

AMERICA AND THE REGIONAL POWERS IN A TRANSFORMING MIDDLE EAST

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Not many people have ever called the United States “nimble” in dealing with change in the Middle East. During the Cold War, it was the locals who exploited both superpowers, playing them off against each other to advance their own interests, while Washington and Moscow stared each other down. The end of the Cold War freed America to act with fewer constraints in the region. Freedom from fear of the other superpower’s reaction bred recklessness under Bush II, producing the catastrophe of the Iraq invasion, from which the United States is still recovering. But the end of the Cold War has meant something different during the Obama administration. The flexibility and nuance of its reactions to the Arab upheavals of 2011 reflect a focus on changes in the region itself rather than calculations in a game with the Soviets or leftover ideological commitments to American hegemony. As people-power with an Islamic face sweeps away regime after regime in the Middle East, and as the long-feared implications of nuclear proliferation pose direct, real-

time challenges to U.S. interests and allies, traditional American policies relying on “authoritarian stability” and Israeli military preponderance have come under serious strain. Fortunately, the current administration has demonstrated the savvy necessary to adapt to these transformations. However, Washington still faces challenges it may not know how to meet.

Uncharacteristically for any great power operating in the Middle East, the United States seems to be performing considerably better than most of the regional powers, who have seemed particularly awkward in their responses to regime transformations and continuing turbulence. Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran are all viewing regional events through old prisms. Israel operates as if caught in a nineteenth-century time warp of romantic nationalism and the confrontation of Jews with the vicious forms of anti-Semitism unleashed in a rapidly modernizing Europe. Key Zionist principles of Jewish self-reliance, national egoism and opportunistic expansionism that served the Jewish nationalist movement well in its

heroic period are dangerously out of place in the rapidly changing Middle East. Yet these principles seem to hold Israeli political culture and the outlook of many Israeli leaders in an iron grip. Saudi Arabia sees the region through the bifocal lens of monarchical solidarity and an increasingly sectarian conflict with Iran for regional influence. Iran, which one might assume would be the regional power best suited to take advantage of revolutionary upheaval, has been flummoxed by the changes in the Arab world. Tehran has stuck by its blood-soaked Syrian ally and continues to roll back freedoms at home while resorting to increasingly tired anti-American and anti-Zionist tropes to rally support domestically and regionally. Only Turkey has nimbly adjusted to the Arab Spring, pivoting from a policy of “zero problems with neighbors” that led it to good state-to-state relations with Assad, Qadhafi and Israel, to a stance in support of democratic change in the region. Having undergone its own democratic transition, however imperfect, Turkey is best-positioned of the regional powers to play a leading role in a more democratic Middle East.

None of this is to say that balance-of-power politics or sectarianism is unimportant as the Arab Spring works itself out. Israeli power, Saudi money and Iranian ties with Shia groups will all influence events as they develop. But none of these states seem to grasp that a major shift is occurring in the region toward political systems where the consent of the governed is necessary for stable domestic politics and where public opinion plays a much greater role in the making of foreign policy.

AMERICA AND THE ARAB SPRING

The Cold War locked the attention of the Soviet Union and the United States onto

one another. Each sought to gain advantage in Third World regions or to prevent the other from doing so. Secure against other adversaries, leaders in Washington and Moscow had neither the incentive nor the attention span to exercise prudent and careful judgment in every international backwater where their rivalry appeared. The pervasiveness of their competition and, relative to the scale of local resources, the immense size of these Gullivers, created irresistible opportunities for Lilliputians to exploit great-power ignorance of local affairs and need for local allies.

Exploitation of the strong by the weak in those circumstances was enabled by an asymmetry of political agility, with local actors able to maneuver fluidly and play the superpowers off against each other in ways that often baffled and frustrated the clumsy, slow-to-learn, intercontinental behemoths. But the Cold War ended two decades ago. Now, as the world changes in the Middle East, the United States, at least, seems quite ready to adapt to change and even welcome it. The Obama administration’s foreign policy in the region is based on two fundamental assessments:

- the region is important, but few developments in it are potential threats to American vital interests;
- multilateral responses to middle-range problems, even if imperfect, are much preferred over the direct and public commitment of U.S. military resources.

