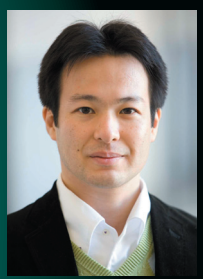
SPECIAL ANALYSIS

How Can We Explain the Arab Spring?

By Satoshi Ikeuchi



Author Satoshi Ikeuchi

The Intellectual Challenge of the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring shook the social consciousness, values and political regimes of the Arab countries and vastly altered their hopes for the future. At the same time, the existing framework for understanding the Arab world received a serious jolt. Experts on Arab politics are now going through a period of fundamental soul-searching. As a scholar of Arab politics, the author's aim is to provide a new conceptual framework that will help explain the present and anticipate the future, albeit broadly.

Does the term Arab Spring make sense in the first place? What caused the chain of rapid changes in society? What were the immediate outcomes in those countries? How did the individual Arab regimes respond to widespread social protest? And what were the reasons for the different responses? What were the factors that led to different outcomes in individual countries? Where did the critical junctures lie in the path to these different outcomes?

The intellectual challenges are boundless and involve various aspects of society and a wide range of academic disciplines. This paper will take up the key elements from the political science perspective and delve into the responses of the regimes to determine what caused different outcomes, while providing comprehensive coverage of the intellectual challenges posed by the Arab Spring. This should provide us with keys to understanding the directions of future developments.

Questioning Arab Authoritarian Resilience

During the last decade, Arab studies, particularly by European and American political scientists, discussed how Arab authoritarian regimes remained stable and focused on why it was unlikely that political change would occur in the near future. Authoritarian regimes in the Arab world were described as "strong", "solid" and "stable". They were recognized as "persistent", "durable" and "enduring". They seemed to be "robust" and "resilient". Some political scientists, almost in despair, used the word "stubborn". (Many of these adjectives were picked out of *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance,* edited by Marsha Pripstein Posusney and Michel Penner Angrist, 2005, a widely respected study on authoritarian regimes in the Arab world.)

There appeared to be innumerable factors that explained the stability of the Arab regimes: the seriously weak and fragmented opposition parties and civil society movements due to severe restrictions imposed on them; the skillful tactics of the rulers, alternating between oppression and co-optation; the firm grip that those regimes had over the massive and multifaceted military and security forces; the economic rent pouring in to the oil-producing countries that made it possible to govern without regard to public opinion; the existence of the United States and other outside supporters of these regimes; the ability of the regimes to exploit existing regional and sectarian conflicts to claim and justify the need for a police state, effectively stultifying dissent — the list goes on.

The views of political scientists in the Arab world had been a little more nuanced. They made a more detailed analysis of the undemocratic governance of the Arab regimes, subjected them to political and ethical criticism and value judgments, and argued for the indispensability and inevitability of change. However, like their Western counterparts, they too failed to foresee the storm surge of sudden political and social change, even as they may have held out vague hopes and expectations for it.

The view persists that the fundamental cause of the absence of democratic change in Arab countries and its future impossibility lies in Arab culture and Islam. Most Western political and social scientists, and academics and commentators from the Arab world, would both object strenuously to this line of argument, often called Arab Exceptionalism. However, it was not unusual to hear Arab Exceptionalism voiced resignedly even among those people, mostly in private but sometimes in public, in despair over apparent stability of the undemocratic regimes throughout the Arab countries and the difficulties in identifying clues for future change.

The situation changed dramatically when the social disturbance and protest movements of the Arab Spring shook those regimes. Experts in the Arab field now have to explain why and how the Arab regimes collapsed. More specifically, they must now explain why some types of Arab regime collapsed while others did not, and why some countries were able to make transitions relatively smoothly from regime collapse to the establishment of a new regime while chaos and civil warfare continued in others.

"Spring" or "Winter" — or Something Else?

What should we call the phenomenon that has manifested itself since 2011 in the Arab world in the first place?

There are objections to what has come to be the generally used term "Arab Spring". Many experts in the Arab field in particular are skeptical about this nomenclature, a reservation that is probably appropriate if you are looking for terminological and conceptual rigor. Marc Lynch, the American expert in politics and media in the Arab world who was the first to use this phrase and helped to disseminate it, later chose the more rigorous term "Arab Uprising" for the title of his book (*The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East,* Public Affairs, 2012). There is a good reason to say it is inappropriate to use the word "spring" because it evokes a sense of euphoria. The protests during the so-called Arab Spring have not necessarily resulted in the happiness and prosperity that is associated with the word "spring". Some argue from a Western perspective, which sees democratization as the only positive direction for political development, that it is inappropriate or at least too early to call it "spring" when none of the countries has managed to transition to a stable democracy. People who are wary of political advances by Islamist forces express implicitly or explicitly opinions to the effect that they do not want to laud these developments as a "spring" since democratization that invites Islamism should be avoided in the first place.

