

# Post-Arab Spring Middle East: Democratisation and geopolitical challenges

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POST-CONFLICT societies are always difficult, challenging, and fraught with perils and uncertainties. Apart from immense social and political challenges, these societies are often vulnerable to economic hardships; ethnic, tribal and inter-faith tensions; and face the ever great task of institutional building process. However, very few societies or countries successfully weathered through these difficult challenges. Social values, cultural norms and practices that are deeply rooted and entrenched contribute to shape the post-conflict outcome immensely. While Arab Spring offers much promises and prospects both for the people of the respective countries and for the entire democratic world there is much doubt and suspicion as to how the post-conflict Middle East would really emerge. Middle East societies have some unique social and cultural attributes that could immensely shape the post-Arab Spring democratisation process. Among these, the presence of a set of complex regional and global geopolitical dimensions in this region could significantly facilitate or hinder the region's democratisation efforts.

For a number of historic and geopolitical reasons, Arab population carries resentment and anti-Western sentiment from the core. One of the root causes is of course Western powers' incessant support for Israel, the country having an abhorring place in Arab public sentiment. A 2011 Brookings Institute survey shows that 59% Arab population expressed unfavourable views against the United States. Another public opinion survey carried out recently by Arab Centre for Research and Policy Analysis (ACRPA) showed that 73% Arabs see Israel and the US as the two most threatening countries. This is not the phenomenon of present time but has been for the last fifty years or so. Riding on this wild and resenting public sentiment, Arab nationalist leaders already risked waging three regional wars against Israel. And after four decades since the last Arab-Israel war, the region still remains very much same as before and has a risk of explosion anytime.



Middle East has also been the major source of world energy since 1930. The region combinedly produces 37% of the world oil and 18% of its gas and more stunningly, the region has 65% of global oil proven reserves and 45% of its natural gas. The has made the region vitally important to the entire world with regard to its energy security as the chief economist of the International Energy Agency rightly put it: "We are ending up with 95 percent of the world relying on six countries in the Middle East" (Selina William and Bhushan Bahree 2005, Wall Street Journal, November 08, 2005).

This contrasting reality world's most important place for energy supply vis-a-vis world's most explosive region has prompted the Western powers to maintain status quo when it comes to promoting democracy, human rights and good governance since achieving the latter might cost peace and stability dearly.

## Great powers' dilemma: democratic government, my client?

Great powers, especially Western powers led by the United States, are also concerned that whether democratic Middle East would serve their regional and global interests. Their concern that the democracy might endanger the very peace and stability has been compounded when they simultaneously fear that the democratic governments could turn their back to them and join anti-Western fraternity.

When Hamas, for the first time, got elected in Palestine territory, neither the US nor its Western counterparts accepted that democratic verdict leveling Hamas as a terrorist outfit which is contravening to democracy. However, the tone has been changing rapidly in the last few years and the Western powers reassessed their position whether they have been able to maintain peace in the region at all especially in relation to resolving Israeli-Palestine conflicts. This

appraisal became more pronounced when the former US Secretary of State Codoleezza Rice made a statement saying that: "For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people." This was deemed to set a new direction. Nevertheless, given the ever complex and puzzling Middle East geopolitics, there is no such straightforward course that the Western powers might take to promote democracy in the Middle East. The regional and global power politics have effectively constrained any wishful thinking. That has been reflected in the recent events of Arab uprising. When USA and Western powers took more proactive role in ousting Libyan dictator Gaddafi, their role was more suspicious and of uneasy one when it came to Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait. Despite Egyptians and Yemeni people marked success in toppling the regime, the military as well as the Western powers played vicious roles even blamed US Special Forces for trying to protect Yemen's Saleh regime and also level the NATO intervention in Libya as a mean for securing their oil interests (Seumas Milne, The Guardian, March 23, 2011). Moreover, the world's democratic flag-bearers' enigmatic silence about Saudi Arabia's theocratic regime and Bahrain's brutally oppressive Sunni government only allows skeptics to question about their true intention in Middle East democratisation effort.