The Obama administration displayed agility in its calibrated response to Libya and its differentiated responses to unrest in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria. This stands in sharp and, historically speaking, ironic contrast with the responses of key regimes in the region faced with

upheavals and transformations that render old policies and stances irrelevant and even dangerous.

It is true that in special cases — such as Cuba and Israel — where vital organs of domestic American politics are touched by foreign affairs, American policy seems as hidebound and irrational today as was the norm in Third World areas during the Cold War. Indeed, with regard to Israel, it would be easy to make the *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* point by citing

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's defeat of American efforts to use a moratorium on

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settlements in the West Bank to re-set the “peace process.” But in the contemporary Middle East, that would be mistaking the forest for one tree. The Iraq War — understood, according to the Vietnam model, to have been a stupendous error of strategic judgment and political hubris — is ending; NATO involvement in Afghanistan is winding down; and the “War on Terror” is being downshifted to a campaign of law enforcement and counterterror specialists. Thus, it is clear that the United States (at least under a second Obama administration) will not make nearly the number of errors of over-involvement in the Middle East that it did during the Cold War and the subsequent two decades.

In every region of the world, this adjustment will face distinctive challenges, partly as a function of the special characteristics and history of different regions and partly as a consequence of the special relationships that the United States, or key American constituencies, have with

local actors. A major Middle Eastern test of a new American approach will be Iran. In the early 1950s, the British put heavy pressure on the United States to pull their chestnuts out of the fire in Iran, where a democratically elected government under Muhammad Mossadegh had nationalized the assets of the oil company that later became British Petroleum. After resisting these pressures for some time, American leaders succumbed to arguments from Britain and pro-shah elements inside Iran

that, even if Mossadegh himself was not a communist, the risk that his policies could bring in-

stability and open opportunities for the communist Tudeh party was unacceptable. Once the Dulles brothers [John Foster and Allen] took charge of the foreign-policy and intelligence apparatus in Washington, it was enough to get us on board. The CIA-engineered overthrow of Mossadegh in 1953 and his replacement with the shah was a classic example of a manipulation by Lilliputians that led, a quarter of a century later, to the Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution and a real disaster for American interests in the region.

The problem posed for Washington in Iran currently is a striking example of how history, not repeating itself, nevertheless often rhymes. U.S. decision makers are confronting an intense campaign of public and private pressure, originating in Israel and from many of Israel's supporters in the United States, reinforced by some of America's Gulf allies, to “do something” about Iran. That “something” differs, among the advocates, from regime change

to carrying out, participating in, or at least authorizing an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities. Once again, the specter of a totalitarian threat to the civilized world is portrayed as rising in Tehran — Red Communism in 1953, tyrannical Islamist fundamentalism in 2012. Debates rage, simulations are performed and wagers are made on insider.com. Will the United States and/or Israel attack Iran this year? The very fact that this is an issue of explicit and regular discussion is a major success for the Netanyahu government. It is a substantial justification for wondering if, indeed, the United States is more capable of implementing policies tailored to its interests now than it was during the Cold War or in Iraq during the George W. Bush administrations.

We think it is. Despite this being an election year, when the leverage of Israeli governments over U.S. foreign policy is greatest, the United States will not attack Iran. The Obama administration is proving to be less susceptible to manipulation by its local allies than past administrations were, recognizing that its broader interests in a changing Middle East cannot be secured by military adventures. If such an attack does occur, it will be carried out by Israel against an American red light, not encouraged by an American green or yellow light. The administration's quiet but determined diplomacy has restrained Israel, while simultaneously implementing what is perhaps the most sophisticated and effective array of economic sanctions ever imposed on a country as large and important as Iran. It has organized a broad international front against Iranian proliferation and increased the pressure on Tehran at every level. It might not succeed, in the end, in preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear-weapons capability. But its approach has a much

greater chance of success in preventing a nuclearized military confrontation in the region than a military strike that would unite Iranians (at least temporarily) behind their government, end domestic differences over nuclear strategy and, at best, set back its program a few years.

