist, even monarchical (it was widely believed that Hosni Mubarak's son, Gamal, was being groomed to be his father's successor) and shifted to the conservative camp with monarchies like Saudi Arabia and Jordan, while Iran seized the mantle of the revolutionary states and created a sphere of influence that includes Syria, Lebanon (especially since Hezbollah toppled the government in January), and, increasingly, Iraq. Though the teams may have changed, after all these years, the Middle East is still divided between the revolutionary and conservative states.

This is the essential context for understanding the regional significance of the 2011 revolutions: it is this zero-sum game that has entrapped the region that the neo-revolutionary states stand a chance to escape. If they do, it could alter the existing paradigm in the region.

Much was made of the changes in Egypt's foreign policy in April when the Egyptian foreign ministry announced it would begin the process of normalizing relations with Iran and Hamas.[4] This does not constitute a complete shift or a reversal – Egypt has not swung from the Saudi bloc to the Iranian bloc – nor is it strictly a bargaining chip with the United States and Israel, as was suggested in *The Telegraph*. [5] For the moment, Egypt's foreign policy is trying to toe a middle line and become something new for a major Arab state in the region's cold war: a non-aligned state.

There are threats to this tenuous status. The conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran is zero-sum, and in a zero-sum

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situation, every non-aligned state is a contest. Despite the Egyptian people having found their voice, the Egyptian state is as weak as Mubarak left it; institutions are in dire need of reform and the economy is in shambles. In the 1952 Egyptian revolution, Egypt emerged stronger and ready to challenge the conservative regimes of the Arab world, but in the present context it will be difficult for Egypt to stand alone and not choose a patron, and a side.

Egypt is currently governed by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, a powerful remnant of the Mubarak regime. The Egyptian military, which partners with the United States and participates every two years in a large joint training exercise, understands more than any other segment of Egyptian society that the future of U.S. aid to Egypt (which is outpaced only by aid to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Israel) is contingent on the maintenance of a healthy relationship with the United States and Israel. Though Egypt may drift more toward a centrist position in the region and away from Saudi Arabia, this does not necessarily come at the expense of the United States. In fact, it has the potential to become a new intermediary in the region, similar to Turkey. In the near-term, the U.S.-Egyptian relationship seems secure.

If Egypt can steer a middle course in the new Arab Cold War, it can change the shape of the region without engineering a campaign of regime change. The Arab Spring is not confined to a season, but like the revolutions of the 1950s and 1960s, may continue for years in fits and starts. In time, it is possible that the revolt in Syria may force regime change there, and monarchs have made concessions from Morocco to Qatar. If Egypt and neo-revolutionary countries to come can maintain a measure of neutrality and the Saudi and Iranian blocs are whittled away, it will leave the countries perpetuating the conflict isolated and vulnerable. Both will be confronted with the choice to either cling to the increasingly unstable status quo or begin to enact meaningful international and domestic policy reforms.

If history is any lesson, the Arab Spring is far from over and the implications of these few months will not be evident for years to come. Without being too confined by the lens of a particular analogy, it is time to note and plan for how the Arab Spring could break the region's most divisive dynamic.

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[1] The comparison was made by numerous commentators, including Mona Eltahawy, Richard Falk, Richard Grenell, Guy Johnson, and Rachel Maddow, among others.

[2] For a thorough rundown, see Thomas Corothers, "Think Again: Arab Democracy," *Foreign Policy* (10 March 2011): http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/03/10/think_again_arab_democracy?page=full and David A. Bell, "Why We Can't Rule Out an Egyptian Reign of Terror," *Foreign Policy* (7 February 2011): http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/02/07/why_we_cant_rule_out_an_egyptian_reign_of_terror.

[3] J. Dana Stuster, "A New Arab Cold War?" *Abu Muqawama*, Center for a New American Security (18 March 2011): <http://www.cnas.org/blogs/abumuqawama/2011/03/new-arab-cold-war.html>.

[4] The shift was prefigured by Shadi Hamid, "Egypt in Middle of Arab Cold War," *The National Interest* (21 April 2011): <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/egypt-middle-arab-cold-war-5208>;

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see also David D. Kirkpatrick, "In Shift, Egypt Warms to Iran and Hamas, Israel's Foes," *New York Times* (28 April 2011): <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/29/world/middleeast/29egypt.html>.

[5] Richard Spencer, "Egypt and Iran forging closer links with ambassadors plan," *The Telegraph* (19 April 2011): <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/8461295/Egypt-and-Iran-forging-closer-links-with-ambassadors-plan.html>.