However, there is an undeniable allure to the evocative power of the phrase "Arab Spring". While this paper avoids the use of the phrase to describe the process of change in the political system in the Arab countries, it is important to objectify and observe the multilayered, multidimensional change in the societies that produced the political changes by calling it the Arab Spring. The sea change that the Arab countries are currently going through is indeed rooted in fundamental social changes. Whether the outcome results in political democratization, a different kind of political system, or a return to authoritarian rule or long-term chaos, they will all emerge from the process of the respective regimes responding to social change and protests at the fundamental level. It is probably more fitting to explain the entire complexity of the process using spring as a metaphor — a new season has arrived, with budding trees and seeds of the unknown being sown.

Information & Generation

What impelled the socially driven changes in the Arab Spring? Two factors, namely information flow and generational gap were of critical importance. The Arab world has been experiencing a cumulative transformation of its information space since the early 1990s. The arrival of satellite broadcasting generated a relatively restriction-free space for speech beyond government censorship and control. This established a common public sphere for discourse within an Arabic verbal space that already was potentially unified linguistically through Modern Standard Arabic. Particularly important in this respect, of course, was Al-Jazeera, established in 1996.

The information flow in this common Arab public space grew explosively and exponentially with the arrival of the Internet. Individuals were no longer passive recipients of information; they were also able to send out information bringing about an interactive process in the information sphere. Already armed with Internet-based information tools, citizens acquired a new kind of information prowess, i.e. mobility with the advent of cellphones and short message service (SMS). Images captured by cellphone cameras are uploaded to YouTube, where they are replayed, copied, stored, and shared worldwide. As a result, the level of accountability the regimes are required to meet has soared, making it nearly impossible to avoid criticism and condemnation when they resort to criminal oppression, which previously would have been carefully hidden from the public eye.

This newly acquired mobility has also generated new forms of political activities on the Arab street. It gave rise to new forms of organizing protests such as "flash mobs" and "smart mobs" enabling protesters to elude suppression by security forces. Street protests by the people, which had been forbidden and effectively blocked, became possible with the transformation of the information sphere.

The main Arabic international satellite broadcasting networks such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya provide broadcasts on the Internet free of charge. Images, sounds and text messages are sent to the programs by way of the Internet and cellphones, and are in turn seen and heard, and lead to further action. The information space where satellite broadcasting, Internet and cellphones connect seamlessly drove political mobilization and political action.

Demographic factors added to this transition of the information sphere produced political change. Over 70% of the population in most Arab countries is 30 years old or younger. They are the generation that grew up with the development of information technology and have high information literacy. However, the younger generation suffers from a higher unemployment rate than their elders and is blocked from the existing outlets for political participation and otherwise exercising political influence. In other words, the younger generation, which was the least empowered economically and politically, was also the most empowered when it came to wielding information tools. The existence of this imbalance, this gap, had trapped the energy for change under the seemingly stable surface of Arab countries.

This pressure was released by the unexpected and fortuitous events in Tunisia, where President Ben Ali, unable to resist pressure from the demonstrations, fled the country, leading to an explosive chain reaction. Already connected by a shared language and a shared public space, the informational and demographic changes occurring simultaneously in the Arab countries served as the backdrop against which the collapse of the Ben Ali regime generated whirlwind demonstrations and learning effects in the rest of Arab society.

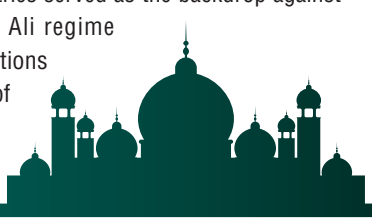


Photo: aflo

People rally in Tunis to mark the first anniversary of the overthrow of former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who fled into exile in Saudi Arabia on Jan. 14, 2011. Some demonstrators shouted slogans demanding jobs and dignity, while others wearing the red and white of the national flag called for recognition of the "martyrs" killed during the weeks of unrest before Ben Ali was toppled.

