ABSTRACT

US Foreign Policy toward the Middle East:
Navigating an Uncertain Era

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US foreign policy toward the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in the face of the 2011 Arab uprisings has encountered many and varied challenges: some manageable and others daunting and immensely difficult to meet. Given today's regional changes and uncertain prospects, traditional US foreign policy tenets and practices need to be readjusted to better reflect US different and evolving interests, motivations, and capabilities. This paper examines the US reaction to the Arab Spring in an attempt to answer the following questions: (1) what effect have the democratic uprisings had on US foreign policy? (2) why has not the Arab Spring brought about a drastic adjustment in US foreign policy as a result; and (3) why, in spite of nearly a half century of US involvement in the region, do US policymakers still have limited understanding of—and even less ability to foresee—such uprisings there? These are profound questions worthy of addressing. Our central argument is that the 2011 democratic uprisings in the MENA region have become an alternative to civil war and authoritarianism, presenting new challenges not only to these regimes and but also to the broader US foreign policy toward the region.

Keywords: Social media, Rentier states, the Arab Spring, Sectarian tensions, US-Saudi relations, US-Iran relations, Civil wars.

US FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD THE MIDDLE EAST: NAVIGATING AN UNCERTAIN ERA

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For nearly seven decades, US foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has been constrained by what has always been seen as a rigid set of "national interests," including guaranteeing access to oil and maintaining Israel's hegemonic status in the region, as well as selective alliances in order to counter perceived threats to the status quo, such as Iran's regional reassertion. In order to achieve these ends, the US set up and bankrolled a number of despotic regimes headed by autocratic leaders that maintained a closed fist on power while oppressing their own people. While avowing their dedication to

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protecting and promoting human rights across the globe, different US administrations have easily turned a blind eye to these dictators who have systematically committed human rights violations. Enforcing human rights selectively between allies and non-allies has undermined US credibility in the eyes of many people in the MENA region.

The checkered past of US foreign policy led to a result no one saw coming but, in hindsight, was abundantly clear: the Arab Spring. The stunning events of 2011 were emblematic of the general feeling among the Arab public that the time for change had finally arrived. "After decades of being subjected to ossified political structures and corrupted economic reforms," experts opine, "Arab publics are more empowered and less fearful."[1]An Arab public long ignored and overlooked, once treated as pawns in the grandiose power games played by superpowers and their proxy states, rose up and demanded that their rights as citizens be counted. Taken by surprise, dictators were toppled and regimes collapsed, while still leaving intact their essential systems—a necessary part of the narrative that should not be ignored. The Obama administration applauded these movements for the most part, but the contradictory nature of its approval came to the surface once more as it became clear that its support was restricted by the conditions of its allies in the region.

The need for rethinking US foreign policy toward the MENA region has never been greater. The decision to intervene in one country, but disengage from another creates a muddling through foreign policy that entails its own contradictions. While it is not difficult to understand the Obama administration's cautious approach toward the region, it is important to realize that prudence and pragmatism, which most characterized this administration's approach, might be the best course of action to take in this regard. Ultimately,

1. William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, Fifth Edition, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2013, p. 539.

however, support for dictatorships and the status-quo will be untenable over the longer term and will entail hefty costs and negative consequences. As most observers concur, having strong but independent allies, rather than weak and submissive clients, would be an improvement, even if the whole enterprise of supporting such allies may not be risk-free and predictable.[1]

This paper examines the US reaction to the Arab Spring in an attempt to answer the following questions: (1) what effect have the democratic uprisings had on US foreign policy?; (2) why has not the Arab Spring brought about a drastic adjustment in US foreign policy as a result; and (3) why, in spite of nearly a half century of US involvement in the region, do US policymakers still have limited understanding of—and even less ability to foresee—such uprisings there? These are profound questions worthy of addressing. Our central argument is that the 2011 democratic uprisings in the MENA region have become an alternative to civil war and authoritarianism, presenting new challenges not only to these regimes and but also to the broader US foreign policy toward the region. In the sections that follow, we examine Iran-Saudi Arabia relations, as well as conduct a comparative analysis of the Obama administration's reaction to the Arab Spring in the countries of Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and Syria.

