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India and the Arab Spring: Regime Changes in North Africa Gulshan Dietl

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Introduction

The Arab Spring has not been a uniform development in the Arab world, even though it has had a contagious nature. One successful experiment has inspired another or many more simultaneously. Nor have the outcomes been uniform, even though the basic demands and methods to pursue them have been similar. None has had a final end thus far. A long-term social revolution in terms of constitutions, political institutions, legal frameworks or credible experiments in popular participation is still in the very initial phase.

Tunisia, Egypt and Libya in North Africa have been the harbingers of the 'Arab Spring'. All three of them have witnessed regime changes and are in the process of taking stock and moving on. Whether the 'Spring' will spread eastwards in a typical domino effect to the rest of the Arab world remains to be seen. Whether it eventually brings about comprehensive reshaping of the region is uncertain at best.

The paper proposes to analyse the Indian responses to these developments.

India and North Africa: An Overview

India's relationship with the Arab world goes back to millennia. The ancient Indian civilization was contemporaneous with the Egyptian, Mesopotamian and the Dilmun civilizations. There are evidences to show that these civilizations existed together, knew of one another and were in contact with one another as well. In modern times, Indian freedom struggle inspired and reached out to the Arab nationalists even before its own independence. Fraternal delegations from Egypt, Syria and Palestine were invited to the Indian National Congress sessions in pre-independence days. The Arab delegations also participated in the Asian Relations Conference hosted by India in 1947.

Egypt and India formed a particularly close relationship after the Indian independence. Jawaharlal Nehru and Gamal Abdel Nasser shared a lot by way of personal friendship and common approach to the global issues. The Nehru-Nasser friendship, the Afro-Asian solidarity and the Non-Aligned movement brought India and the Arab world closer together and strengthened their positions during the crucial period of nation building.

The Indian policy vis-à-vis the creation of Israel and the subsequent Arab-Israeli wars was acknowledged and appreciated in the Arab world. When Israel, Britain and France attacked Egypt in the wake of the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, Nehru was quick to support Nasser. And quicker to grasp the larger context of the event. In a message to Nasser, he wrote, 'If colonialism succeeds in coming back to Egypt, it will reverse the entire course of history and return to every other country from which it had been forced to go.'¹

Apart from Egypt, the rest of the North African states did not occupy a significant attention in India's world view. The Indian initiatives to engage with them were few and far between. According to the website of the Indian embassy, the following have been the major interactions with them:

'The continuing process towards political pluralism and democracy, along with Government's efforts to contain violence and terrorism in Algeria were noted with interest and encouragement. India's diplomatic representation to Algeria was upgraded again, with the appointment of an Ambassador in Algiers. The meeting of the bilateral joint Commission was held in New Delhi in March 1997...India's relations with Libya were characterized by efforts to strengthen economic cooperation. A consignment of essential drugs and medicines was dispatched to Sudan in November 1996 for the flood victims. Delegations were exchanged with Tunisia in several

¹ Ayub Syed, quoted in Mekkawi, El Sayed, 'Indo-Egyptian Relations: A Reassessment', in Rajendra M. Abhyankar, ed., *West Asia and the Region* (Academic Foundation, New Delhi, 2008) p. 504.

fields, including trade, agriculture, science and technology, and environment. Foreign Minister of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic paid a visit to India in September 1996 and held talks on matters of mutual interest.

The organization of an exclusive 'Indian Trade Expo' in Casablanca, Morocco, in April 1996, was a major initiative to promote bilateral commercial exchanges. Deputy Chairperson of the Rajya Sabha visited Morocco on this occasion. The visit of Morocco's External Commerce Minister to India in December 1996 ensured that the momentum of growing bilateral trade would be maintained.' ²

In plain words, these developments do not amount to much.

Tunisia: The Spark

Muhammad Bouazid, a twenty-six year street vender set himself alight south of Tunis in protest on 17 December last year. It was a timely spark that gained momentum as the Tunisians went on to protest the suicide. The initial grievances against unemployment and corruption intensified and transformed into the demands for political change and removal of Zainul Abedin Ben Ali, the strongman who had ruled the country for twenty-three years. The protests were helped along by a WikiLeaks cable that called Tunisia a 'police state' and criticised Ben Ali for being out of touch with the people. It was also revealed that the entire economic elite in the country was related by blood or marriage to him.

