The Arab uprisings have so far brought little change to the pattern of relations among countries of the MENA region. There has been no dramatic realignment of countries. Rather, the turmoil has largely confirmed old patterns, although making cleavages deeper and some relations even closer. A break in this remarkable picture of continuity in the region’s equilibria may eventually be caused by the conflict in Syria. While the responses of the regional actors so far conform to the established pattern of alliances and enmities, that conflict entails the possibility of a territorial rearrangement affecting Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. This paper analyses the factors that explain why relations among countries in the MENA region have remained quite consistent through a period of domestic political turmoil.

The Arab uprisings have so far brought little change to the pattern of relations among countries of the MENA region. There has been no dramatic realignment of countries. Rather, the turmoil has largely confirmed old patterns, although making cleavages deeper and some relations even closer.

This continuity should not be considered surprising. Domestic political change has been limited or non-existent in most countries. Contrary to the rhetoric, there have been no revolutions, and remarkably little reform, in the MENA region. The old ruling military and political establishments have reasserted their hold over Egypt, and the Moroccan monarchy is still firmly in control, the king’s power only marginally diminished by the 2011 constitution. The outcome of the Tunisian uprising remains uncertain at the time of this writing, but it will most likely be a compromise between a moderate Islamist party that cannot rule alone and an opposition that cannot sideline the Islamists. In Yemen, the former president has gone, but the new alliance of tribes and political groupings does not differ significantly from the previous one. President Muammar Qaddafi has been overthrown in Libya and his idiosyncratic regime has gone with him, but Libya has never been an important player in the politics of the region, despite Qaddafi’s inordinate ambition. Furthermore, most countries of the MENA region have experienced no domestic change at all.

A break in this remarkable picture of continuity in the region’s equilibria may eventually be caused by the conflict in Syria. While the responses of the regional actors so far conform to the established pattern of alliances and enmities, that conflict entails the possibility of a territorial rearrangement affecting Syria, Iraq and Lebanon – often referred to as the end of the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement. Should that happen – and this does not appear likely at this time – the equilibrium in the Levant might be affected.

Continuity in the Levant and the Gulf

Nothing has changed in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the eternal epicenter of the region. The two sides are as far from reaching an agreement as they have been in the past, despite valiant recent attempts by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry to revive the peace process. The two sides are as far apart as ever on the issue of boundaries, the status of Jerusalem, the Palestinian refugees’ right of return, and the future of West Bank settlement blocks. If anything, there has been a hardening in the position of Israel while
the Palestinian side remains divided, with Fatah suffering a crisis of leadership and Hamas in limbo. As a result, an increasing number of politicians and analysts are questioning the viability of the two-state solution, but without being able to offer alternatives likely to be acceptable to all sides: a single state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean in which Palestinians enjoy full rights would not be acceptable to Israel because it would mark the end of the Jewish state, while one in which Palestinians are second class citizens would do nothing to stop the conflict.

The second flash point in the Levant is Syria. The civil war raging in the country has turned into a three-way conflict with no end in sight. What started as an attempt to put an end to the regime of Bashar al-Assad has turned into a war in which radical Islamist and moderate secular organizations wage their own separate battles against Assad, but are also fighting each other for control of the territory lost by the Syrian government.

This three-way struggle has pulled in other regional actors on the basis of pre-existing ties and enmities. Iran continues to support Assad, as it did in the past, as part of its attempt to extend its influence in the region by exploiting religious affinity. Syria’s Alawite minority, the backbone of the Assad regime, is not strictly Shia theologically speaking, but has long been Shia in terms of political alignments. Iran also continues to support Hezbollah in Lebanon, not surprisingly because it helped create the movement in the first place. What is new, however, is that Hezbollah has gone beyond being in the same political camp as Iran and Syria, but is actively fighting in Syria, deploying in a conflict among Arabs the “weapons of the resistance” it always claimed would be used only against Israel.

