The A-Factor:
# Implications of the "Arab Spring" for Middle East Conflicts

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According to the 20th edition of the annual *Conflict Barometer*, published by the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (HIIK), 2011 could be considered one of the most violent years since 1945. The number of active wars[1] rose in one year's time from six to twenty. Eight of these wars were fought in the Middle East and Maghreb regions – four of them in the context of the so-called "Arab Spring" — all on a sub-state level, yet with highly significant implications for international security and interstate relations. Instead of heralding a new era of state-society relations in the region, anti-government protests in many countries and their suppression claimed the lives of tens of thousands. Whether or not the end result was an improvement in peoples' basic security remained an open question, and differed from place to place. Consequently, one should take a closer look at both the dynamics of the "Arab Spring" conflicts and their effects on other regional crises.

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[1] The HIIK uses five levels to indicate conflict intensity on a sub-national and monthly basis: dispute, non-violent crisis, violent crisis, limited war, and war. In measuring the intensity of violent conflict (the latter three levels), five proxies are used indicating the conflict means and consequences. They encompass the scope and extent of material and human resources employed in conflict measures, as well as the their consequences, in particular, the number of casualties, cross border refugees, and internally displaced persons, as well as significant destruction of accommodation or infrastructure, for example. Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, *Conflict Barometer 2011* (Heidelberg: 2012).

War as a moving phenomenon - conflict dynamics in the "Arab Spring Wars"

Despite different levels of media attention and perception, the conflicts in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria match the HIIK's 2011 criteria of war, due to the major human and material resources employed, as well as high numbers of casualties, refugees and massive destruction. The threshold of 1,000 conflict-related deaths per year, used by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program,[2] was exceeded in Syria (over 5,000 since March), Yemen (over 1,600 since February), and Libya (over 10,000, since February) in only a few months of fighting. Repression by Egyptian security forces against protesters claimed the lives of about 850 people in January and February alone.
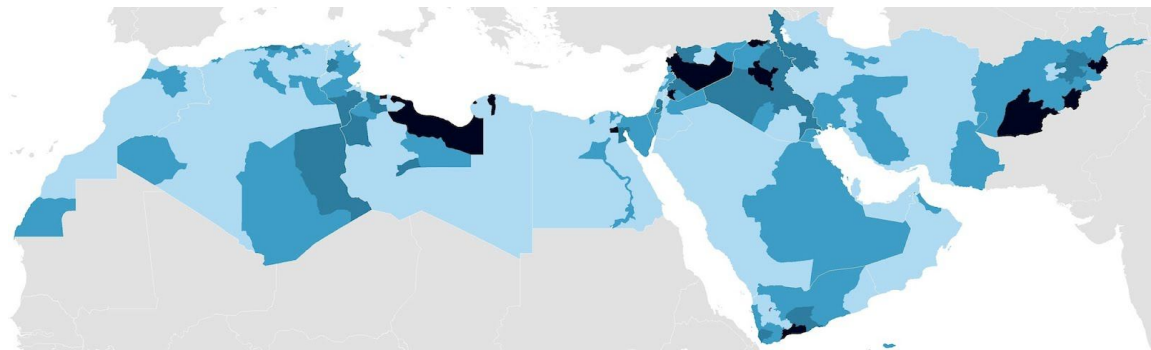
Intensity of violent political conflicts in first-level sub-national units 2011, Middle East and Maghreb. Source: Conflict Barometer 2011[3]

Beyond the observed death toll and in light of the time and spatial dimension of these wars, we can observe significant variances in the course of the year. In Yemen and Egypt, war remained limited, both time-wise and geographically, to the capitals Sana`a and Cairo. Lower, yet significant, levels of violence spread to the industrial hubs Ta'izz (in Yemen), and Alexandria and Suez (in Egypt). In Libya, the uprising against Mu`ammar al-Gadhafi started in peripheral areas and escalated to a war in February in protest strongholds like Benghazi and Misrata, where the military used warplanes, tanks, and thousands of troops in its operations. Neither protest suppression nor armed rebellion brought war to Libya's capital Tripoli, but NATO's bombing of government facilities beginning in late-March did. In Syria, small-scale protests began in the capital Damascus in February 2011, but a high level of violence was first witnessed in the southern provincial city of Dar`a only in April and May. The violence then spread to nearly all governorates, from the dissident strongholds of Hama and Homs in the northwest, to the eastern oil-hub of Deir al-Zor near the border with Iraq, and to Idlib, where large-scale operations caused thousands to flee to neighboring Turkey. The Kurdish minority refrained from joining the uprising against Bashar al-Asad but played a significant role in internationalizing the conflict in October, when the

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[2] UCDP, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/program_overview/. Accessed 16 February 2012.