In less than a month, he fled the country and Prime Minister Mohammad Ghannouchi took charge. In February, he resigned and Beiji Caid el Sebsi became the prime minister. The elections to the constituent assembly are scheduled for next month. Things in Tunisia have not settled down with this, even though post-Ben Ali it has been a relatively normal period in the country.

The popular yearning to break free of shackles goes back to the colonial period in the country's history. It was way back in the early twentieth century, when Abu al-Qasim al Shabi, a popular Tunisian poet, wrote:

'If the people will to live,
Providence is destined to favourably respond,
And the night is destined to fold,

²Indian Embassy, Washington, http://www.indianembassy.org/policy/Foreign_Policy/wasia.htm accessed 7 July 2011

And the chains are destined to be broken.’³

India and Tunisia have had cordial relations with each other. There are diplomatic and trade relations and several Memoranda of Understanding between the two. Tunisia has been particularly interested in cooperating with India on science and technology; information and communication. A small number of Indians, estimated to be one hundred and fifty, are resident in Tunisia. In October 1995, the two countries issued a ‘Joint Declaration on Combating International Terrorism, Drug Trafficking and Organised Crime’. India and Tunisia have taken a common stand on these issues in international fora.⁴ In 2004, the two exchanged instruments of ratification of the bilateral Extradition Treaty.

The Indian response to the Tunisian uprising has been a total silence, so far. The official website of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs does not even acknowledge the political change in the country. In an entry dated as late as July this year, it states, ‘India-Tunisia relations have been traditionally cordial and friendly. An Indian mission at the level of a Charge d’affaires was set up in Tunis in 1963, with the first Ambassador being posted in 1976. Tunisia opened its Mission in New Delhi in 1981. Tunisian leaders have always praised the Indian leadership and openly acknowledge the support India extended to Tunisia in its freedom struggle.’⁵ The freedom struggle here refers to the national independence struggle against the French colonial rule and certainly not the popular uprising against Ben Ali.

A former Indian diplomat addressed the Tunisian uprising, not for its own sake, but as a likely precursor to similar happenings in the Gulf. Prakash Shah raised a number of questions:

‘What would happen if political changes in the Gulf as a result of the Arab uprisings result in calls for US forces to leave the Gulf? Would India join the call? Would we risk creating a security vacuum that will endanger our oil supply lines, the welfare of our workers and the volumes of our remittances? What would happen if the defence vacuum is filled by China to protect its economic interest? With China occupying the dominant heights in Pakistan and maintaining a strong energy presence in Iran, would India risk departure of the Western armed presence and consequent extension of Chinese’s influence in the Gulf region? Do we have contingency plans to defend our energy supply lines and our workers?’⁶ Prakash

³ *Arab Literature in English* <http://arablit.wordpress.com/2011/01/16/two-translations-of-abu-al-qasim-al-shabis-if-the-people-wanted-life-one-day/> Accessed 12 October 2011

⁴ Foreign Relations, Tunisia, Ministry of External Affairs, India. July 2011. <http://mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=50044535> accessed on 7 August 2011

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Prakash Shah, ‘Tunisian Contagion and India’s Gulf Interests’, Pakistan Defence, 16 April 2011 <http://www.defence.pk/forums/india-defence/103932-prakash-shah-tunisian-contagion-indias-gulf-interests.html> accessed on 15 August 2011

Shah's queries are valid and deserve serious consideration. They, on the other hand, also indicate that Tunisia is not important enough and close enough to be a source of worry. It is Tunisia's impact on India's close neighbourhood that needed to be monitored and prepared for.