The Syrian conflict has also sharpened the lines of conflict between the Assad regimes and the Sunni Arab monarchies of the Gulf, but without changing the underlying alignments. Gulf countries have long been fearful of Iranian influence – or hegemonic aspirations as they see it – in the Gulf and the Levant. With Iran openly backing Assad, Gulf countries were bound to take a stand against him, but that stand has been surprisingly forceful. Saudi Arabia and Qatar in particular have provided financial support and facilitated the purchase of weapons by Assad’s opponents. The usually guarded and prudent Saudi royal family has been uncharacteristically outspoken on this matter, berating Assad and even castigating the United States and other Western countries for refusing to intervene or even provide weapons to the insurgents.
For two of Syria’s neighbors, Iraq and Lebanon, the war has become a domestic challenge even more than a matter affecting their foreign alignments. Both countries are deeply divided along sectarian lines, and the increasingly sectarian conflict next door is exacerbating domestic fissures. Hezbollah’s open intervention in Syria, coupled with the staggering inflow of refugees (over 800,000 in a country of some 4 million), both destabilize the ever fragile confessional balance in the country and deepen the contrast between the traditional Western-oriented foreign policy of the Lebanese government and the diametrically opposite stance of Hezbollah, which is also part of the government. While Lebanon has weathered paradoxical situations before, it could be headed for a major crisis. 

Sectarian conflicts in Iraq are also deeply affected by the war in Syria, and this is reflected in the country’s foreign policy. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, Iraq after the American withdrawal drifted toward the Iranian camp while also seeking to maintain some appearance of normal relations with the Gulf countries and Turkey. Those efforts have now ceased, with Iraq openly supporting Assad and thus incurring the ire of the Gulf countries and, increasingly, Turkey. Domestically, too, the Maliki regime became more openly Shia and as a result the Sunni population feels increasingly marginalized. This is reflected in the resurgence of violence perpetrated by radical Sunni organizations in Iraq, and these groups now openly participate in the war against Assad in Syria. Like Lebanon, Iraq now has two policies toward Syria, that of the government, which backs Assad, and that of radical Islamists, who are fighting against him.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS, is a spinoff from the defunct Al-Qaeda in Iraq, an organization the United States had tried to dismantle. Al-Qaeda consolidated after the US withdrawal and at present is the major security challenge to Iraq, with almost daily terrorist attacks that made some 1,000 victims in September 2013 alone. In April 2013, Al-Qaeda in Iraq announced a merger with Jabhat al-Nusra, one of the most successful fighting groups in Syria. Jabhat al-Nusra rejected the merger, seeing it as an attempted take-over. The two organizations have been fighting each other since then, despite sharing the same ideological orientation.

The Case of Turkey

The exception to this general pattern in which turmoil in the Levant is confirming rather than altering old relations across the
region is Turkey. In 2003, the government of Recep Tayyp Erdogan proclaimed a policy of “zero problems with neighbors.” Based on the thinking of Foreign Minister Ahmed Davutoglu and reflecting the requirements of a booming, export-oriented economy, Turkey decided to disregard ideological and political differences with neighboring countries, concentrating instead on business relations. It sought to maintain good relations with both Iran and Iraq. It attempted to become the major investment and business partner for Kurdistan, whose autonomy from Baghdad fell just short of independence, and to do so without alienating the Iraqi government. Turkish companies headed by pious Islamists opened factories in Egypt even as the Mubarak government kept thousands of Muslim Brothers in jail. Turkey also established strong trading ties with Syria, lifting visa requirements and becoming the shopping destination of choice for Syrians living sufficiently close to the border. The exception to this good-neighbor policy was the relationship with Israel, which had been close before the AKP came to power, but worsened steadily as ties to Arab countries became warmer.

As the region became more polarized, particularly with the war in Syria, Turkey was forced to abandon its policy. In part, it became impossible to maintain equally good relations with countries in conflict with each other. In part, Erdogan started following his own ideological preferences. He praised the Arab uprisings and the victories of Islamist parties in Tunisia and Egypt, angering Gulf countries. Above all, he turned openly against the Assad regime, advocating regime change, opening the door not only to refugees but also to representatives of the armed opposition. The foreign policy of Turkey, in conclusion, was deeply changed by the events triggered by the Arab uprisings.