[3] Light blue = dispute or non-violent crisis, blue = violent crisis, dark blue = limited war, black = war.

murder of a Kurdish leader sparked mass protests and the storming of several Syrian embassies abroad. Territorial conflict spillover also occurred when the Syrian army pursued dissidents who had fled to Lebanon.[4]

Spillover effects from the "Arab Spring" into other sub- and interstate conflicts

With the minor exception of anti-corruption protests in Bagdad and the Kurdistan region in February,[5] Iraq remained relatively unaffected by the Arab Spring.[6] By way of comparison, in the same year, Iraq's local al-Qa`ida branch and affiliated militants killed up to 4,000 civilians and security forces in bomb attacks, armed assaults, and suicide bombings; and the ongoing war in Afghanistan claimed more than 2,000 lives. In Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, and Saudi Arabia, protests calling for political reform and an end to corruption were met with domestic reform promises. A higher level of violence occurred in Bahrain where demands for political reform coincided with the Shi`ite majority's long-standing grievances and protests were dispersed with an additional 1,000 Saudi troops and 500 Emirati policemen - the only case of official and active external military support for those rulers under domestic pressure. However, apart from the sectarian strife in Syria and Bahrain, the assumption that an increased level of political mobilization would also trigger an escalation of ethnic and sectarian conflicts has not yet been supported by the empirical data. The conflicts between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and Iran and the Party of Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) escalated to the level of war and highly violent crisis, respectively, because of large scale military operations in response to attacks on security personnel. The conflicts' visibility on the Iranian and Turkish streets, however, remained limited. Turkish media blamed Syria for provoking terrorist incidents along Turkey's borders.[7]

Regional and international security challenges emerging from domestic strife

As suggested in the case of Syria, regimes under pressure deliberately turned loose their security forces in order to signal the high price their populations and other states would have to pay for challenging their authority. Gadhafi's

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[4] See also Magdalena Kirchner and Maren Sass, "Syria (various opposition groups)," in *Conflict Barometer 2011*, ed. Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (Heidelberg: 2012).

[5] Rachel Kantz Feder. "Iraq's Day of Anger: Democracy for Arabs, Electricity for Iraqis," *Tel Aviv Notes* 5, no. 4 (February 27 2011). http://dayan-ng.tau.ac.il/sites/default/files/TA_Notes_KANTZ_FEDER_FEB27_11%5B1%5D.pdf. Accessed 16 February 2012.

[6] See also Valentin Lang, "Iraq (AQI, ISI, Sunni militant groups)," in *Conflict Barometer 2011*, ed. Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (Heidelberg: 2012); Tanja Eschenauer and Miriam Kurz, "Afghanistan (Taliban et al.)," in *Conflict Barometer 2011*, ed. Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (Heidelberg: 2012).

[7] Hasan Kanbolat. "Turkey's escalating terror has foreign motives," *Today's Zaman* (2 September 2011). http://www.sundayszaman.com/sunday/columnistDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=255636&columnistId=90. Accessed 16 February 2012.

threats to "set the Mediterranean on fire"[8] after the UN Security Council had adopted Resolution 1973 in mid-March remained purely rhetorical but other incidents called for more attention. On May 1, for instance, violence broke out as 100 Syrian and Palestinian protesters deliberately crossed the Syrian-Israeli ceasefire line on the Golan Heights. According to Israeli officials, the incident was an orchestrated "act by the Syrian leadership to deliberately create a crisis on the border so as to distract attention from the very real problems that regime is facing at home."[9] Apart from that incident, however, Asad has until now refrained from escalating interstate conflicts, while nonetheless threatening that any outside military intervention in Syria will "unleash an earthquake that would burn the Middle East."[10]

In both Egypt and Yemen, the opposition accused then-Presidents Mubarak and Saleh of at least tolerating a deterioration of the domestic security situation in order to prove that they were indispensable. In the case of the latter, the relocation of troops from the southern province of Abyan to Sana`a in Spring 2011 allowed al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula to seize significant parts of it. Unsuccessful efforts by the Yemeni military to recapture the provincial capital of Zinjibar claimed the lives of at least 500 people since March, forcing up to 100,000 residents to flee the area.[11]