Egypt: Million Man March

Egypt proved to be the first country to catch the Tunisian contagion. The protests began on 25 January and quickly spread across the country. Tahrir Square in Cairo turned into a huge camping ground with protesters pitching tents and activists providing services. The numbers swelled and the last day of the month saw a 'Million Man March'. The grievances articulated went all the way from food price inflation and high unemployment to the state of emergency laws and lack of free elections. On 11 February, Hosni Mubarak resigned after ruling the country for nearly thirty years. The power was transferred to the Supreme Council of Armed Forces.

India and Egypt have continued to cooperate in a whole gamut of areas in the post-Nehru-Nasser era. India has set up the Maulana Azad Centre for Indian Culture in Cairo to promote cultural cooperation between the two countries and implement the Cultural Exchange Programme.

The high level contacts have been regular and frequent; the trade between the two has continued to grow under the Most Favoured Nation clause. Indian investment in Egypt and its involvement in Egypt's gas sector are substantial. Egypt has been keen to cooperate with India in information technology, pharmaceuticals, chemicals and fertilizers, steel, and agricultural equipments. Scores of private Indian companies are present in Egypt, for example, Oberoi Group of Hotels, Tata Motors, Asian Paints, Ranbaxy, Ashok Leyland, NIIT, HDFC, Dabur, Kirloskar Brothers, Thapar Group etc.

The Indian response to the protests in Tahrir Square, in the circumstances, was muted. The Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), the official think-tank of the Indian Defence Ministry, prescribed that the government should 'adopt a cautious and well-calibrated policy towards Egypt.'⁷ A former Indian diplomat, Chinmaya Gharekhan, expressed his disappointment over Indian silence, on the other hand. In an interview, he said, 'if we were to not show any interest in the developments going on in Egypt then it would be unfortunate. We were rather silent in the beginning and then we made some statements which did not really mean very much.'⁸

⁷ 'Crisis in Egypt: Implications for India'. *IDSA Brief*, 4 February 2011 http://idsa.in/system/files/IB_CrisisinEgypt.pdf, accessed on 7 September 2011

⁸ 'India, US, Israel Need not Fear the Coming Change', *Deccan Chronicle*, 6 February 2011

It was only when the ‘Million Man March’ took off in Cairo, that India acknowledged the ‘articulation of the aspirations of the Egyptian people for reform.’⁹ In a statement, the Indian government hoped that ‘the situation will be resolved in a peaceful manner, in the best interests of the people of Egypt.’¹⁰ The statement was welcomed as the first genuine response after the previous ‘anodyne statements’. By then, the European Union had been openly criticising Mubarak’s band-aid measures and the Jordanian King had sacked his entire cabinet after almost two straight weeks of popular protests.

Libya: Role in the Security Council

Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was the longest-term leader in the Arab world. He captured power in 1969. Almost from the very beginning, he challenged the global system by championing and funding revisionist agendas and movements across the world. Ronald Reagan called him ‘the Mad Dog of the Middle East’, and sought to eliminate him by targeting and bombing him. He was accused of carrying out the bombing of a PanAm flight over Lockerbie in 1988. By the nineties, however, he changed course through accommodation to suit the realities of Libya’s national interests. In 1999, he agreed to hand over the Lockerbie accused to justice and in 2003 he agreed to give up the Libyan stockpile of Weapons of Mass Destruction.

The protests in Libya began towards the end of February. Benghazi, the city on the east coast of the country, emerged as the focal point of rebellion. A Transitional National Council (TNC) was set up there with the express goal of overthrowing the Gaddafi regime. The United Nations took swift and decisive action in wake of the Libyan government crackdown on the protesters. The Security Council resolution 1970 called for tough measures against the Gaddafi regime, to freeze the assets of Gaddafi and ten of his associates, to restrict their travel and to refer the matter to the International Criminal Court.¹¹ An arrest warrant for Gaddafi was issued on 27 June. The Secretary-General expressed hope that the message ‘would be heard and heeded’ in Libya. India voted in favour of the resolution.

⁹ ‘India Hopes for a Peaceful solution of Egyptian situation’, 1 February 2011, Ministry of External Affairs, <http://meaindia.nic.in/mystart.php?id=530217128>, accessed on 14 August 2011

¹⁰ ‘New Delhi Offers Guarded Support’, *Times of India*, 2 February 2011. http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-02-02/india/28362828_1_indian-investments-egyptian-people-egypt-india-relations accessed on 14 August 2011.

