

**RSC Policy Brief:**  
**Review of the Unrest in the Middle East and North Africa**  
*February 25, 2011*

With the continuing unrest in the Middle East and in North Africa, the RSC has prepared the below policy brief summarizing the situation country by country. This brief is not meant to cover every detail of these ongoing events, but is meant to provide an overview.

**Tunisia:** Soaring unemployment, inflation, and government corruption led to violent protest beginning in late December of 2010. A young man in Sidi Bouzid set himself on fire on December 17, 2010, after officials prohibited him from selling vegetables on the street without a permit. The man was a 26 year old computer-science graduate who has been unable to find other work. The town is one of the poorest in the nation and has an agriculture based economy. This event sparked the four-week revolt that spread throughout the country, and then to Tunis (the capital city). In Tunis, the protests were met with tanks, armored vehicles and tear gas. Reports estimate that at least 219 people have been killed and dozens have been injured.

President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali had been in power since 1987, and on January 14, 2011, he left the country for Saudi Arabia. The evening before, he had appeared on national television and offered to resign at the end of his term, in 2014. However, did not slow down the protestors and he resigned the next day. Parliament Speaker Foued Mebazaa has been sworn in as the interim president, and has instructed Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi to form a new government. On January 17, 2010, Ghannouchi unveiled a government line-up, which included several former ruling party ministers in key positions. This enraged protestors.

According to the Tunisian constitution, elections are to be held with 60 days, however Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi has promised elections to take place within six months. It is reported they will be open to all political parties. The media has dubbed this the “Jasmine Revolution,” after the national flower, and these events helped spark similar events through North Africa and the Middle East.

**Lebanon:** Supporters of caretaker Prime Minister Saad Hariri have violently protested against Hezbollah’s nomination of a candidate for Prime Minister, Najib Mikati. On January 25, 2011, lawmakers backed Mikati by a vote of 68-60. Protests occurred throughout the country, and Prime Minister held a national address calling for peace and rejecting violence in the demonstrations.

Mr. Hariri's government collapsed on January 12, 2011, over a conflict of how to respond to a U.N. tribunal investigating Hezbollah members of being behind the 2005 assassination of his father, former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Hezbollah had requested the government disassociate itself from the U.N. tribunal. After an agreement was not reached, Hezbollah brought down the government. The government fell after Minister of State Adnan Sayyed Hussein turned in his resignation. Ten other members of the Hezbollah-led March 8 alliance resigned. This meant that the threshold needed to collapse the government (11 resignations from the 30 member Cabinet) had been reached.

Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, along with 22 others, was killed in February 14, 2005 when a bomb exploded next to his motorcade in Beirut.

**Libya:** Protests in Libya began on January 14, 2011 over the late completion of government subsidized housing projects. This began by hundreds of people breaking into new, and still under construction, government housing units. Some of these projects were recently postponed, even though owners had already signed contracts and paid most of the installments.

Col. Khadafy has been in power since a coup in 1969, and stated on February 22, 2011, that he had no intentions of giving up his post. In a 75 minute television rant, he stated he would "cleanse Libya house by house" if protestors did not surrender. On this same day, Libyan Minister of the Interior Abdel Fattah Younes al Abidi resigned from his post and urged the military to support the protestors and their "legitimate demands."

The military has responded with violent action, attacking mosques, airports, and other locations with automatic weapons, anti-aircraft guns, mortars, and rocket-propelled grenades. Additionally, military planes have been ordered to attack protestors and bomb oil fields, and Navy warships have fired at protestors.

Two Libyan fighter jets, one warship, and two civilian helicopters, have defected to Malta (an island nation to the north). There have also been several local army units and other officials to defect. Some pilots have even parachuted from their fighter jets, allowing the jet to crash into remote areas, further defying Khadafy's rule. In the city of Benghazi, an army unit switched sides and helped locals defeat security forces. Local tribal leaders, along with residents and defected military officers, have formed local administrations and have begun distributing weapons that were looted from the security forces' arsenals.

