

Also in this section:  
 Islamists in retreat 80  
 Just possibly... 80  
 Africa's economic stars 81

Imposing peace in  
 Congo 82  
 Lighting up Africa 84

# Middle East and Africa



## The people still want a bigger say

Xan Smiley

The coming year will surely be better for most of the Arab world

**A**fter the democracy-heralding euphoria of 2011 and the heroic struggles in 2012 to keep up the momentum towards political reform, in 2013 the Arab world fell back into a mood of misery and chaos. Egypt reverted to military rule, Syria got sucked into an ever-bloodier civil war, and post-tyrannical progress in Libya and Tunisia wobbled and stalled. For sure, instability and uncertainty will prevail across the region in the year ahead too. But there is a modest chance that 2014 will bring a general improvement. It could hardly be worse.

In **Egypt** two tasks await the generals who, with broad popular support, squelched a failing democratic experiment in July 2013. First, they must allow both parliamentary and presidential elections to be held in the first half of 2014. Second, in the likely enforced absence of the Muslim Brothers from the voting lists (see next article), they must persuade at least some Islamists to run. Despite his denials in 2013, it is possible that General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the power behind the throne, will put himself forward for the presidency.

The key to progress, whatever his formal position,

is that he allows a genuine system of democratic checks and balances to emerge. It will also be crucial that whoever runs Egypt embarks on drastic and brave structural reforms, including the phasing out of many subsidies, a prerequisite for rescuing the economy.

The civil war in **Syria** may start to burn itself out. Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar will not allow the rebels to lose; in any event, Bashar Assad's regime is unlikely to achieve an outright win. The country may settle into three more or less self-contained but hostile chunks: a western one run mainly by Mr Assad's Alawite minority, stretching from Damascus down to the sect's coastal and mountainous homeland near Latakia, while the rebels hold much of the north, centre and east, and Syria's Kurds have the north-east. Expect the rivalry between jihadist rebels and less Islamist ones to worsen.

If, however improbably, the Americans cut a deal with **Iran** over its nuclear programme, the chances of a Syrian settlement supervised by America and Russia could sharply improve too, as the Iranians become joiners rather than spoilers in regional diplomacy. And if a new mood of compromise spreads, the chances of a deal between **Israel** and the **Palestinians** could even rise as well. If, on the other hand, the bloodshed in Syria intensifies, the violence could spill over into its uneasy smaller neighbours, multi-sectarian **Lebanon** and poor **Jordan**, always reliant on backing from America and the Saudis.

**The civil war in Syria may start to burn itself out**

### 2014 IN BRIEF

Pope Francis makes his first official visit to the Holy Land

Xan Smiley:  
 Middle East and  
 Africa editor,  
 The Economist

## Oh, Brothers

Max Rodenbeck CAIRO

### Islamists in retreat everywhere

Two years ago it was easy to spot the winning political trend in the Middle East. The wave of change brought by the Arab spring favoured the fortunes of Islamists, and one strand in particular. Patient and disciplined by years of repression, the Muslim Brotherhood and its many offshoots, all from the centrist part of the Islamist spectrum, seemed to meet with success everywhere.

Affiliated parties won the first free elections in Egypt and Tunisia. Brotherhood-backed rebel groups, bolstered by regional players such as Turkey and Qatar, looked set to emerge triumphant from the armed revolts of Libya and Syria. Even states that were not touched by revolution manoeuvred to parry the challenge: King Mohammed VI of Morocco, for instance, held his nose and appointed a mild-mannered Islamist as prime minister. A creeping, region-wide trend towards Islamist dominance that had started with the 1979 Iranian revolution and gained momentum with the more recent electoral triumph of Islamists in places such as Iraq, Palestine and Turkey appeared to be consolidating.

But the seemingly inexorable rise of the Brotherhood, which was founded in Egypt in 1928, has abruptly stopped. A precipitous slide in the popularity of Muhammad Morsi, the Brotherhood man elected Egypt's president in 2012, paved the way for a military coup in July 2013. A few months later Tunisia's Nahda party bowed to similar public pressure. The Brothers in Libya and Syria lost strength, too. Rich and influential countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, whose leaders deeply distrust the Brotherhood, financed their rivals as Turkey and Qatar faded from the scene.

