

# Middle East and North Africa feel repercussions of Tunisian revolution

Ann Talbot  
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“The Tunisian revolution is not far from us,” Amr Moussa told the 22 members of the Arab League gathered at the Egyptian resort of Sharm el Sheik for an economic summit. “The Arab citizen entered an unprecedented state of anger and frustration,” he warned, after his Egyptian hosts tried to prevent any discussion of the events in Tunisia.

Mohammed ElBaradei, the former United Nations nuclear weapons inspector, warned that Egypt faced “a Tunisia-style explosion” as some oppositionists called for a week of anger.

“What has transpired in Tunisia is no surprise and should be very instructive both for the political elite in Egypt and those in the West that back dictatorships. Suppression does not equal stability, and anybody who thinks that the existence of authoritarian regimes is the best way to maintain calm is deluding themselves,” ElBaradei told the *Guardian*.

“These things need to be organised and planned properly. I would like to use the means available from within the system to effect change, such as the petition we are gathering demanding political reform. The government has to send a message to the people saying ‘yes, we understand you’, and of course, if things do not move then we will have to consider other options including protests and a general strike.

“I still hope that change will come in an orderly way and not through the Tunisian model,” ElBaradei said.

Egypt is the most populous of the North African states and the most important strategically. It will receive \$1.3 billion in aid from the United States in 2011. This makes Egypt the second largest recipient of US aid in the Middle East, after Israel.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit dismissed the idea that a Tunisia-style uprising might break out in Egypt as “pure nonsense”. But experts on the region were not so sanguine about the prospects for the survival of 82-year-old President Hosni Mubarak’s regime.

Michelle Dunne of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace warned, “First, widespread economic

grievances such as youth unemployment can indeed quickly translate into specific demands for political change, and second, this can happen even in the absence of strong opposition organizations.

“The third lesson of Tunisia’s Jasmine Revolution was perhaps the most memorable of all: When long-postponed change finally comes, it is often startling how relatively little effort and time it can take.”

In the case of Tunisia, Washington moved rapidly to persuade President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali to quit when it became clear that his repressive regime could not contain the uprising. Up to that point Washington had continued to support Ben Ali, who was one of its closest allies in North Africa.

According to the French satirical magazine *Le canard enchaîné*, American army officers spoke directly to Tunisian generals. It was their decision not to support the president that convinced him to flee the country. French diplomats and officials were completely wrong footed. They had been offering Ben Ali assistance up to the last moment. Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie is reported to have said privately, “America took control of the situation. We were in a fog of confusion the whole time. Needless to say, the Americans did not keep us informed,” she complained.

The uprising in Tunisia represents a turning point in world affairs, and it is not just France that finds itself unprepared. A new era of revolutionary upheavals has opened up and is threatening the stability of many Middle Eastern and North African regimes that have long been thought of as stable.

Deep seated social tensions erupted in Tunisia and brought down a dictatorship which had been in place for 23 years. Similar tensions exist across the region. Soaring food prices have made those tensions even more acute. Economists are predicting record growth rates for the Middle East and North Africa in 2011. But the effect of the growth that has already taken place has been to widen the gulf between the rich and poor. Almost half of Egypt’s 80 million population lives on less than \$2 a day.

Six Egyptians have tried to immolate themselves in recent

days and ten in the Arab world as a whole, in imitation of Mohamed Bouazizi who set himself on fire after the Tunisian police confiscated the fruit and vegetable stall that was his only means of making a living. It is a measure of the desperate situation facing millions that such acts of despair have multiplied across the region.

Governments have moved quickly to restore food and fuel subsidies that the IMF ordered them to cut only weeks ago. But the IMF will not allow them to be retained indefinitely. Prices will undoubtedly rise once more. Egypt has agreed an IMF programme which will remove subsidies from food and fuel, which currently amount to 7 percent of GDP.

The Syrian government has announced that it will give \$11 a month to some of the country's poorest families. But even in the face of the Tunisian uprising, the IMF is pressing Syria to abandon food subsidies. The Baathist regime has embarked on a major programme of economic restructuring in the hope of encouraging foreign investment. According to the *Economist*, this meant "big cuts in subsidies and painful belt-tightening for Syria's far-from-opulent masses."

Last year Yemen agreed a \$369.8 million loan with the IMF in return for an economic restructuring programme. Under this plan fuel subsidies and other aspects of public spending will be cut in order to reduce the state's fiscal deficit. Two nights of clashes have taken place between protestors and the police in Aden, the main southern city. Unlike Tunisia, an element of separatism is involved in this case, but the underlying social issues are similar, in what is the poorest of Arab states. Like many other rulers in the region, President Ali Abdullah Saleh has ruled Yemen for 30 years.

In Libya, protests are taking place in several cities over delays in providing social housing. In Bani Walid, protesters broke into vacant houses in a social housing project. They said they had been waiting for years to get homes. Benghazi, Bidaa, Darna and Sabha have seen similar protests.

In Jordan, protests took place in the cities of Irbid, Karak, Salt and Maan over rising prices and unemployment. Arab countries have some of the highest rates of unemployment in the world, according to the Arab Labour Organisation. The Jordanian government has just announced \$225 million worth of cuts in food and fuel prices. But this concession has failed to stop the demonstrations. Some protesters called for the resignation of Prime Minister Samir Rifai.

In Sudan, police used tear gas against demonstrators in Al Kamleen city near the capital Khartoum. Protesters blocked the main road to Khartoum for more than an hour. Students from Al-Gezira University and Khartoum University were involved in demonstrations against the government plan to reduce subsidies for food and fuel. The leader of the Islamist opposition party, Hassan Al-Turabi, has been arrested.

The Khartoum government is facing an economic and political crisis. Its foreign exchange reserves are falling rapidly and the oil-rich south of the country is on the point of secession with western backing.

Ethiopian Minister of State for Trade, Ahmed Tusa, has expressed his fear that a Tunisia-style uprising may break out in Ethiopia. The government has attempted to limit prices. But Tusa said that cost of essentials "was blowing up beyond the capacity of Ethiopia's lower and middle classes' purchasing power."

"What happened in Tunisia should not happen in Ethiopia," Tusa said, but President Meles Zenawi "fears the worst."

These movements pose a serious challenge to US foreign policy in the entire region. Regimes on which Washington and its allies have depended could crumble as rapidly as that of Ben Ali. The support for Tunisia's national unity government is an attempt to restabilise the situation by bringing forward official opposition parties and trade unions that are willing to continue working with the West. But there is substantial opposition to this manoeuvre within Tunisia, particularly the inclusion of members of Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD), the former ruling party.

This forced three ministers from the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) to quit the government along with Mustapha Ben Jaafar, the leader and former presidential candidate of the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberty (FDLT) as minister of health.

RCD ministers now serving in the national unity government withdrew from the party, including Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi. The central committee of the RCD has been dissolved.

The government has also decided to recognise all banned political parties, including Ennahda, the outlawed Islamist party, in an effort to utilise its services.

But the disbanding of the RCD does not change the class character of the new regime, or the essential role of any such change at the top, in Tunisia or elsewhere, in safeguarding imperialist interests. The only way workers and oppressed peasants can defend their interests is by building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International and taking up an international struggle against both imperialism and its local representatives.



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