Egypt and the Maghreb

In the less than three years since the fall of Mubarak in February 2011, Egypt has experienced the overthrow of its president, 18 months of military rule, a year under the Muslim Brotherhood, and a military coup d’état that de facto restored the old regime, but with an even more prominent role for the military. Egypt’s foreign policy hardly changed through the entire period. The fears that the Muslim Brotherhood would renege on the Camp David Peace Agreement with Israel, turn against the United States, and even pull closer to the Islamic Republic of Iran proved unfounded.

The Muslim Brotherhood made some marginal changes in Egypt’s
policy. For example, it continued the attempts to mediate between Hamas and Fatah in Palestine first undertaken by the Mubarak regime, but while President Mubarak had always been closer to Fatah, the Muslim Brotherhood was more sympathetic to Hamas and more inclined to keep the Gaza border crossings open.

The few changes were quickly reversed by the military after the July 2013 coup and Egypt’s foreign policy returned to the well-established pattern: a cold but enduring peace with Israel; great caution in the relationship with Hamas; frequent closing of the Gaza crossings and more energetic attempts to shut down the smuggling tunnels that are Gaza’s lifeline; hostility toward Iran; friendly relations, driven by increasing dependence, with Saudi Arabia and Gulf countries other than Qatar (guilty of having supported the Muslim Brotherhood government); and the attempt to restore the so-called strategic relation with the United States to what it was before 2011.

The foreign policy orientations of Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco have not been significantly affected either, whether toward one another or toward countries outside the region. (Libya will not be discussed here because the absence of a government truly in control makes such discussion moot).

Despite some initial hopes of the United States that the domestic political openings in Tunisia and to some extent Morocco would lead to improved relations among Maghreb countries and to the revival of the frozen Arab Maghreb Union, the situation is unchanged. Tunisia remains open to regional cooperation, but the long-standing hostility between Morocco and Algeria has not abated, precluding progress. Outside the region, all three countries are economically oriented toward Europe – a Free Trade Agreement between Morocco and the United States has not altered the situation much. Tunisia and Morocco are also politically oriented toward Europe and the United States. In fact, they would like more U.S. involvement and complain of neglect. Algeria remains standoffish, as it has been since independence in 1962, and its relations with France continue to be affected by still-smoldering resentments generated during the colonial period and the war for independence.

Conclusions

Several factors explain why relations among countries in the MENA region have remained quite consistent through a period of domestic political turmoil.
The first is that the turmoil, while considerable, has not so far led to clear political change in most countries, including those where presidents have been deposed. Many Arab regimes, Egypt’s most dramatically, have proven to be more resilient than their presidents, ensuring de facto continuity.

A second factor is the depth of sectarian divisions, which limits the extent to which countries can realign their friendships and forgo their enmities. It is intellectually more satisfying to explain a country’s policies in grand geopolitical terms rather than on the basis of sectarianism, but the reality tends to be simpler. It was impossible for Egypt under the Muslim Brotherhood to befriend Iran because Iran is a Shia country and Egypt a Sunni nation, and neither the Muslim Brotherhood nor the ayatollahs could disregard this. It would be equally difficult for Turkey to ignore the ties developing between Maliki and Tehran. And as long as Syria is ruled by an Alawite government it will have no choice but to be an ally of Iran.

There are also state interests that encourage continuity of policies through changes of government. It would be extremely difficult for any government in Egypt to renege the Camp David agreement and risk conflict with Israel. And there is no reason why the Moroccan king, after having introduced modest political reforms to maintain domestic peace, should be willing to negotiate with Algeria the outstanding issues, including the annexation of the Western Sahara, that stand in the way of economic cooperation.

Major political realignments in the MENA region thus appear extremely unlikely at present. A change in regional equilibria would require the deep regime changes the region has not experienced so far.