By the end of 2013 the Brothers were everywhere in retreat. This was clearest in Egypt, where the broad public looked on with indifference as the new authorities killed hundreds of Brotherhood protesters and chucked its leaders in jail. It seems Egyptians had voted for the Brothers not to endorse their "Islamist project" but in the hope that they might bring better gov-

ernment, which Mr Morsi failed to do.

The Brotherhood in Jordan, long the country's most powerful opposition group, has split into feuding hardline and reformist factions, a fate that may await affiliates elsewhere. In places where the state has collapsed, such as Syria, more radical Islamists, including jihadist factions, have captured the initiative from the Brothers. Where states have remained strong, non-Islamist forces, including the pre-revolutionary power elite in countries such as Tunisia, have regained strength.

What this augurs for the future is deepening polarisation. Some countries will experience intensified competition between a hardened Islamist core and a determined secularising trend. In other places, sectarian divisions, especially between Sunni and Shia Muslims, will be the main source of friction. In either case, for much of the region no shore of peace and tranquillity will be reached in 2014. ■

Max Rodenbeck: Middle East correspondent, *The Economist*



Morsi code

### 2014 IN BRIEF

Nigeria celebrates 100 years as a unified country



The fortunes of **Iraq** in 2014 will also, to a degree, depend on Syria. If the Syrian civil war worsens, sectarian strife in Iraq, whose dominant Shias feel a kinship with Syria's Alawites, could put an end to the American-created democracy. Come what may, Iraq's **Kurds** should manage to hang on to, and perhaps even entrench, their treasured autonomy.

Elsewhere, there is more ground for hope. Noting the fate of their Islamist brethren in Egypt, **Tunisia's** Nahda party will seek to compromise with more secular groups and trade unionists to keep the country's messy new democracy alive. In **Libya** the plethora of militias defying the authority of the central government must be curbed. Elections in both countries might keep them heading in the right direction. Fingers crossed.

Farther west, **Morocco's** monarch will hold the line with canny constitutional tweaks, while **Algeria** may at last loosen up a little as President Bouteflika's health fails and a succession struggle sharpens. It would boost both

countries' economies enormously if they reopened their border, which has been huffily closed since 1994.

**Yemen** got rid of its long-standing dictator, Ali Abdullah Saleh, in 2012. His successor, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, will struggle to forge a national consensus, as southern secessionists, northern rebels and al-Qaeda-linked jihadists undermine the central government.

After 24 years in power **Sudan's** president, Omar al-Bashir, will face growing opposition, not just on the streets but perhaps even in the bosom of his ruling party.

The Gulf monarchs, with the exception of Shia-majority **Bahrain**, will keep dissent at bay. But the succession crisis in **Saudi Arabia**, by far the biggest and beefiest of the Gulf monarchies, may rumble more loudly under the surface, unless King Abdullah makes it clear that a younger generation of princes must be allowed to take over after his fraternal successor, Prince Salman.

Many will say that the Arab spring is well and truly over. They are wrong. The Arab awakening, always a better description, has forced the Arab world to change, mainly for the better, despite the massive recent disappointments of Syria and Egypt, uncertainties elsewhere and continuing autocracy in the Gulf. Social media and the internet have revolutionised Arab minds. The ability of the crowds in Cairo's Tahrir Square to bring down both a military government and—with help from the generals—an Islamist one has given people a new thirst for having a say in who rules them. There will be plenty of evidence, in 2014, that this has yet to be slaked. ■

### Just possibly...

**Barack Obama** makes an historic visit to Tehran for talks on Iran's nuclear programme.

**Saudi Arabia** at last gives **women drivers** the green light.

Someone is awarded the **Mo Ibrahim** prize for good governance in Africa, which has failed to find a worthy winner in four of the past five years.