



Two years of the Arab Spring

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In the current issue of the “Pulaski Policy Papers” Senior Fellow at the Casimir Pulaski Foundation Mr. Tomasz Otłowski analyses the developments in global and regional security two years after the Arab Spring. “The emergence in the region of some groups advocating extreme political slogans based on a radical interpretation of Islam rapidly changes the current security paradigm of the Middle East. And it's not just about the West (especially the United States) losing its last isolated footholds – allies ready not only to receive billions of dollars in military assistance grants, but also, if necessary, put their neck on the line for their overseas patron. It is also a change in the regional balance of power and in the strategic status quo, which had shaped the security situation in the region for several decades, despite its being challenged and opposed by so many.”

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The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is an independent, non-partisan think tank with a mission to promote freedom, equality and democracy, as well as to support actions of strengthening civil society. The foundation carries out such activities as conducting scientific research, preparing publications and analyses, organizing seminars and conferences, providing education and support for leaders in Poland and abroad. The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is one of only two Polish institutions that have a partnership status with the Council of Europe and is a member of the Group Abroad – an umbrella organization of top 40 Polish NGOs working outside of Poland.

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When in early 2011 part of the Arab world plunged into the chaos of social unrest and revolution, the West started to perceive these developments with great hope. This was mainly due to the very nature of the protests and demands of the demonstrators, making reference to democracy, freedom and basic human rights. It seemed that this wave of democratization – like the one that swept two decades earlier through Central and Eastern Europe – was finally about to pay a visit to the Middle East. Western experts and academics seemed to believe that in this part of the world, constantly harassed by despots, social hunger for democracy should be obvious.

In order that the flame of revolution in the Arab world not to be extinguished too soon, some Western countries have taken action against their own obvious geopolitical interests. How else should one call the United States quick and decisive break away from support for the Egyptian regime of Hosni Mubarak? While undoubtedly authoritarian and brutal, the regime had long been a staunch U.S. ally in the region. For some time, Mubarak's Egypt – as one of only a few Arab states – supported what remained of the Pax Americana that still existed in the Middle East after the U.S.'s inglorious retreat from Iraq, weakening their involvement in the Persian Gulf and cooling down their relations with Israel. This vague prospect of democracy in Egypt proved to be more attractive to Washington than hard geopolitical reality and America's own interests.

Other Western countries are also unable to boast a more prudent policy. When the rebellion in Libya turned into a civil war and the regime of Muammar Gaddafi began to regain control of the situation, France along with Italy and the United Kingdom decided to step in militarily in the name of saving "Libyan democracy." As a result, the world faced several months of conflict in which NATO was also involved. Gaddafi eventually lost power and his own life, but the world has not yet been enriched with another fully democratic and lawful country. On the contrary, Libya is now a "black hole" of regional security, adversely affecting the entire region of the Maghreb and the Sahel.

The second anniversary of the outbreak of the Arab Spring is a good time to summarize the strategic consequences of this process. The most important of these are of geopolitical significance, affecting the long-term transformation of the international process in the Middle East, and often beyond. From the perspective of Western interests, the Arab Spring has clearly brought adverse effects.

Intensive development of radical Islam

The most important of the strategic consequences of the revolts in the Arab world is the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. It is undisputable that over the past two years in the Middle East, the movements whose programs are based on the ideas and demands of Islamic fundamentalism have strengthened their position. Radical Islam has never had so much to say in the public life of the Arab states (especially in the Maghreb) and has not played as important a role as it does today.

In the two years since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, Islamic extremists rule (or co-govern) in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Significantly, this happened due to their winning of free, democratic general elections, a clear sign of both the capacity of the slogans proclaimed by the Islamists and the high social attractiveness of the "radical Islam" model. It can be assumed that if fully free and fair elections are held in other countries in the region, the outcome would likely be similar to the results obtained by the fundamentalists in Tunisia and Egypt.

The rise of radical Islam in the Middle East brought about by the Arab Spring does not only have a political dimension (i.e. the exercise of power). It also involves a very clear military dimension, referring to the sharp increase in the number, efficiency and geographical range of Islamist armed organizations; that is those that primarily use force (including terrorism) in pursuing their assumed political goals.