The dilemma of Western powers is understandable that the democratic governments in this region might act contravening to their interests; however, if they are truly for the promotion of democratic and liberal ideals, they have to swallow the bitter pill that respective democratic governments will not always be the force they desire. Unless they accept this reality, rise above their material interests and stop protecting undemocratic regimes, the region will continue to struggle to make a full stride towards democratisation.

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## Silence was the only option

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR BIR PROTIK

ON December 15, 2012, Chitra Devi walked across the stage to receive the honour being awarded to individuals and organizations that had great contribution in our Liberation War. Chitra Devi is the wife of Shaheed Sepoy Ansuja Prasad, the youngest recipient of the coveted Mahavir Chakra awarded by the Indian Government to those who demonstrated outstanding courage in India's wars. Sepoy Ansuja Prasad received the Mahavir Chakra for his valour during the operation in Shamsheernagar airport area, Sylhet on November 30, 1971 during our Liberation War. He was only 17 years and joined the regiment after completion of his training 11 days prior to the eventful day.

On November 29, 1971, Indian and Bangladeshi joint forces comprising 3 Punjab Regiment (Indian Army) with artillery support and 2 Field Battery (Bangladesh Forces) attacked the Shamsheernagar airport area. This was a strategically important location as the airfield located close to the border, was planned to be used by the Pakistan Air Force for launching air attacks on Indian airfields. The airport area was well defended by a company of 30 Frontier Force Regiment of Pakistan Army, a company of Mujaheds and a platoon of Tochi Scouts. As the November 29 night offensive by the Indian and Bangladeshi was largely unsuccessful, the commander decided to launch another attack the following night, reinforced by the 10 Mahar Regiment.

The Pakistan Army was very well equipped and positioned all around the runway. Camouflaged machine-guns had a clear line of fire. Once the Indian and Bangladeshi offensive began, fierce battle erupted. The assault were however impeded by a well dug in defended position from where a machine-gun was observed to be creating havoc which made the advance impossible. The 10 Mahar Regiment was incurring casualties. Assaulting troops being quite close to the Pakistani position and in open area, it was not possible to bring artillery fire. Having no other alternative, the advance Company Commander of the assaulting the 10 Mahar Regiment decided to take out the machine-gun post using hand grenades. There was smoke and fire all around and the situation was getting desperate in the fluid battlefield. Company Commander signaled by hand Sepoy Ansuja Prasad to crawl to him. He signaled Ansuja to the machine-gun post and ordered it to be destroyed by grenades. Without hesitation, Ansuja crawled like a leopard into the hell of fire. His comrades watched in deep appreciation. Reaching near the target Ansuja was hit by a bullet but undaunted he continued to crawl towards the machine-gun post. I watched with admiration the valour of the young soldier.

Bleeding profusely, Ansuja reached the machine-gun post and threw two grenades into the post. The area burst into flames. Surviving Pakistani soldiers were seen escaping

from nearby trenches. As the 10 Mahar Regiment soldiers made the final charge, I could see only bits and pieces of human bodies from both sides on the blood-soaked ground. Ansuja Prasad's remains lay scattered amongst them. Eight days later, after the capture of the Kulaura railway station, the same Company Commander informed me that Ansuja had been awarded posthumously, the Mahavir Chakra.

On December 16, 2012, at a dinner for the honorees, Chitra Devi came to the table where I was sitting and introduced her. Someone in the gathering told her that I had taken part in the battle of Shamsheernagar. Chitra Devi greeted me and sat in the vacant chair next to me. After a small discussion, she told me that she was married to 17-years-old Ansuja at the age of 13 just before the 1971 war. She remembers Ansuja as a very handsome and cheerful young man. He had enlisted very soon after their marriage, and was martyred soon after in Shamsheernagar area. Her one regret over the years was that his body was not returned to their home and she could not see his handsome face for

one last time. An officer and a Subedar came to her home and informed that Ansuja had fought bravely and in his effort to save the lives of his fellow soldiers had to embrace martyrdom. She remembered of screaming in her top voice and loosing her consciousness. When she regained her consciousness, she saw worried faces of her relatives and the officers looking at her agonizing face. She had only one request for them, "Bring his body back so that I could see him for the last time." There was no response. She requested the officers time and again to bring back his body, but in vain. Days passed and she had to adjust to reality of life. She was forced to be strong, to hold on to herself, to resist the storm of fate. But her biggest regret was that she did not see him in his eternal sleep. The sleep he earned by being the dutiful child for his country.