We will first address US foreign policy prior to the Arab Spring, characterized by its concern toward oil, Israel, and the threats of Iran and Islamism. The focus of this paper then shifts to exploring US foreign policy during and after the Arab Spring, with a particular emphasis on its treatment of the situations in Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and Syria. This section endeavors to provide a better understanding of the difficulties and contradictions involved in pursuing an inconsistent foreign policy. We will conclude this paper by putting forward several

1. March Lynch, The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East, New York: Public Affairs, 2012, p. 256.

suggestions regarding how these contradictions might be minimized or eliminated at best.

THE SOCIAL MEDIA

The immediate lauding of the uprisings as "Facebook and Twitter revolutions" has proven to be fundamentally misleading. Social media websites are neither the catalysts of the revolutions, nor are they the spark that brings the roaring fire to life. Rather, it is, in the words of an expert, "the human element that determines whether an uprising will or will not occur."[1] Unpredictable but powerful, that element was the spark: the willingness of human beings who believed enough in the rightness of the cause to put themselves in harm's way for its sake.

Social media websites functioned as the dry tinder that allowed the spark to travel along a much wider space than it would have originally, and within much less time than traditional media might have taken otherwise. Social media also means instant culpability for those in power: the beating of unarmed protestors can be filmed on a camera phone and, within seconds, uploaded to YouTube for the world to see. The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, in protest to confiscation of his produce cart and scale, went viral on the Internet and social media, touching off protests that first reached Tunisia's capital and then suddenly burst onto global scene.

To be sure, public information provided by social networking and social media websites played a crucial role in the region's democratic uprisings. Through social networking sites, activists not only gained the power to topple some well-entrenched dictatorships, but also helped civilians become more aware of their political surroundings. The role that technology has assumed in allowing the distribution of

1. James L. Gelvin,The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know. Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 25.

information is essential in helping civilians to actively control their political destiny. It should be noted, however, that social media remain enabling tools, and not the catalyst of peaceful, democratic change.[1] The heart of revolution was made up of people who, in the words of one expert, "had long been deemed invisible by dictators as well as by their international sponsors. For decades these Arab citizens and their social and political movements have been either unfairly demonized or totally ignored in the West—by both its leaders and the media—who saw the region through the prisms of Israel, oil, terrorism, or radical Islamism."[2]

While modern technologies and social media may have brought new politics to the streets, organization on the ground trumps the enthusiasm of young protesters when it comes to shaping a country's political future. How to turn elections into democracy in these post-conflict societies continues to be a daunting task, especially in countries with a longstanding history of military involvement in politics. Increasingly, however, Arabs have learnt the hard way that democracy cannot be imported or outsourced; its success will ultimately hinge on their awareness, participation, and commitment to the public good. In short, the once invisible Arabs have become visible, and in the process, they have shown the potential to redefine and rewrite their history.[3]

PRE-ARAB SPRING PRIORITIES

Since the Industrial Revolution, the search for energy became synonymous with an unending quest to fuel the machine of progress.

1. MahmoodMonshipouri, Democratic Uprisings in the New Middle East: Youth, Technology, Human Rights, and US Foreign Policy, Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014, p. 88.
2. Marwan Bishara, The Invisible Arab: The Promise and Peril of the Arab Revolution, New York: New Books, 2012, p. ix.
3. Ibid., pp. 228-229.

When petroleum replaced coal in powering the massive engines of the Empire at the turn of the century, it was dubbed "black gold," a resource worth fighting for. Nowhere was that sentiment more obvious than in the Middle East and North Africa, where for decades to come oil constituted the primary geopolitical attraction for great powers, with often deadly results. Beginning with the first three-way skirmish over the British-controlled pipeline through Iran at the start of World War I, oil has been the subject of countless clashes and wars.[1]

It is no surprise, then, that maintaining a continuous flow of affordable oil is a cornerstone of USforeign policy toward the Middle East. Prior to the discovery of oil, interactions between the US and MENA countries were minimal. The 1928 Red Line Agreement and the 1948 Anglo-American Petroleum Agreement, both concerning rights to oil, signified growing US interest as well as presence in the region. After World War II, ties between the US and oil-rich countries such as Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states intensified. We will examine those relations more in depth in the next section.