Once the Arab masses saw a dictator who appeared to enjoy ironclad authority easily lose power, they rapidly shed the "barrier of fear" that had been erected by their governments and by they themselves. The existing relationship between the rulers and the ruled lost its slavish premise. The Arab masses had in some sense expected till then that they would be arrested, tortured and even murdered for participating in demonstrations and other shows of defiance and had consigned themselves to resignation and fear. The protests against the regimes therefore did not surface publicly.

But now, a new common understanding had grown among the younger generation that it was wrong to be beaten just because one had participated in a demonstration. As people availed themselves of information tools mediated by satellite broadcasting, the Internet and the like, informational transparency grew dramatically and regimes saw the accountability required of them soar and in turn their credibility dive. The regimes only incited anger by cracking down on demonstrators, which resulted in their rapidly losing legitimacy. A paradigm shift had occurred in the Arab countries in the relationship between state and society.

Varying Regime Responses & Outcomes

How did the political regimes change in the Arab countries that saw large-scale protests? Let's take a look the six hardest-hit countries: Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria and Bahrain.

In Tunisia and Egypt, regimes facing large-scale protests gave up power quickly, and the process moved on to the transition to a new regime relatively smoothly. The presidents and many of their close associates were either arrested or fled their countries, and faced criminal prosecution. The other four regimes adamantly refused to relinquish power in the face of protests and often used brute force, such as deploying the military, in response. In Yemen, when anti-government protests swelled beginning in late January 2011, President Ali Abdullah Saleh repeatedly refused to stand down and prolonged the conflict, including small-scale armed clashes, until he finally signed an agreement in November and ceded power to the vice president. The large-scale, armed crackdown on March 18 produced a fissure in the unity within the regime, and major figures of the regime such as General Ali Mohsen, who hails from the same region and tribe as the president, abandoned the regime. As a moderate case of civil warfare broke out involving localized fighting between pro-Saleh forces and the anti-Saleh forces, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states led by Saudi Arabia, which feared a growing conflict, attempted to calm the conflict by engineering a peaceful step-down for Saleh, leading to an agreement for a coordinated transition with amnesty for the outgoing president.

In Libya, the regime cracked down on protests with tanks, mortars, attack helicopters and fighter planes. Large-scale defections began early on, with schismatic tendencies rooted in the history between Tripolitania to the west, which includes the capital Tripoli, and Cyrenaica to the east, where Benghazi is located. This led to the breakup of Libya's military and administrative institutions, and large-scale civil war broke out. As NATO forces intervened, Tripoli fell in August and Sirte in October, when Muammar Gaddafi was killed.

In Syria, the military and security forces joined with the Shabbiha, the militia employed by the government, to crack down on anti-government protests with excessive force. This led to the gradual militarization of the protests, and a nationwide, protracted civil war where a deadlock currently prevails. In Bahrain, demonstrations spread involving more than half of its citizens, against which the monarchy requested military intervention by the GCC member countries. As Saudi Arabian and UAE troops marched in and applied pressure, Bahraini security troops used force to dispel the demonstrators. Protests continue even now around Manama in a state of deadlock. Harsh suppression continues, as the United States, Japan, and the rest of the international community turn a blind eye because of their interest in the stability of the oil-rich Gulf region and the stability of the regime in Bahrain as a key element in their strategy against Iran.

Trajectories & Critical Junctures in Regime Collapse/Persistence

What led to the different outcomes for these regimes? This section will introduce concepts for analyzing the trajectory of the political developments in each of these countries. Three critical junctures in the political situation of each of the countries that faced large-scale anti-government demonstrations will be identified with a specific focus on the response from the regime and in particular the decisions and the actions that the military took.

The first juncture is the point where the protests demanding the ousting of the regime reaches a critical mass and the regime must decide whether to use force or resign. The response of the military is crucial here. It boils down to a simple but critical question: "Would the military

fire on its own citizens?" This is the "moment of truth" for the relationship between the regime and the military. In an authoritarian regime, the supreme leader normally has firm control over the military and security apparatus. The regime and the military are deemed to be one and inseparable, and the expectation that the military and security apparatus would join hands to crack down whenever an anti-government movement appeared served to reinforce the stability and sustainability of the regime.

However, when they actually faced strong social pressure, the military in Tunisia and Egypt refused to participate in the armed crackdown, delivering the *coup de grâce* to the respective regimes. In the other four countries, the military to various degrees joined other internal security apparatus in the crackdown, leading to bloodshed.

