

As spring turns to summer

Opportunities for peacemaking in the Middle East and North Africa

Over recent months people in countries across the Middle East and North Africa have been demonstrating, leading to the departure of several long-standing rulers. The significant shifts in power following this process will have long-term effects on the state of affairs in the region, with some changed and some new stakeholders emerging with different agendas and coalitions. The transformations have the potential to result in (more) legitimate internal authorities and to foster regional stability after a period of transition. However, the opposite result may occur if the experiment fails. The internal shifts of power have already influenced the foreign policy approach of the countries concerned and this will have an impact on the future stability of the region and beyond.

The first protests in the region erupted in Tunisia when a young unemployed man committed suicide after having been arrested for selling vegetables without the required permit. Protests escalated and resulted in the overthrow of the government and the President. In Egypt, after countrywide demonstrations including on Cairo's Tahrir Square, the President was removed after 30 years of rule, leaving the military in charge. While some demonstrations are ongoing, elections are being planned in both countries (in October in Tunisia and in September in Egypt), paving the way for new governments to be installed and new constitutions to be crafted.

Other countries in the region saw the eruption of different levels of violence following demonstrations. Libya slipped into an internal conflict and is now facing a stalemate between the Government, the opposition and the European-led forces (the latter intervening with a UN mandate to protect civilians). In Yemen, Bahrain and Syria ongoing demonstrations have put pressure on rulers to resign and were met by a tough response from the state security forces, causing casualties. Also in the region, in Lebanon, the unity government collapsed over a row with Hezbollah ministers on the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and Syrian-Saudi as well as Turkish-Qatari mediation attempts failed. Finally in Palestine, Egypt's interim government brokered an agreement between Palestinian Fatah and Hamas which focuses on reconciliation and the establishment of a joint interim government in preparation for elections.

The groundswell of protests in the region is widely seen as an expression of popular frustration, which had built up over years of oppression. People voiced their anger about social issues such as access to jobs and the cost of living as well as social mobility and political concerns such as corruption, lack of freedom of expression and of political participation.

Countries in the region vary in terms of religious homogeneity and power structures; some have a tribal structure while others have state institutions, and some are monarchies while others have a presidential system. Despite these differences, many of the demonstrations were driven by similar motives and in most countries the younger generation was the driving force, with large swathes of the affected societies supporting them.

The situation in the region is still not settled. Some stakeholders could be inclined to use force to maintain or gain power, turning them into a threat to peace. Tensions might ease after a transitional phase, but they may build up again. The events could also have wider effects and impact on the role

of Hezbollah and the Salafi movements; the situation in Israel and Palestine; the appeal of violent extremist organisations; the perceptions, and role, of organised Islamic parties; the role of Iran, Turkey, Lebanon, the US, and the EU; and on the world economy. All stakeholders face the challenge of adapting to changes in the region which represent both an opportunity for peace and stability founded in democracy, as well as the emergence of new obstacles to peacemaking.

Questions for discussion

In what way will the changes in the region affect the opportunities for, and obstacles to, mediating and negotiating peace? To what extent will the changes influence the approach of regional actors to conflict and peacemaking? Which factors will contribute to internal and regional stability? What does it take to consolidate democracy in the region?

What is the role of regional organisations (the African Union and the League of Arab States) in the changes and in the future shape of the region? What should be the role of stakeholders from outside the region? Has mediation contributed to prolonging conflicts in the region instead of resolving them?

What is the significance of the recent agreement between Fatah and Hamas? What will be needed for the reconciliation efforts to be successful?

What are the potential parameters of a negotiated political solution in Libya?

Which other regions may be affected by the Arab uprisings?