In a broader context, the Iran case signifies that the United States is finding it easier to adapt to the disappearance of the old order in the Middle East than are local allies whose fundamental political logics are contradicted by twenty-first-century winds of change. Under this president, the United States is neither paralyzed against action out of fear of error, nor misled into a simplistic and dangerously uniform “doctrine.” For evidence of the agility of American policy in the Middle East under the Obama administration, consider the degree to which policies in Iraq, Libya, Egypt and Syria have been specifically tailored to the challenges, opportunities and constraints those very different settings present, much as the administration's approach to the Iranian nuclear issue has been.

- In Iraq, the Obama administration skillfully implemented the Bush administration's agreement with Baghdad on the withdrawal of American forces. In the face of calls from discredited Iraq War hawks in Washington to set the agreement aside, the administration appropriately let the Iraqi political process, as messy as it is, work the issue out itself. Trying to impose a continued American military presence on a reluctant, democratically elected Iraqi government would have been the height of folly in the new Middle East of the Arab Spring.
- In Egypt, a truly revolutionary but still uncertain political transformation

required simultaneously delicate processes: disengaging from our longstanding but increasingly counterproductive relationship with the Mubarak regime; standing in support of reformist change by the secular-liberal minority in Egypt that Americans naturally identify with; constraining the instincts of Egyptian generals reluctant to cede their economic and political dominance; and breaking new political and diplomatic ground by establishing working relationships with the Muslim Brothers, who will shape the long-term

meaning of Egyptian democracy.

- In Libya, the administration successfully trod a narrow path between a too-forward, overly American, effort to take charge of events and a mushy multilateralism. It would not have worked had it not been for the kind of behind-the-scenes leadership that Washington alone could exercise.
- In Syria and in the United Nations Security Council, the administration faces the kind of blockage of international action in protection of outrageous policies by Russia and China that the world is accustomed to experiencing at the hands of American vetoes regarding Israeli actions. Be that as it may, forceful and multilateral diplomacy by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is showing some on-the-ground results and is sending appropriate signals to the world, to the Syrian opposition and to the Asad regime. The message is this: the regime cannot rely on Russian and Chinese vetoes to protect it forever; the civilized world

will find ways to empower the Syrian opposition; but only a united opposition in Syria, capable of offering assurances to regime supporters, will be capable of achieving its goals.

ISRAEL, IRAN AND THE ARAB SPRING

The exaggerated responses Israeli elites have displayed toward Iran’s policy of nuclear ambiguity have been seen by some as designed to disrupt sustained international, and especially American,

attention to the Palestinian problem. But it would be an error to understand Israel’s public Iranophobia simply as

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a stalling tactic in the “peace process.”

Israelis are afflicted by a fear of the future. Few Israelis, and even fewer Israeli leaders, are able to portray a future for their country that is both satisfying to them and believed to be attainable. The dominant trope among the center-right and hard-right elites in the country is that Israel is a “villa in the jungle”; it will have to engage in a competition in brutality with enemies whose hatred for Jews and for Israel is so deep that compromises are simply down payments on suicide. If this is not seen officially as a permanent state of affairs, it is treated as if it were. Among other things, this depressing assessment helps explain a drop to near zero in Israel’s Jewish migration balance. The best-educated, most liberal and secular Israelis are emigrating in disproportionate numbers, and surveys show large minorities of Israelis actively considering it.

Aside from the tragic and bloody end to the Oslo process, and the deep scars it left on both Israelis and Palestinians, the mood in Israel is also explained by the inability to draw reassurance from the traditional postures of Zionism and the ringing slogans of its heroes. Herzl's Zionism began with the assumption that the homelessness of the Jews was a special and vital problem for the international community and that it would go to great lengths, including imposing a Jewish state on resisting (Arab) locals, in order to solve it. Shockingly, the international community now seems to treat the homelessness of the Palestinians as a special problem requiring global intervention and, possibly, imposition of a settlement against the will of the (Jewish) locals. Rather than riding a wave of sympathy and support for Zionism as a solution to the worldwide problem of anti-Semitism — and despite huge investments in “re-branding” efforts — the policies of the Israeli government toward the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, Hamas in Gaza, and the Arab citizens of Israel, have triggered a rapidly spreading international wave of sympathy and mobilization for the Palestinians. This includes a campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions that seeks not just an end to the occupation, but in some cases the delegitimization of Israel as a Jewish state.