As the US began to assume its role as the sole superpower, it often took measures to curtail perceived Soviet interference in the region and later—especially when the Soviet threat disappeared—to protect its own interests. It is here that US foreign policy encounters accusations of hypocrisy and double standards, with the US apparently interfering whenever it sees fit in order to safeguard its access to cheap oil—a goal that might not always be the same as its professed intentions. Liberating Kuwait from Iraqi invasion in 1991 seems to some a secondary goal of Operation Desert Storm. Stationing American forces on the Saudi regime's holy land after the Gulf War, while fulfilling its short-term goal of protecting the passage of oil

1. Wilfred Nunn, Tigris Gunboats: The Forgotten War in Iraq, 1914–1917 London: Chatham, 2007

through the Persian Gulf shipping lanes, was an integral part of intensifying radical Al-Qaeda recruitment. Many in the Middle East—and in the West—refer derisively to George Bush's 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq as a "war for oil," a war that in the end entailed hefty costfor both US worldwide standing and to its economy while alsoadding further fuel to the fire of terrorist rhetoric.[1]

THE US AND PRO-WEST DICTATORSHIPS

The trend of inadvertently sacrificing long-term US interests for immediate gain continues into another way the US seeks to guarantee its access to oil: through its close, uncritical relations with oil-producing countries, often dictatorships that practice human rights violations as part and parcel of domestic policy. In these "rentier states," a concept described by HosseinMahdavy[2] in reference to oil producers, the majority of state revenue comes from sale of its natural resources, which ensures a steady stream of capital to the government that enables development without requiring citizen taxation. However, Mahdavy argues that "socio-political stagnation and inertia"[3] is one side effect of such an arrangement. Insulated by monetary benefits, regimes can make their own decisions without fear of taxpayer wrath, and use their wealth to 'buy off' concerns about internal issues. We will see a glaring example of this later on, with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia's announcement of handouts just after the Arab Spring to mollify any public discontent.

1. Dana Priest and Josh White. "War Helps Recruit Terrorists, Hill Told" The Washington Post, February 17, 2005. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A28876-2005Feb16.html (Accessed June 1, 2013)

2. Mahdavy, HosseinMahdavy, 1970. "Patterns and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier. States: The Case of Iran." In M.A. Cook, ed., Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East: From the Rise of Islam to the Present Day, London: Oxford University Press, 1970.

3. Ibid.

US-SAUDI RELATIONS

Saudi Arabia is the first of our two case studies comparing the US relations with major oil exporters in the MENA region. Since the 1940s it has been one of the US most important relationships because of its control over immense oil fields, constituting almost one-fifth of the world's proven oil reserves. It is the largest producer and exporter of total liquid petroleum, and maintains the world's largest oil production capacity. [1]

Two years after the US recognition of King Abdulaziz's government in 1931 came the first American company to search for oil. President Franklin Roosevelt told a British ambassador in 1944, "Persian oil …is yours. We share the oil of Iraq and Kuwait. As for Saudi Arabian oil, it's ours."[2] American companies Exxon, Mobil, Chevron and Texaco joined to form the Saudi national oil and natural gas company, Saudi Aramco, after World War II.[3]Saudi Aramco is currently considered the largest energy company in the world,[4] and Riyadh is one of the top buyers of American-made weapons, with defense deals that total billions of dollars.

Complications to US-Saudi relations have occurred because of the Arab-Israeli conflict, peaking with King Faisal's oil embargo of 1973, and after 9/11, when behind closed doors the Saudi government refused to cooperate with releasing background information on the 15 of the 19 hijackers that were Saudi nationals. There have also been instances where the US has criticized Saudi Arabia's dismal human

1. "Saudi Arabia Country Overview." US Energy Information Administration, February 26, 2013 http://www.eia.gov/countries/country-data.cfm?fips=sa (Accessed June 1, 2013)

2. Yergin, D. The Prize: The Epic quest for Oil, Money and Power. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991.