After days of fighting, the city of Benghazi is now seeing basic order return. The military defected en masse, and the city is now being run by a makeshift group of judges and lawyers. As of late, Khadafy appears to still have control over part of Tripoli (the capital city) and other areas in the center of the country. It is reported that towns to the west of the capital, and all of eastern Libya, is now in control by the opposition.

Death toll estimates range from 600 to 2,000. The Arab League has barred Libya from all meetings. Libyan government officials stated that some members of CNN, BBC Arabic and Al Arabiya would be allowed into the county to report. However, officials stated that foreign journalists who cross into Libya will be regarded as "terrorist collaborators."

**Egypt:** Protests and rallies began on January 25, 2011, in several Egyptian cities (Cairo, Alexandria, Suez, Mansura, Beni, and Suf), demanding that President Hosni Mubarak be removed from the office of the President. These protests, at least in part, were inspired by the collapse of the authoritarian government in Tunisia. In a statement by the Interior Ministry, the Egyptian government quickly stated that the protests were orchestrated by the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood is officially banned in Egypt, but is still tolerated.

Twitter and Facebook were reported to be blocked throughout the country. Security forces used water cannons, tear gas, and then nightsticks to alter protest movements.

On January 28, 2011, President Mubarak deployed the Egyptian military to restore order and enforce a national 6:00pm curfew. Additionally, Mubarak imposed a near-total blackout on communications. President Obama called for President Mubarak to take “concrete steps” toward political and economic reform. The Muslim Brotherhood encouraged its supporters to take part in the protests on Friday, January 28. Protestors burned down the ruling party’s headquarters in Cairo, assaulted the Interior Ministry and the state television headquarters, and burned down six Cairo police stations and several cars, and at one point the American Embassy was attacked. At this point police began using rubber-coated bullets, and then live ammunition.

On February 7, 2011, Vice President Omar Suleiman met with two representatives of the Brotherhood, among a group of about 50 opposition figures. Many participants argued against Suleiman’s statements that the meeting produced any “consensus.”

On February 11, 2011, President Mubarak stepped down, and turned all power over to the military. The military stated that elections will be held in 6 months. The military also pledged to repeal the “emergency law,” that allows the government to detain anyone with charges or trial. On February 15, 2011, the Egyptian military convened a panel of eight jurists, which includes Sobhi Saleh of the Muslim Brotherhood, to revise the Constitution. Sobhi Saleh expressed extremist views that include advocating a ban on kissing in public. He was also recently released from an Egyptian intelligence prison. Protests continue, as of February 25, 2011, calling for the new panel to carry out the promises made to protestors, and protestors continue to pressure all those formally associated with the Mubarak administration to be removed from power.

**Yemen:** Protests began in Yemen on January 27, 2011 and still continue to call for the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Local media report there are between 50,000 and 80,000 antigovernment demonstrators. Protests are being carried out over multiple streets around Sanaa University in San’a (the capital city), so it is difficult to estimate total numbers. Around 10,000 pro-Saleh demonstrators marched in Tahir Square on February 25, 2011, however they were much smaller in number than the antigovernment protests.

The U.S. Embassy in Yemen stated there is “a disturbing rise in the number and violence of attacks against Yemeni citizens gathering peacefully to express their views on the current political situation.” Pro-Saleh demonstrators have repeatedly clashed with protestors and have fired into the crowd on several occasions. The death toll remains around 20, however dozens have been injured. Some pro-Saleh demonstrators have snuck through police lines and have attacked doctors treating the injured.

President Ali Abdullah Saleh has been in power since 1978. On February 2, 2011, he announced that he would not seek reelection at the end of his term in 2013. In 2005, he announced he would not seek reelection, although in 2006 and was elected to a seven-year term. Saleh's power has been in decline in recent years as the country's oil revenues shrink. Saleh also announced that parliamentary elections that are currently scheduled for April, would be postponed to allow more time for discussions about reform.