Other spillover effects from the "Arab Spring" should be considered unintended consequences of decreasing state capacity, but with important implications for regional security issues. Firstly, the monopoly on the use of force had been challenged and even weakened in several countries. The Libyan conflict in particular led to concerns about increased arms proliferation, particularly regarding the spread of advanced anti-aircraft rockets, in North Africa's Sahel region, as well as the strengthening of al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).[12] These concerns were reasonable, as AQIM attacks in 2011 occurred in Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and, for the first time, in Tunisia. Counteroffensives by the states included the deployment of thousands of troops and aircraft, yet were not able to put an end to AQIM's activity in the Sahel. A second source of concern has been the return of thousands of heavily armed Tuareg fighters from Libya to Mali, with extremely deleterious consequences regarding domestic instability.[13] A third

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[8] Fadwa al-Hatem. "Syria's Bashar al-Assad – an expert at buying time," *The Guardian* (31 October 2011). http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/31/syria-bashar-al-assad-buying-time. Accessed 16 February 2012.

[9] Yaakov Katz, Ben Hartmann, and Khaled Abu Toameh. "Scores of Syrian protesters breach Israeli border." *The Jerusalem Post* (16 May 2011). http://www.jpost.com/NationalNews/Article.aspx?id=220702. Accessed 16 February 2012.

[10] al-Hatem.

[11] See also Daniel Church and Bastian Herre, "Yemen (various opposition groups)," in *Conflict Barometer 2011*, ed. Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (Heidelberg: 2012); Christian Flittner and Bastian Herre, "Yemen (AQAP, Ansar al-Sharia)," in *Conflict Barometer 2011*, ed. Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (Heidelberg: 2012).

[12] Karen Leigh. "North Africa's Sahel: The Next Terrorism Hot Spot?", *Time* (12 September 2011). http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2092687,00.html. Accessed 16 February 2012.

[13] CNN. "President: Tuareg fighters from Libya stoke violence in Mali." CNN (6 February 2012). http://edition.cnn.com/2012/02/06/world/africa/mali-unrest/index.html. Accessed 16 February 2012.

outcome of weakened state capacity in peripheral areas has been increased al-Qa`ida activity in the Sinai Peninsula.[14] In early 2011, the EU got a first taste of another example of weakened state capacity: the number of Tunisian and Libyan migrants and refugees landing on the Italian island of Lampedusa increased to almost 20,000 between January and March, among them thousands seeking work in European countries – a scenario highly unlikely just prior to 2011, given the strict limitations on migration and border control agreements.[15]

Conclusion & Outlook

Violence on the sub-state level is likely to increase in 2012 if either the new governments or those that managed to stay in power fail to a) reconcile with their highly mobilized societies, including both the winners and losers from the upheaval; b) reform and reconstruct their security apparatus; and c) regain control over peripheral areas within their sovereign territories, especially in the Sahel region, the Sinai Peninsula, and southern Yemen.

Regarding interstate relations, the escalation of domestic conflicts in Middle Eastern states did not lead to direct violent conflict in 2011. The several cases of trans-border military incursions generated only limited diplomatic tensions. On a non-violent level, however, the uprisings influenced interstate relations in the region. Concerned about domestic and regional instability, neighboring countries engaged several times in conflict mediation - sometimes successful as in the case of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in Yemen, sometimes ineffective, as with Turkey and the Arab League in the case of Syria. Over the course of the year, criticism of the violent repression of protest, particularly in Libya and Syria, was voiced in several Arab capitals, and both countries were eventually suspended from the League and subjected to sanctions. Moreover, external military support for the Libyan opposition was extended by several GCC countries.[16] The same was also presumably true for the Free Syrian Army, which received aid from Turkey and some Arab League members. How matters unfold in Syria in the coming weeks and months will surely have profound ramifications for the whole region.

To access the 20th edition of the annual *Conflict Barometer*, please click here.

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[14] Jacques Neriah. "Egypt and Israel Caught in an Al-Qaeda Whirlpool?", Jerusalem Center Blog. A Middle East Political Earthquake? (22 August 2011). http://jerusalemcenter.wordpress.com/2011/08/22/egypt-and-israel-caught-in-an-al-qaeda-whirlpool/. Accessed 16 February 2012.

[15] Francesca Bertin and Elena Fontanari. "Militarizing the Mediterranean." IP Journal (1 July 2011). https://ip-journal.dgap.org/en/ip-journal/regions/militarizing-mediterranean. Accessed 16 February 2012.

[16] Ian Black. "Qatar admits sending hundreds of troops to support Libya rebels." The Guardian (26 October 2011). http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/oct/26/qatar-troops-libya-rebels-support. Accessed 20 February 2012.

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