Tears were rolling down her cheeks. It seemed all this had happened recently. The wound was still fresh for her. She then asked me the question I had been dreading since she sat down to speak to me. Did I see Ansuja's body after he was martyred? I could not reply. How could I tell her there was nothing left of the body, only scattered remains that were left of him in the battlefield! How could I destroy the one image she has of him in her imagination that he died with his handsome face intact! I could not find it in myself to tell her what really transpired that day.

For over 41 years, Chitra Devi hold on to the memory of a man who sacrificed his life for the liberation of our country. I could not burden her with the images of his violent death. For Chitra Devi, a widow for over 41 years, let Ansuja always remain, the cheerful 17-years-old, the young man with the handsome face.

Silence was the only option I had at that moment.

The writer is a Freedom Fighter.



Skulls found in a mass grave: Evidence of Pak army's atrocities

## Was military action only way to end Algerian siege?

EDITORIAL DESK

THE Algerian hostage crisis has ended with tragic consequences.

Seven Japanese, including employees of plant engineering and manufacturing firm JGC Corp., were confirmed to have been killed during an attack on an Algerian natural gas plant by a group of Islamist militants.

We condemn the criminal group for targeting "corporate warriors" diligently working in a foreign country under severe conditions.

The siege was unusual in that more than 30 heavily armed terrorists held hostage scores of people from several countries, including Japan, Britain and the United States.

An investigation must be conducted urgently to get to the bottom of this incident. Suspicion has arisen that the assailants had collaborators at the plant who provided information and guidance.

At a news conference on January 21, 2013, Algerian Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal said 37 foreigners died and 29 militants were killed in the siege.

### Hostages' lives not priority?

The Algerian military operation to bring the situation under control as soon as possible has been criticised for not giving enough consideration to the hostages' lives. Sellal stood by the decision to launch the assault by stressing his government's stance of not yielding to terrorism. His statement also reflects the domestic situation in which long years of civil war killed as many as 150,000 people in Algeria.

Sellal said launching the military operation soon after the siege started was necessary because the militants had attempted to flee Algeria with the hostages and planted explosives in a bid to blow up the gas complex.

If the militants had been allowed to get away with their crimes, it could lead to second and third terrorist attacks. The Algerian government apparently felt it had no alternative but to resort to the use of force.

Any unilateral attack on economic activity in a civilised society must be met with return fire.