Yemen is the poorest of all Arab countries. In the recent past there has been a rebellion in the north and a fight for secession in the south (which was formerly independent until 1990). Al Qaeda has turned parts of the county into a refuge, which is beyond the country's control. The situation in Yemen is compounded by the fight against al Qaeda, the southern secession movement in the south, a Shiite uprising, and an upcoming shortage of water.

For a review of the terrorist threat in Yeman and the Arabian Peninsula, see this [RSC Policy Brief](#) from the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress.

**Jordan:** Protests began in Jordan on January 28, 2011, calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Samir Rifai. The protestors' anger is centered on rising prices, inflation and unemployment (around 12%) and poverty (around 25%). The Islamic Action Front (the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood) is the largest opposition party in Jordan, and they have been active participants in recent demonstrations. Crowds in the thousands have marched in several cities, some chanting "In the name of God, the government must change" and the "Koran is our constitution, jihad is our path."

Government supporters and opponents have clashed, and at least eight people have been killed. Violence from police and security forces has not been reported at this time, and protests have been largely peaceful.

On February 11, 2011, King Abdullah replaced most of the Cabinet and fired Prime Minister Samir Rifai, replacing him with Marouf al-Bakhit, a former army general and ambassador to Israel. The Muslim Brotherhood has reportedly refused to take Cabinet seats.

**Algeria:** Protests and rallies began on February 12, 2011, in the capital city of Algiers, calling for democratic reform. These events violated a government ban on public protests and rallies. Police dressed in riot gear attempted to prevent the protestors from congregating in the city center. According to the AP, there was some jostling between police and the marchers, but no major violence was reported. The AP reported that organizers estimated their numbers to be around 10,000, but government officials estimated them to be only around 1,500.

On February 22, 2011, the Algerian government adopted a measure that would lift the state of emergency that has constrained civil liberties and human rights in the country for 19 years. This is a major concession to opposition groups, namely the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD).

President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has been in power since 1999, and was reelected by large margins in 2004. In November 2008, the Algerian constitution was amended and the two-term limit on the presidency was removed. The President was elected again by large margins in 2009.

**Bahrain:** Protests began on February 14, 2011 when Shi'ite protestors took to the streets in Manama (the capital city), in Bahrain's Pearl Square. Protests began on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a national charter that limited political reform. Estimates were in the tens of thousands. Protestors had set up a camp in the square, until February 17, 2011 when police stormed the camp with armored vehicles. Police also used tear gas and rubber bullets. Bahrain's Health Ministry estimates that seven people have been killed.

Protestors wanted the government to provide more jobs, create better housing, and free political detainees. Protestors also called on the government to abolish a current system that offers citizenship to Sunnis as a way to close the population gap with Shiites, who account for around 70% of the population.

Hassan Mushaimaa, leader of the Haq Movement, the largest opposition party, has been detained in Beirut, Lebanon. It is reported that Lebanese authorities have seized his passport and he is not being allowed to return to Bahrain.

Bahrain is an island nation, of around 1.2 million, off the coast of Saudi Arabia, and is ruled by the Sunni al-Khalifa dynasty. The country is known for its oil and pearls. Sheikh Khalifa has ruled the country since it gained independence in 1971. Bahrain has reportedly been crucial to the U.S. fight against al-Qaeda, and Bahrain is home to the 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet – a major U.S. Naval Forces Central Command.

**Iran:** As the events in Egypt were hailed by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, similar events in his own back yard didn't receive the same welcome. On February 14, 2011, thousands of Iranians protested in the Tehran's Asadi Square (along with other demonstrations in Isfahan, Mashhad, and Shiraz), showing their unity with the Egyptian people, as reported by BBC. Police forces used tear gas and batons against the protestors. It is reported that eight people have been killed, many others injured, and dozens have been arrested.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated: "We are against violence and we would call to account the Iranian government that is once again using its security forces and resorting to violence to prevent the free expression of ideas from their own people." These statements are the strongest, and most direct, in support of antigovernment demonstrations in countries that have recently had violent protests.

