

## THE ARAB REVOLTS AND STRATEGIC THINKING

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The first North African rebellions in Tunisia and Egypt, and the later ones that have swelled up in other countries of the region, point to a systemic change in international relations. This change can be summed up as the dismantling of the role of the United States, and its allies, in the Middle East.

In June 2008, the European Laboratory of Political Anticipation (LEAP) warned in its monthly bulletin that “pro-Western Arab regimes [had gone] adrift” and that there was a “60 percent risk of socio-political explosion on the Morocco-Egypt axis”. The analysis emphasized the consequences of the “systemic global crisis” for these regimes, which included imminent hunger riots. The report also highlighted “the inability of Washington and its European allies to answer [to the Middle Eastern situation] by anything other than securitarian stances.”

Focusing on Egypt, the LEAP registered an increase in instability due to “the political deadlock created by the end of Mubarak’s reign combined with the regime’s incapacity to address the economic and social expectations of a growing part of the population.” The conclusion by the European center for strategic analysis is noteworthy in light of recent events: “According to our analysts, Egypt will be politically hit by the outcome of the plunge into the heart of the global systemic crisis. Social instability

will be stronger than the securitarian nature of the regime.”

### Strategy vs. guesswork

Such anticipatory conclusions are not reached haphazardly. Strictly speaking, the process is neither a matter of guesswork nor of prediction, because the future is not foreseeable. The issue is more complex. It is a matter of understanding the lines of force, the relations of power, the strong and weak points in international relations understood as a system. It is like understanding which bricks in a wall are those that sustain the structure, if those bricks are removed or affected, the whole building - despite its appearance of stability - could tumble ...

This is why long and short-term analyses are necessary, employing multiple approaches (political, economic, social and cultural) to constitute a complete and complex conjunction of readings. This allows for a quantitative and qualitative overview. Systemic analyses must be conducted by a team of analysts who share the objective of understanding the whole. The concepts of “systemic crisis” and of “geopolitical dismantling,” concepts habitually used by LEAP, are part of such analyses.

To say we are traversing a systemic crisis, however, is not to say that the capitalist system is in a terminal crisis. The point, rather, is that the international system will not continue to function as it has since its last great re-structuring, which took place about 1945, at the end of the Second World War. While systemic analyses do not pretend to specify exact dates for such profound changes, they do indicate stages characterized by important tendencies. For example: the crisis of U.S. hegemony. This is



She Guevara.

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characterized by the fact that the United States can no longer draw the map of the world at its whim, as it has done over the last five or six decades. But the power of the United States will not disappear. It will surely continue to be a global power, yet now in a multipolar world. In a similar way, when 2008 is pinpointed as the year in which the shift began, during George W. Bush’s term of office, this is a matter of approximate dates, symbolic dates that simply indicate turning points.

## Egypt as a turning point

In the last two years, the Uruguayan weekly *Brecha* has registered some of these systemic shifts, exploring not only the decline of U.S. power, but also the growth of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China, to which South Africa has now been added). Turkey's geopolitical shifts have also been noted, as it has slowly abandoned Washington's sphere of influence. But the Arab revolts constitute a pronounced turn of the screw.

In the case of Egypt, as the journalist Hossam el-Hamalawy noted, what is most astonishing is that the country did not erupt sooner. "Revolt has been in the air for the last few years," he said in an interview broadcast by Al Jazeera on January 27. No uprising falls from the sky. El-Hamalawy explained that in 2008 there were two "mini-intifadas" in Tunisia. In Egypt, the epicenter of the strong union movements that organized strikes was the textile industry in the city of Mahalla, on the Nile Delta. As a consequence of that wave of strikes, two independent unions were formed: tax collectors, with 40,000 members, and health workers, with 30,000.

The first long-term change to note is the "degree of courage of the people" who have lost their fear, who have become protagonists. It will not be easy to shut them back into their houses. That the uprisings did not happen before this year was because the region's regimes used the war against terrorism to inhibit dissent.

The second shift is that the United States is quickly losing its most important allies in the region. It lost Turkey, then Tunisia, and now Egypt, the country that receives the most U.S. aid after Israel. If we agree with Immanuel Wallerstein that we are

living the second Arab revolution (the first was in 1916, for independence from the Ottoman Empire), Washington is the big loser. The big winner is Iran. As curious as it may seem, the U.S. Defeat of Saddam Hussein gave Tehran a central Middle East role, since the Iraqi leader was "Iran's fiercest and most effective enemy."

The White House has been unable to advocate political alternatives to the region's dictatorial regimes, beyond Barack Obama's famous speech in Cairo on June 4, 2009. In a moment of historical irony, that speech was entitled "A new beginning." Hillary Clinton has limited herself to making a few generic calls for peace and democracy and asking for an orderly transition with no vacuum of power. Without its crutch of Egypt's truly clientelistic regime, created and sustained by political and military aid, the weight of the United States in the Middle East will diminish.

But not only does Washington lose in the region. The influence of the West as a whole, and particularly the European Union, which receives its oil through the Suez Canal, will disappear into the crowded Arab streets and plazas.

Finally, all eyes look to Turkey. Distanced from both Washington and Tel Aviv, yet not quite aligned with Iran, it is setting itself up as both a pivot point and an example to follow. Ankara will provide an almost inescapable source of inspiration for the future governors of Cairo, as the axes of the region's new and precarious equilibrium find themselves increasingly distanced from those countries that were until now loyal allies of the ex-superpower.