Early Zionists imagined the Jewish state as a modern democracy serving as a rampart of Western civilization against the barbarian east. Eventually, it was expected, the region would modernize, Westernize and democratize, in the process becoming like Israel and accepting of and even grateful for its presence. In this context, it is deeply disturbing to Israelis that both modernization and democracy have come to Turkey, but the result has been intensified

opposition to and even hatred of Israel. The Arab Spring may or may not bring democracy to the region, but it has removed dictators with whom Israel knew how to cooperate. In post-Mubarak Egypt, it is becoming evident that popular beliefs and passions will have greater influence over foreign policy in the Muslim Middle East. This will likely mean a stronger commitment to Palestinian demands and less tolerance for backroom security cooperation with Israel or for winking at Israeli uses of force in Gaza or Lebanon. Zionism was based on the fundamental idea that, in a Jewish state in the Middle East, Jews would finally be physically secure against threats to their existence. But now, with Iran coyly and infuriatingly combining Holocaust rhetoric with nuclear opacity, Israelis feel deep in their core the reality that, of all the places in the world where Jews live, the one place they really could be exposed to a threat to their physical existence is Israel.

One might imagine that the severity of the challenges facing Israel, and the irrelevance of Zionist ideological principles as effective road maps for negotiating contemporary political realities, will lead Israel to consider fairly radical and substantive changes in the policies that have produced its current predicament. So far, however, there is little sign of this. The dominant discourse within the country is that the opprobrium with which its leaders are confronted in much of the world is the product of ingrained anti-Semitism and a fundamentally irrational hatred that is unresponsive to any changes in Israeli behavior. Unless Israelis can learn to see their world, their predicament and their future prospects with less reliance on ideological maps of a time and of problems long gone, they will not be able to adjust to the rapid changes now occurring in the region.

TURKEY, SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN

While the focus of outsiders' attention during 2011 was rightly on the popular upheavals and dramatic political changes occurring in the domestic politics of Arab states, a less obvious struggle was continuing for political influence among three major regional states: Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry has its origins in the balance-of-power politics of the Persian Gulf and has now extended throughout the greater Middle East to include the Levant, Afghanistan and Pakistan. While at its core an old-fashioned struggle for state influence, it is overlaid by the sectarian split between Sunnis and Shia. Each side finds allies, usually among its fellow sectarians, in

the fragmented politics of weak Arab states like Lebanon and Iraq. The AKP government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey entered the regional game more recently, seeking a return to a position of influence in a region consciously ignored by the secularist Turkish elites of the Ataturk era. Erdogan's highest-profile play in this regard was to take a hard line against Israel, appealing to both domestic and regional public opinion. But his policy more generally was built on the principle of "zero problems with neighbors," or at least minimal ones. Successes of this policy included improved bilateral relations with Greece, Syria and Iran and a shift toward embracing rather than isolating the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq. The policy undoubtedly had long-term strategic

implications, but it was also very good for the dynamic Turkish business sector, which increased trade and investment all over the region. Ankara had excellent relations with both Qadhafi's Libya and Asad's Syria before 2011, and Turkish firms were making hay while the sun shone in both countries.

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran reacted predictably to the Arab Spring, seeing it as nothing more than a new round in their increasingly sectarian battle for regional influence. If a troubled regime was an ally, they were with it; if not, they were against it. Iran crowed over the fall of Ben Ali in

Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt, contending that the Arab Spring was actually an Islamic Spring, the long-

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expected regional ripple effect of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. But it has stood steadfastly by its ally in Damascus while Asad fights to hold on to power. Saudi Arabia was stunned by the fall of Mubarak, its most important Arab ally, and blamed the United States for not doing enough to keep him in power. When popular mobilization in the neighboring kingdom of Bahrain seemed to be pushing the king and his crown prince toward some kind of compromise with the opposition, Saudi troops entered the country to support the harder-line faction of the ruling family and back the Bahraini armed forces' suppression of the demonstrations. But Riyadh has been in the lead in calling for an end to the Asad regime and its replacement by a more "representative" government.