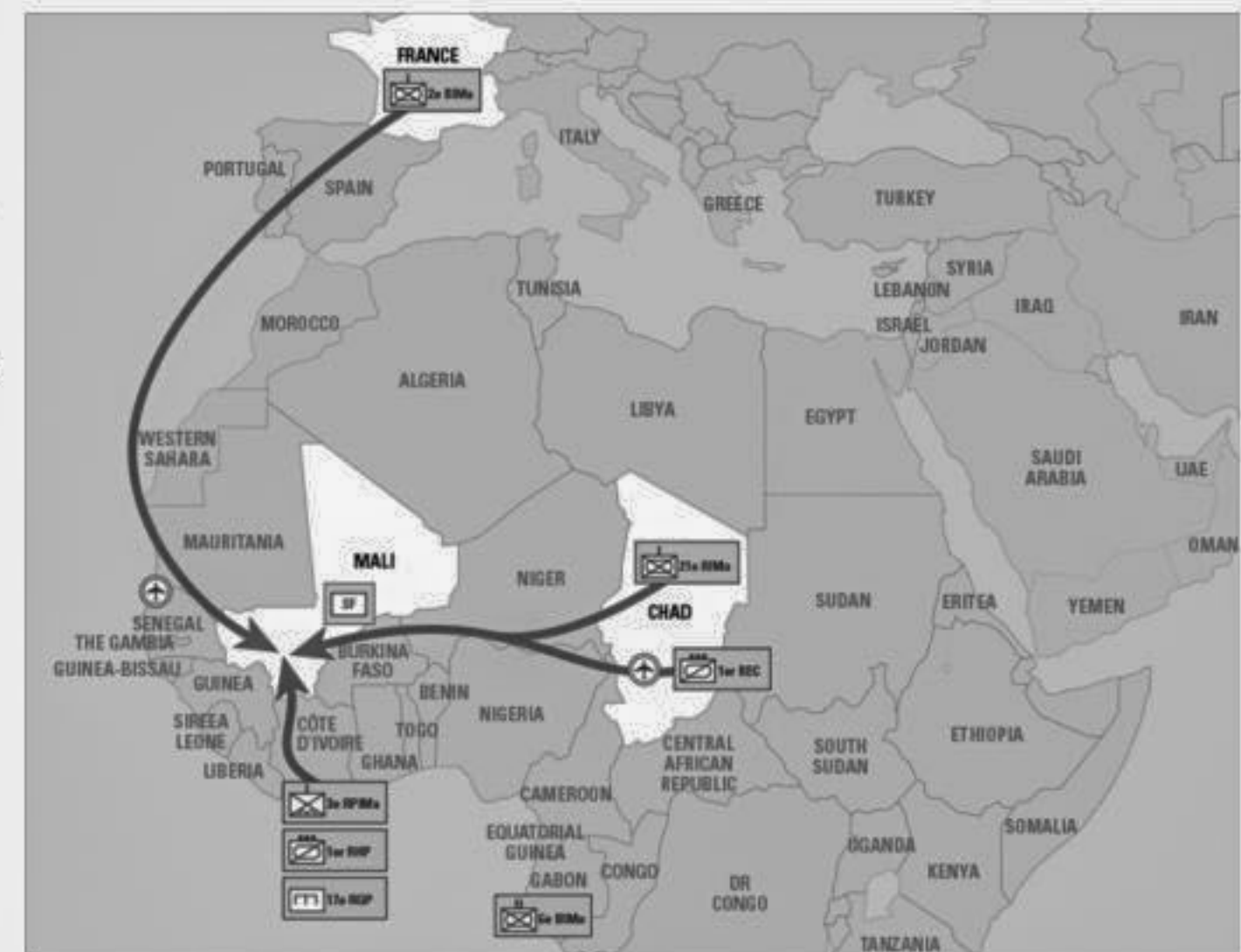
British Prime Minister David Cameron expressed dissatisfaction over the fact that his government was not told of the military opera-

tion in advance. But after the siege ended, he showed a degree of understanding of the early Algerian military operation by saying resolving the crisis would be a very difficult mission for security forces of any country.

### Lessons for Japan

The Abe administration has dispatched a government-chartered aircraft to Algeria to bring home survivors and the victims' bodies. We also urge the government to quickly confirm what happened to three Japanese who remain unaccounted for.

It is important that the Algerian government be asked to give detailed explanations on the circumstances under which the military operation was conducted, and how the Japanese died.



French military bases in West Africa

The crisis has brought problems with the Japanese government's crisis management system to the surface.

Like the United States and European countries also affected by the siege, Japan only obtained scant snippets of information while the Algerian forces conducted the military operation.

Japan has 49 uniformed defence attaches stationed overseas, including only two in Africa—one in Egypt and one in Sudan. The number of such attaches in Africa must be steadily increased.

To protect Japanese firms operating in troubled regions, specialists with expertise on these areas and antiterrorism measures should be trained, and the nation's information-gathering and analysing capabilities strengthened.

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