While Islamists in Egypt won the elections on the wave of social and genuinely grassroots revolution, the fundamentalists in Libya fought fiercely for their current success during the Civil War. It is thanks to militias and paramilitary groups composed of Islamists, that the Libyan revolution first (Spring 2011) survived Gaddafi forces' counter attacks, in order finally to beat the regime after a few months. Unsurprisingly, Islamist forces were the most valuable units of the opposition in term of their combat skills. These formations consist mainly of terrorists and jihadists, seasoned in the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen and Algeria. As a result, eastern Libya is now a bastion of Islamists of various stripes, led by such close allies of Al-Qaeda as the Ansar al-Sharia and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

An almost identical process is currently taking place in Syria. There, too, the pro-democratic opposition must rely on the strength and efficiency of the Islamist militant formations, without which it would not be able to continue the rebellion. This alliance, however, has served to strengthen the jihadists, and allowed them to take the whole revolution hostage. As a result, the Syrian revolt more and more resembles a "holy war" aimed at establishing in the country an Islamic social and political order based on Sharia law. The strengthening of the role of the armed Islamist groups has been observed not only in the countries "affected" to varying degrees by the Arab Spring, but also in other regions of the Muslim world. This process is probably most noticeable on the African continent, where radical Islam, buoyed by military and political successes in the Maghreb, is trying to be heard today in the Sahel (e.g. Mali), and even in the sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria).

Taking advantage of their marked presence in Libya, Syria and Yemen, their substantial resources of weapons and military equipment (acquired in the government arsenals), and their ability to move freely in the area, the Islamists are carrying today the seeds of a "holy war" to Muslims in the neighboring countries. And although triumphant jihadists in Mali have been stopped for now, we should not be deluded that this brings us any permanent solution to this growing problem. On the contrary, in the near future we can expect to see similar actions taken by the fundamentalists in Mauritania, through Niger, Egypt and Sudan, to Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq. The development of Jihad in one part of the "broader" Middle East automatically generates an increase in extremist threats in other areas.

Al-Qaeda Reloaded?

Another important result of the Arab Spring, with far-reaching geopolitical consequences, is the return of Al-Qaeda as an ideological, political and organizational centre of global jihad. The organization had been neglected for several years. Following the elimination of its founder and leader Osama bin Laden in May 2011, its imminent demise was predicted. Too hastily, it turns out, as it is not only active but still deadly.

Currently, there is no doubt that the success of Islamic fundamentalists in the wave of the Arab Spring in North Africa and the Middle East are largely thanks to Al-Qaeda. As a matter of fact, so too is the Islamists' "good fortune" in South Asia (the prospect of the Taliban victory in Afghanistan and the strengthening of the position of fundamentalists in Pakistan). A proof of the rapid development of Al-Qaeda's global structures is the establishing in 2011 of two new official franchises: "Al-Qaeda's Sinai Peninsula" (with close ties to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Salafists) and "Al-Qaeda in East Africa"

composed mainly of Somali Islamists from al-Shabaab.

The U.S. administration has for years been proclaiming with confidence the idea of the weakened position and significance of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic movement. It realised the dramatic extent of its error on the eleventh anniversary of 9/11 (the event that marked the beginning of the war on Islamism). On September 11, 2012, in an attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi a number of American diplomats, including the U.S. Ambassador to Libya, were killed. The responsibility for the attack itself fell on Al-Qaeda; however, it was in fact conducted by Ansar al-Sharia, one of many new North African groups linked to Al-Qaeda.

A new quality in Middle Eastern geopolitics

The emergence in the region of some groups advocating extreme political slogans based on a radical interpretation of Islam rapidly changes the current security paradigm of the Middle East. And it's not just about the West (especially the United States) losing its last isolated footholds – allies ready not only to receive billions of dollars in military assistance grants, but also, if necessary, put their neck on the line for their overseas patron. It is also a change in the regional balance of power and in the strategic status quo, which had shaped the security situation in the region for several decades, despite its being challenged and opposed by so many.

Israel has been the most significantly affected by these changes. Suddenly the country seems to have returned to the starting point; after decades of relative strategic "stability", it is now back where it was at the very beginning of its modern statehood, when every border is a distinct section of the frontline, and every Arab neighbour is a ferocious enemy, wanting to crush the existence of the Jewish state.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. "Islamization" of the Middle East and the Maghreb is a fact, a factor which severely affects the changes in the geopolitical status quo in the region. The full extent of these changes, the direction and the final result is still not possible to predict. The West, and especially the European Union – as a structure on the one hand geographically closest to the area affected by the process of change, and on the other, having a historical commitment to it – is not really able to go beyond the role of a passive observer and commentator.