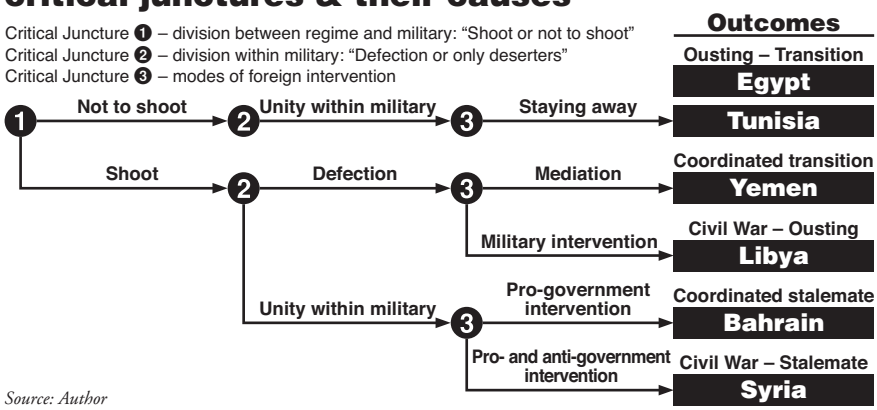
In other words, the first juncture appears to have been whether or not the unity between the regime and the military could be maintained. The Tunisian and Egyptian military disobeyed orders at the institutional level, leading to the separation of the regime and the military, while the Yemeni, Libyan, Syrian and Bahraini military as institutions followed demands to crack down on demonstrators.

The second juncture, which came after the relationship between the regime and the military had made this fateful choice, was whether or not unity within the military would be maintained. This issue is deeply related to paramilitary forces such as elite guards, special forces, security forces and militia, as how the relationships between the military and other security apparatus that have been established in parallel evolve is one element that determines the direction of future events. To put it another way, this was a matter that concerned the internal unity of the military and security apparatus. Among the four countries where unity between the military and the regime was maintained in the face of large-scale demonstrations, Yemen and Libya saw the early onset of defections in the military and security apparatus at the command, regional and tribal levels. This precipitated the breakup of the military and other government institutions, leading to a state of civil war/conflict, making it difficult for the regime to maintain military control. By contrast, in Syria and Bahrain, institutional unity has been maintained after the military and security apparatus joined the crackdown. In Syria, some officers and soldiers joined the Free Syrian Army, but they were "deserters" acting as individuals, and it appears that defection at the command level is rare. Thus, the regime in Syria and Bahrain are able to confront the anti-government forces in a civil war/conflict situation from a militarily superior vantage point.

In Egypt and Tunisia the transition process is proceeding in a relatively stable manner largely due to the fact that the institutional unity of the military has been maintained throughout the process. This is so despite the fact that the military accelerated and determined the demise of the previous regime by distancing itself from it.

CHART

Trajectories of Arab Spring countries: critical junctures & their causes



Source: Author

It goes without saying, of course, that it was not these internal structural factors alone that determined the outcome. What is worth mentioning is foreign intervention, in particular military intervention or lack thereof, and its form. Let's call this the third juncture. Even in Libya, there was a high possibility that the anti-government forces would have been stamped out by the end of March at least for the time being if NATO forces had not conducted aerial bombing at the time. Although anti-government demonstrations would have survived without the bombing, the conflict would have dragged on for a long time. At the other end in Bahrain, the military intervention by the GCC member countries and acquiescence by the Western nations including Japan had a decisive effect on the immediate development of events (continuation of the incumbent regime). In Syria, Middle East players (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Iran, various forces in Lebanon, etc.), players outside the region (the US, France, Russia, China, etc.) and nongovernment forces in and outside the region (Al-Qaeda, and other Islamist militia) are engaging through a wide range of interventions and support. The international politics around these interventions has become a major problem in itself and has actually increased the complexity and opacity of the shape and form of domestic enmity and confrontations.

National Military/Regime Military; Institutionalized Military/Patrimonialized Military

What were the factors that determined the decisions of the respective regimes and military at each of the critical junctures?

Three elements proved to be important at each of the three junctures. The first was the degree of institutionalization/patrimonialization of the military; the second was the composition of military, namely whether it was a tribal alliance or was singularly dominated by a specific social group mainly coalescing in line with sectarian affiliations; and the third was foreign intervention (or lack thereof) and its form. The *Chart* incorporates these three elements and illustrates the timelines and junctures for these six countries.