¹¹ The full text of UNSC Resolution 1970 can be accessed at: <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N11/245/58/PDF/N1124558.pdf?OpenElement>

A month later, on 17 March, the United Kingdom, France and Lebanon, with support from the United States, proposed resolution 1973. It called for 'No Fly Zone' over Libya and authorized member-states to take 'all necessary measures' to protect civilians in Libya.¹² The resolution was adopted by a vote of ten in favour: France, Lebanon, the United Kingdom, United States, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Portugal, Nigeria, South Africa and Gabon. There was no negative vote. Five abstained: Brazil, China, Germany, India and Russia.

On 23 August, the Gaddafi regime collapsed with the rebels entering Bab al-Azizia compound in Tripoli, the seat of his authority.

India and Libya have been distant neighbours. They have never had a close relationship with each other. Libya was perceived to be a friend of Pakistan and suspected to be a benefactor of A Q Khan's international network that illegally sold nuclear know-how. The trade figure between the two has remained under \$1 billion, which excludes oil and gas. The Indian import of oil from Libya, in any case, does not exceed one percent of its total oil imports.

There is an India-Libya Joint Commission that has been regularly meeting in Delhi and Tripoli alternatively for nearly a decade. Issues like the bilateral investment protection and promotion, direct flights linking Delhi and Tripoli, information, cultural and education exchange programmes etc. are taken up at this forum.¹³

The visit by the Indian foreign minister Pranab Mukherjee in 2007 was the first high-level visit after the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's state visit in 1984. That meant that longer than a whole decade passed without any face-to-face talks between the leaders.

The visit by the foreign minister was seen as a great success. 'India and Libya can play a major role in bringing Asia and Africa closer as Libya is the northern gate for Africa, and India is an active member seeking to play an essential role in Asia,'¹⁴ Colonel Gaddafi was quoted as saying by the Libyan official JANA news agency. He also said, 'The sky is the limit for cooperation between the two countries.' Mukherjee handed over a letter from the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh inviting Gaddafi to visit India.

In India, the visit received positive assessment. 'I think Mukherjee's visit was highly successful because Gaddafi is one of the important leaders of Africa who has given the continent a new and stronger identity. Gaddafi has inspired the African countries and has helped create the African

¹² The full text of UNSC Resolution 1973 can be accessed at, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/sc10200.doc.htm>

¹³ 'India-Libya for Closer Trade and Economic Ties', 8th India-Libya Joint Commission, 1 July 2010. http://commerce.nic.in/PressRelease/pressrelease_detail.asp?id=942 Accessed on 10 August 2011

¹⁴ Sheela Bhatt, 'Why Pranab's Libya visit is important', Rediff, 30 May 2001, <http://www.rediff.com/news/2007/may/30spec.htm>, accessed on 14 August 2011

Union replacing the Organization of African Unity’¹⁵, a former diplomat Chinmaya Gharekhan told the media.

India acknowledged that the African Union was focusing on new business; better bargains for its raw materials, labour and rich natural resources; and that it was seeking investments and a better place in the world for Africa. It also noted that Libya was attracting investments for its infrastructure.

Shashank, a former Indian ambassador to Libya, admitted that Gaddafi has ‘his own idiosyncrasies’, but that his heroes were Nehru and Nasser and he was a believer of Non-Aligned Movement. For India, which is looking for energy equity, Libya can be an important country. According to him, ‘To strengthen India’s relations with the African Union, Libya is an important country to talk to. Also, it is an oil producing country that requires manpower in various sectors. India is in a position to balance the interests of both countries.’¹⁶

When the protests started in Libya, there were roughly 18,000 Indians working in Libya. Evacuating them and bringing them back home, under the circumstances, was the first priority for the Indian diplomacy. The security of Indian Embassy and the Ambassador were equally important.