2. The Arab Spring events follow their own rhythm – spontaneous and impossible to control. Even more so, they are not susceptible to control from outside the region, especially from Western countries. Especially since many European countries, even more so those with a colonial past, are still treated in the Middle East and North Africa as actively involved participants in the conflict. Interventions in Libya, Mali and involvement in Syria only perpetuate this pattern of thinking.

3. In this situation, the creative role of the European Union towards the events of the Arab Spring is limited to certain procedures, defined by the Americans as "damage control" (minimizing losses). Neither the EU as a whole, nor any of its member states alone is able to influence the course of events between the Maghreb and the Middle East, between Turkey and Yemen. In addition to this, there is the devastating lack of discernment as to the reality prevailing in the Middle East and the associated risks of granting support to those who should not receive it (as in the case of Libya and Syria).

4. In light of the events of the past few months, the European Union, and those of its member states that want to play an even greater role in the region, would be well advised now to give up on the dream of bringing both democracy to the Middle East and a system of human rights, compatible with European models. Instead, one should rather focus on the active support of those regional regimes which, though perhaps not in complete accordance with European ideas of liberal democracy, are able to effectively halt the so far invincible march of Islamic fanatics and extremists.

5. The EU support – political, organizational, and financial – in the first place should go especially to countries such as Algeria (the last Maghreb country today actively and effectively combating Islamic radicals), Jordan (the only state in the Levant openly supporting the policy of the West), Kuwait and Qatar (the last fully Western outposts in the Persian Gulf region). There are not many of these "last" and "only" real allies left in this part of the world. If we were to surrender them, we would permanently lose the possibility of any impact on the situation in the region.

6. Strong and unequivocal support from the European Union (which above all needs to radically change its current policies in this respect) should also go to Israel. It is in a very real sense the last bastion of the West in the Middle East; the bastion understood as a distinct community of civilization based on Judeo-Christian cultural foundations. Israel was the first to stand up to fight the Islamist threat, when in Europe or in the U.S. no one even dreamed of such a danger. Today, in the new strategic situation emerging from the chaos of the Arab revolution, Israel seems to be the most vulnerable to changes, which is why it needs the support of Europe all the more.

7. A number of Middle East ethnic and religious minorities have been awaiting urgent assistance from the world, especially from Europe. Their future in the newly emerging geopolitical reality in the region hangs in doubt. In particular, this applies to Middle Eastern Christians who today are subjected to persecution, which they have not experienced for many centuries. Many moderate followers of sects and communities within Islam are also persecuted for "apostasy from the true faith." If the European Union really wants to be faithful to the ideals and values that lie at its foundations, it cannot forget about these victims of the Arab Spring.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation

is an independent think tank which specializes in foreign policy, with a mission to promote freedom, equality and democracy, as well as to support actions of strengthening civil society. The foundation carries out activities both in Poland and abroad, among others in Central and Eastern Europe and in North America.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation was founded due to political changes that took place in Poland after 1989. The principal values of Casimir Pulaski (freedom, justice and democracy) are an inspiration for every initiative undertaken by the Foundation. A few of the Foundations activities include: conducting scientific research, preparing publications and analyses, organizing seminars and conferences, providing education and support for leaders (www.instytutprzywodztwa.pl).

The Foundation is the main organizer of the Warsaw Regional NGOs Congress (www.warsawcongress.pl), the co-organizer of the Academy of Young Diplomats (www.diplomats.pl) and publisher of the Communication Platform for Non-Governmental Organizations (www.non-gov.org).

The Foundation also awards the Casimir Pulaski Prize “The Knight of Freedom” to outstanding people who have made a significant contribution in promoting democracy. So far the prizewinners were: Professor **Władysław Bartoszewski**, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland, historian Professor **Norman Davies**, **Alaksandar Milinkiewicz**, leader of democratic opposition in Belarus, **Lech Wałęsa** and **Aleksander Kwaśniewski**, former Presidents of Poland as well as **Javier Solana**, former High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, **Valdas Adamkus**, former President of Lithuania, **Bernard Kouchner**, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of France, and **Richard Lugar**, the United States Senator.

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