At the first juncture, the point where the military "shoots or does not shoot" at the protesters following the regime's orders, the key factor is the degree of institutionalization of the military and security apparatus. This is strongly influenced by whether the military and security apparatus are patrimonially constituted or not. Syria's President Bashar al-Assad was initially not considered as the successor to his predecessor and father Hafez al-Assad. He was educated as an ophthalmologist and was receiving training in London. However, when his older brother Basil, the presumed successor, died in an accident in 1994, he was quickly called back from London and named successor. He rose quickly in the military ranks, reaching lieutenant general. When the control of the military is at its core a family business, it can be called a patrimonially constituted military.

This contrasts with Egypt, where Gamal Mubarak, the second son of President Hosni Mubarak, has been groomed to be the successor since the turn of the century but was not given recognition as a military officer. Instead, Gamal rose quickly as an executive member of the National Democratic Party, the dominant political party. There was plenty of corruption and nepotism in the Egyptian state apparatus, but they do not appear to have reached that deeply into the military.

As the institutionalization of the military as an organization in the modern state progresses, officers and soldiers are recruited from all regions and strata of the country regardless of sects, tribes or kinship ties, promotion is based on merit, and there is no patrimonial control of the military by family members of the president, such a military can then claim to have the true features of a "national military". By contrast, when the military is arbitrarily controlled by the family members, other relatives and cronies of the supreme leader, and its commands are constituted and controlled by sectarian, tribal, regional, and patronage links, such a military has the features of a "regime military". From this perspective, it is clear that the Tunisian and Egyptian militaries clearly have the features of a "national military" while the militaries and security apparatus in the other four countries show obvious characteristics of a "regime military".

As a regime faces large-scale dissent from society at large and teeters on the brink of collapse, a "regime military" shoots citizens while a "national military" does not. As the six countries were placed in more or less the same situation, this point was clearly demonstrated as if it were a controlled experiment in political science.

Unity/Division within Military

The second juncture, whether or not unity within the military and security apparatus would be maintained, depends much on whether the composition of the military is founded on an alliance based on tribal, sectarian, regional and other social divisions or on more or less singular rule by a specific tribe or sectarian group on which the core of the regime is based.

Yemen had been under patrimonial domination based on the Saleh clan. The children and brothers of President Saleh dominated major positions in the military, General Ali Mohsen and other leaders of Saleh's fellow Sanhan tribesmen formed an alliance with them in controlling the main military commands, and leaders of the powerful Hashid tribal confederacy, to which the Sanhan tribe belonged, held major assignments such as the command of regional military districts. Since these military commands were constituted at the tribal level and the regime was supported by an intricate framework of alliances between the leaders of these tribes, the collapse of the alliance framework led to the collapse of the regime. However, if the new regime is constituted by a new set of tribal alliances, the nature of the new regime in Yemen will not be very different from that of the Saleh era.

By contrast, in Syria, the Alawites, who comprise only about 10% of the population, hold an overwhelming majority of the key positions in the military and the Baath Party security apparatus and exercise control, supported by some Sunnis and minority Christians and the like. Thus, they have been able to avert defections at the command level and worked to sustain their regime. However, since this generates enmity between the majority of Syrians and the sectarian supporters of the Assad regime, the short-term maintenance of the regime may lead to the collapse of the state and sectarian civil war in the long run.

Foreign Intervention (or Lack Thereof) & Its Form

The circumstances of foreign intervention, which comprise the next juncture, differ significantly from country to country. One important point here is that the effect of foreign intervention may not necessarily depend on the scale of the military pressure but most likely be related to the amount of leverage that the foreign countries have within the respective countries and regimes.

For example, the US did not openly request the Egyptian military to break away from the regime or threaten military intervention. However, the Egyptian military is sustained by US military support, and it must have assumed that it would be difficult to maintain its relationship with the US if it took action that was seriously at odds with American values. Moreover, the Egyptian military must have generated America-like professionalism through the cooperative relationship with the US military that had been built up since the Camp David Agreement in 1978. When US support wavered, that became the final, fatal blow to the continuation of the Mubarak regime.

By contrast, against a country like Syria, which has continuously been subjected to a variety of US sanctions and does not rely on US aid, the leverage of new sanctions is likely to be limited. One regime will show little effect from extremely severe sanctions from the outside while another will suffer fatal damage depending on the circumstances by small changes in the posture of a superstate.