Both the Saudis and the Iranians are dumbfounded by the democratic wave in the Arab world. Both deal with their own politics in anti-democratic ways — the Khamenei regime through increasing repression and manipulation of the democratic elements of the Islamic Republican system. Not particularly responsive to public opinion at home, they were out of their depth as popular movements swept the region. The participation and success of *salafi* Muslims at the ballot box in Egypt, where they took about 25 percent of the seats in the new parliament, are profoundly disquieting to the Saudi elite that has justified its undemocratic rule by reference to *salafi* interpretations of Islam. The Iranians were happy to bring together representatives of Arab opposition groups in Tehran in late January 2012, but banned the press when the absence of Syrian opposition figures was very publicly noted by their fellow conferees.¹ For each, the Arab Spring was simply a new phase of their regional power game. They little appreciated the fact that the playing field might be changing profoundly. How the two will deal with democratic polities, in which public opinion could become as important as sectarian identity in driving politics, remains to be seen.

Only the Turks have demonstrated any appreciation of the nature of the changes occurring around them. Despite a significant Turkish economic stake in Qadhafi's Libya, Ankara eventually abandoned the colonel's regime and supported the international efforts to back the Libyan opposition. Erdogan had publicly paraded his friendship with Bashar al-Asad in the past, but that did not stop him from giving elements of the Syrian opposition safe haven in Turkey and publicly calling for the Syrian leader to step down. His visits to Tu-

nisia, Libya and Egypt in September 2011, during which he presented the Turkish experience with democracy and moderate Islamism as a model for the region, had all the trappings of a victory tour. Perhaps the Turkish ability to read regional currents is simply a matter of more skillful leadership than that found in Iran and Saudi Arabia, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that dealing with democratic politics at home gives a country's elite a better feel for the importance of democratic and popular movements abroad. Turkey has certainly emerged from this phase of the Arab Spring with its regional standing enhanced, something no other Middle Eastern state can claim.

Good feelings and "soft power" are certainly not everything in Middle East regional politics. Iran and Saudi Arabia still have plenty of cards to play in the unfolding of the Arab Spring. But, if the Arab world does become more democratic, we should expect popularly elected Arab governments to look more toward Ankara for partnership, even leadership, than toward Tehran or Riyadh.

CONCLUSION

The best theories of democracy explain its evolution as a second-best option embraced by opponents stalemated in their hopes to achieve domination of the state. In other words, democracy is seldom "built." It emerges, from messy, often violent or semi-violent struggles, as in the French Revolution or the English and American civil wars. What we are witnessing in the Middle East is but the opening act in an unfolding drama whose denouement can scarcely be anticipated in any detail. It is possible that the democratic hopes raised by Tunisia and Egypt might be dashed by civil strife and inept governance. Perhaps

the upheavals of 2011 will simply lead to the replacement of one set of authoritarians by another. If that is the case, then the old patterns of dictatorial alliances and regional power balancing will continue to serve the regional states' interests, and Washington will play *realpolitik*, as it has in the past.

But the Arab Spring may indeed enable the kind of mobilization of real contending social forces necessary to create the basis for democratic evolution. Such regimes as may arise from these struggles will likely produce foreign policies more responsive to democratic Islamism and popular opinion than ever before. Autocratic Saudi Arabia and theocratic Iran will find that their

sectarian strategies avail them less and less. And if Israel cannot find ways to tap the creativity of its own democratic instincts, its ideological and cultural rigidity will lead to even greater isolation, deeper dependence on its political influence within the United States, and heightened prospects for war. Meanwhile, a democratic Turkey could regain its historical position as a regional leader. And the United States, if it continues on the flexible and prudent path that the Obama administration has set out, could see new opportunities to secure its interests without the over-commitment of military force that has characterized American policy since 9/11.

¹ Robert F. Worth, "Effort to Rebrand Arab Spring Backfires in Iran," *New York Times*, February 2, 2012.