The United States was learnt to have asked India for the coordinates of its mission and the Ambassador’s residence so that ‘due precaution’ could be taken and the air strikes by the coalition forces do not hit the wrong target. While these details were passed on, the Indian government authorized Ambassador M Manimekhlai to leave Tripoli and move to a neighbouring country without waiting for prior approval.¹⁷

The government, in the meanwhile, had readied plans to evacuate Indians in Libya. Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao said that the Indian Ambassador in Libya was seeking permission for planes and ships to evacuate the 18,000 Indians; 13,000 around Tripoli and the remaining scattered in the east of the country.¹⁸ There were serious logistical problems, as the task was enormous and difficult. The 275 Indians, stranded in a desert camp, complained that they were asked to undertake a 14-hour journey by road through the restive towns of Garyan and Azazia to

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Pranab Dhal Samanta, ‘Some Assurance: US Gets Indian Embassy’s Coordinates’, Indian Express, (New Delhi) <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/some-assurance-us-gets-indian-embassys-tri/767169> 25 March 2011 Accessed on 14 April 2011. There were bombs and shelling near the Indian embassy, according to the Indian Ambassador posted there, but the Chancery did not take a direct hit.

¹⁸ Sandeep Dikshit, ‘Efforts On to Evacuate 18,000 Indians’, *The Hindu*, 23 February 2011

reach Tripoli, before they could expect to be evacuated.¹⁹ The embassy phones were reportedly not working and the Indians felt insecure and helpless.

India was a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, when the critical votes were passed on the Libyan situation. Resolution 1973 authorizing no fly zone over the country set the stage for a massive external intervention. India abstained on the same. It explained its move on several counts. It said that the Secretary-General had sent a special envoy to Libya and that the UN had not yet heard the report from that visit by the time of the vote. 'The resolution that the Council has adopted today authorizes far-reaching measures under chapter VII of the UN Charter with relatively little credible information on the situation on ground in Libya. We also do not have clarity about details of enforcement measures, including who and with what assets will participate and how these measures will be exactly carried out.' It expressed hope that the measures adopted should mitigate and not exacerbate an already difficult situation for the people of Libya. In a statement, the Indian government said, 'it hopes that this would not lead to greater harm to innocent civilians, foreign nationals and diplomatic missions and their personnel still in Libya.'²⁰

Inside India, the abstention received widespread support. India's position on the Libyan crisis makes one wonder if the country which is seeking a permanent place at the high table in the United Nations Security Council could have done any better. The answer would perhaps be a 'no'.²¹ That was a consensus public opinion.

Several voices spoke up with different rationale in support of the Indian diplomacy. To list a few: there was a lack of credible information on the ground as the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy had not finalized his report, which was a prerequisite for the UNSC to pass a resolution. The issues of command and control were not settled when the bombing commenced. The civilian lives were at risk from the bombing from the sky. Even Russia and China, the permanent members of the UNSC, had abstained. Military intervention in a tribally divided country like Libya highlights a selective approach to the promotion of freedom and protection of civilians. The 'Mission Creep' that has characterized the Western powers' military attacks raises

¹⁹ 'Come 1000 km to Tripoli: Embassy Tells Stranded Indians', *The Statesman*, 1 March 2011, http://www.thestatesman.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=360923&catid=36 accessed on 30 June 2011

²⁰ Tripti Lahiri, 'India Unhappy over Libya Air strikes', *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 March 2011. <http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2011/03/21/india-unhappy-over-libya-air-strikes/> Accessed on 30 April 2011

²¹ Ananth Krishnan and Sandeep Dikshit, 'India and China had Similar Considerations on Libya', *The Hindu*, 26 March 2011

troubling questions about their Libyan strategy.²² The rise in civilian casualties and the risk of an Iraq blunder being repeated, India's abstention was prudent.²³

The domestic compulsions behind the abstention were referred to by some commentators. As a multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic society, India entertained apprehensions that its support for the UNSC resolution 1973 may be perceived negatively by its Muslim citizens.²⁴ Libya could become an unending military quagmire and help radicalize many Muslims who will increasingly see the intervention as a West-versus-Islam war, if it drags on. India will not be helped by a world in which Islamic extremists gain ground.²⁵ An IDSA Brief mentioned warnings by intelligence experts of copy cat effect on Jammu and Kashmir.²⁶ A commentary specifically mentioned the troubles in Kashmir just a few months before the vote to conclude that 'by maintaining the narrative of non-intervention, India is buying insurance against global pressure on Kashmir.'²⁷