**Syria:** On February 18, 2011, around 1,500 people took part in a demonstration in protest a police beating a local shop owner in Damascus. This was not a protest targeted directly toward the government. On February 2, 2011, a group of around 20 people holding a candlelight vigil for Egyptian protesters were dispersed by police, and some were detained.

On February 23, 2011, the third peaceful demonstration in three weeks took place in Syria. A group of about 200 people staged a peaceful sit-in outside the Libyan embassy to show support for Libya's protesters, fourteen were arrested, and several were beaten by uniformed police. Witness reports say two among the beaten were women. Witnesses also say that during this protest, there were nearly twice as many secret and uniformed police as protesters. Some protesters were punched, kicked and beaten.

The President of Syria is Bashar al-Assad, who has been in power since 2000, and is the son of former Syrian president Hafez al-Assad. He is an outspoken critic of the United States.

The government has also been quick to crackdown on communications and movement within the country. There have been several reports of internet censorship and phone call tapping. The Syrian government seems quite fearful that bigger protests will emerge.

**Morocco:** Protests occurred on February 20, 2011, and consisted of around 37,000 demonstrators. Protestors called for political reform, an end to corruption, higher living standards, and higher quality education and health care. The protests were generally peaceful, though they did spark rioting and looting in several cities, including Rabat (the capital city), Tangier and Marrakesh.

There have been five reported fatalities when a bank was set on fire in al-Hoceima. Around 130 people were injured (mostly security personnel), and around 120 have been arrested. No violence on behalf of the government has been reported. Protest in Morocco are reportedly common.

The demonstrations did not seek to depose King Mohammed IV, but rather called for him to relinquish some power to the people, end corruption in government practices, state television, and enact reforms to their constitution. The King has been in power since 1999, and appoints most important positions, and has the authority to veto any legislation without recourse.

**Iraq:** Protests in Iraq have spanned across at least ten cities, from Basra in the south to Mosul in the north. Protestors have gathered demanding political and economic reform, along with more electricity, clean water, and better pensions and medical care.

Iraqi security personnel have placed themselves on the streets in Baghdad, in an attempt to intimidate protestors, and a planned “Day of Rage” to take place February 25, 2011. This particular demonstration has led to the deaths of at least 13 people. Reports estimate protest turnouts to be in the hundreds of thousands. It has also been reported that uniformed Iraqi Army soldiers have raided at least one press office, the Journalistic Freedoms Observatory, taking computers and other files. Gen. Qassim al-Atta stated February 22, 2011 that “We have confirmed intelligence and information about terrorist plans to target the demonstrators in different ways – explosive vests, car bombs, snipers and pistols with silencers.” This was widely seen as an intimidation tactic aimed to limit turnout. Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki has made similar comments.

There have been calls for the Prime Minister to step down, but most protestors are not calling on an entirely new form of government. Like Egypt, Iraq also has a “Tahrir Square” in Baghdad, which has been the center of protest in the city. Protestors are reported to be mostly peaceful, but angry. At least three local government offices have been stormed, and there are plans to set another on fire.

Security officials erected overnight concrete blast walls in order to keep the protestors from reaching the Prime Minister’s offices.

The protestors had a victory in the southern city of Basra. Governor Sheltag Abboud appeared before a crowd of around thousands (reports vary from 4,000 to 10,000) and announced his resignation.

**Saudi Arabia:** The royal family of Saudi Arabia is maneuvering to avoid a massive uprising against the government. King Abdullah, who is now 87, has announced a plan to spend \$37 billion on benefits to the lower and middle-class, such as affordable housing, pay raises, unemployment benefits, and education.

No organized protests against the royal family have occurred, but 2/3 of the Saudi population is under 29, and the employment rate for young people is estimated to be hovering around 40%. There have been a few small, isolated incidents of unrest: Saudis demonstrating for better pay, and some internet criticism of the royal family.

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