Of course, the US is not the only source of foreign intervention, as other major powers such as Russia as well regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran also intervene.

Mutual influence and intervention among countries that are undergoing political change in the Arab Spring may also be important factors, although I have not given them sufficient attention in this paper. Egypt, where regime change is proceeding ahead of the other five, is now recovering its influence as a major player in regional politics. Its influence on the politics and the society of other Arab countries as well as its interaction with them should not be ignored.

Challenges Ahead

This paper has highlighted the decisive role that the different relationships between the regime and the military have played at critical junctures in the process of political change in the countries that have been shaken up by the Arab Spring. This sheds light on the directions of political change and the challenges ahead in the post-Arab Spring era.

In the case of Egypt and Tunisia, which managed to move on to "transition to the transition stage" relatively smoothly, the institutionalized military had kept a distance between the old regime and maintained the unity of the military and security apparatus. Here, when and how the role of the military as the guardians of the political process will be diminished pose a new and important challenge. In Tunisia, the military has maintained a low profile since the beginning of the collapse of the old regime and has not exercised any clear political powers. Therefore, the military does not constitute a major obstacle in this country's search for a new political system. By contrast, the military in Egypt had been the most competent and authoritative government institution, and temporarily assumed all authority of government when the Mubarak regime collapsed. This made the democratization process in Egypt a textbook case for the democratization theory put forward by Alfred C. Stepan based on the Latin American experience, Brazil's in particular. The Egyptian military as a government institution assumed the role of the military as government, not necessarily willingly. The challenge from hereon is how the political power of the military can be diminished, how to return it to the barracks. Muhammad Mursy of the Muslim Brotherhood, who assumed the presidency on June 30, issued multiple presidential decrees on Aug. 12 and dismissed top military officials, replacing them with younger generals. The democratization process is proceeding more rapidly than had been expected. Going forward, concern will grow over the possibility of the Muslim Brotherhood becoming too powerful.

In the other four countries, by contrast, the major challenges of the transition period are overcoming the patrimonial composition of the military and more broadly government as a whole and rebuilding the military as a truly institutionalized national military — in other words, to transform it from a military of the regime to a military of the people. This is a challenge that will require much more time to meet. These countries will have to undergo, at least in part, a new process of nation building while overcoming the problems that have accumulated through the preceding state formation process. In Yemen, clashes between forces controlled by Saleh's sons, brothers, nephews and other relatives on the one hand and tribal forces that broke away from the Saleh regime on the other are pushing what was already a schismatic state towards the danger of further division, while separatist movements in the northern and southern regions are stepping up activities. Al-Qaeda is threading its way through the breach to increase its influence. On Aug. 6, President Abd al-Rab Mansur al-Hadi initiated a major realignment of the military organization in an attempt to diminish the influence of Saleh's sons and relatives on the military. However, Saleh's allies are pushing back, and small armed clashes are occurring with frequency. Al-Qaeda attacks are growing, although the relationship between this and the ongoing situation is unclear.

Photo: aflo

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (R) shakes hands with United Arab Emirates (UAE) Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan, with British Foreign Secretary William Hague in the center, at the Friends of Syria Conference in Tunis on Feb. 24, 2012. Western and Arab nations are seeking an immediate ceasefire in Syria to allow aid to be delivered to desperate civilians as the nearly year-long rebellion continues.

In Libya, armed groups from the tribal and regional forces that contributed to toppling the Qaddafi regime are confronting each other, posing an obstacle to the development process of a new regime. Disarming militias and integrating them into a national military is a prerequisite for the establishment of a stable government.

In Syria, the patrimonially dominated military and security apparatus are currently in a state of direct military defiance against demands from the majority of the Syrian people to step down. The challenge in resolving the conflict is to eliminate or neutralize the military and security organizations one way or another. In Bahrain, factors for future armed confrontations are accumulating, as the patrimonial composition of the military is being reinforced even now by means such as South Asian mercenaries. JS

Satoshi Ikeuchi is associate professor at the Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology at the University of Tokyo. Among his prize-winning works in Japanese are Contemporary Arab Social Thought: Eschatology and Islamism (2002) *and* Methods of Discussing Islam (2009). *His articles on Middle Eastern politics have been published in two anthologies, and his literary-social reviews have appeared in numerous journals.*