The Libyan drama reached a finale with Gaddafi disappearing and the rebels poised to take over the country. India announced that it will send medicines and other essentials worth \$2 billion soon to the TNC and sent Minister of State for External Affairs E Ahmed to Paris to attend a meeting on Libya's future. Ahmed reportedly made a strong pitch for India — and Indian firms — contributing to the rebuilding of the country.²⁸ Ahmed's visit came in for severe criticism, as France was the country to have spearheaded the assault on Libya's sovereignty and territorial integrity in flagrant violation of international law. Instead of accepting its invitation to the 'Friends of Libya' conference on 1 September, which was called to disburse the Libyan assets to

²² Brahma Chellany, 'Saving Civilians: Murky Geopolitics', *The Hindu*, 5 April 2011

²³ Keerthi Sampath Kumar, 'Responsibility to Protect: The Case of Libya', *IDSA Comment*, 2 May 2011. http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/ResponsibilitytoProtectTheCaseofLibya_kskumar_020511 Accessed on 30 August 2011. There were, of course, diametrically different views and prescriptions from outside the country. India was advised to 'get on the right side of history' and demonstrate that its 'heart is in the right place.' James M Dorsey, 'Libya Poses Policy Challenge to Asian Giants', *The Hindu*, 29 August 2011.

²⁴ Sanjeev Kumar Shrivastav, 'India's Response to the Libyan Crisis', IDSA Brief, 13 April 2011, http://idsa.in/system/files/IB_IndiaLibyaCrisis.pdf, accessed on 7 September 2011

²⁵ Kanti Bajpai, 'The Logic behind the Libyan Decision', *The Times of India*, 2 April 2011.

²⁶ 'Crisis in Egypt: Implications for India' *IDSA Brief*, 4 February 2011.

²⁷ Yogesh Joshi, 'India, Libya and the Kashmir Paradox', 13 March 2011. *World Politics Review*, 13 March 2011, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/8163/india-libya-and-the-kashmir-paradox> Accessed on 17 August 2011

²⁸ Jayanth Jacob, 'World Dumps Gaddafi, India Still Can't Decide', *Hindustan Times*, 3 September 2011 Accessed on 7 September 2011

the TNC, India should have insisted that the process of cauterizing the Libyan wounds should be left to the UN. Even the Indian parliament, which was in session, was not informed of the government decision to participate.²⁹ With that, India has recognized the TNC *de facto*.

Conclusions

The most comprehensive response from the highest quarter in India came from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on 18 March. That is, the day after India abstained on the UNSCR 1973. He welcomed the pro-democracy wave sweeping the region, saying that ‘as a democracy, we are happy to see our brothers in West Asia (Middle East) and North Africa taking an increasing role in determining their own future. These are decisions for countries and their citizens to take for themselves, free of outside interference or coercion,’ he said at the India Today Conclave in New Delhi. ‘India will do what it can to support the decisions that the people and countries of the region take about their own future. As close neighbours and historical friends, we have a major stake in their peaceful, orderly evolution. Over six million of our citizens live and work in this area,’ he added.³⁰

Overall, though, the Indian response has been cautious and muted. Two reasons can explain it: one, its stand on non-intervention in domestic affairs is driven by its own domestic compulsions; and two, the processes of change in all the three countries are still unfolding. The old orders in Tunisia and Egypt are dented but not dead and in Libya it is defiant.

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²⁹ M K Bhadrakumar, ‘India’s Volte-Face on Libya: The Secret Mission’, *Deccan Herald*, 6 September 2011. <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/188738/secret-mission.html> Accessed on 7 September 2011

³⁰ <http://www.sify.com/news/india-welcomes-pro-democracy-wave-in-middle-east-north-africa-pm-news-national-ldsrEmebbgc.html> 18 March 2011 Accessed on 4 April 2011