3. Tetreault, Mary Ann. "The Political Economy of Oil," in Understanding the Contemporary Middle East, 3rd. edition, ed. Jillian Schwedler and Deborah J. Gerner. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2008

4. "The World's 25 Biggest Oil Companies."Forbes.com, 2013. http://www.forbes.com/pictures/mef45ggld/1-saudi-aramco-12-5-million-barrels-per-day/ (Accessed June 1, 2013)

rights record, especially in regards to women's issues, political prisoners and freedom of speech and religious rights. For many, this is not enough, and the US seems meek and accepting of the kind of behavior it would not tolerate from a non-ally. Although paying occasional lip-service to the values of human rights, the US has largely left its strongest MENA ally to its own devices, leading many to denounce its apparent hypocrisy. Condemnation of similar disdain for human rights is common when it comes to non-allies of the United States in countries such as Iran, the second of our case studies, with whom the US interacts with far differently.

US-IRAN RELATIONS

At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, and during the Persian Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911), Morgan Shuster was appointed Treasury General of Persia, to counter Russian and British interests in Iran. Under pressure by both Russia and Great Britain, Shuster resigned. The British proved instrumental in carrying out the 1921 coup that brought Reza Pahlavi to power. World War II and the emergence of the United States as the dominant player on the global scene seriously undermined the British influence in Iran. The abdication of Reza Shah and his son's ascension to power in the early 1940s ushered in a new era in US-Iran relations, one marked by fast-paced change and modernity. During the early 1950s, Iran's democratically elected nationalist Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadeq, rose to an unprecedented popularity, forcing the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi into exile.[1]

Mossadeq's rise to power and parliament's approval of nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) led to

1. MahmoodMonshipouri, "US-Iran Relations," in MerhanKamrava and ManochehrDorraj, eds., *Iran Today: An Encyclopedia of Life in the Islamic Republic*, Vol. 2, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008, pp. 491-499; see p. 491.

widespread resentment toward Iran's prime minister by the British colonial power.Prime Minister Mossadeq was removed from power in 1953 by a CIA-engineered coup—known as Operation Ajax—conducted largely by US and British security agents. The 1953 coup ended Iran's fledgling attempts at democracy, giving rise to a modernizing, royal dictatorship that, a quarter of a century later, set off an anti-American revolution that brought militant Islamic groups to power.

The Shah restored his absolute power by eliminating all constitutional obstacles in his way. The Shah's aggressive modernization and Westernization projects alienated cultural and religious elites in a country where religious values held a tight grip on cultural traditions. Oil-induced growth boosted Iran's economic growth, while the Shah's land reform programs, under pressure from the Kennedy administration, altered the class structure in Iran's countryside, creating a new rural bourgeoisie, a new rural propertied class, a new proletariat, and a new landless class that relied on its labor for survival.[1]

By the late 1970s, the Shah's violent attempts to curb revolutionary fervor have proved ineffective. The conservative forces, spearheaded by Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini, overwhelmed pro shah-forces and toppled the monarchy.Protests against the Shah's regime broke out in 1978 and again in 1979, the Islamic Revolution was complete: the Shah fled, and in his place Iran became an Islamic Republic, headed by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah RouhollahKhomeini.[2]

Currently, diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States remain frozen, mostly due to Iran's continued pursuit of its nuclear program and repeated failed nuclear talks with international agencies.

1. Ibid., p. 492.
2. Ibid., p. 493.

Iran claims it is acting in order to ensure energy self-sufficiency, with use of its nuclear energy for strictly peaceful purposes, without creating nuclear weapons. Two of the United States' most prominent allies in the region disagree: Israel, long a perceived enemy of Iran and itself considered a nuclear power, and Saudi Arabia, which distrusts Iran for its seeming ambitions to impose its own vision on the region. Commercial relations between Iran and the United States, therefore, are restricted by crippling sanctions.

The fiery rhetoric of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was president of Iran from 2005-2013, and cloistered, conservative laws helped to brand Iran as a nation to be dealt with in caution and fear. However, with the recent 2013 election of moderate President Rouhani, there is a glimmer of hope on the horizon that the Iranian government's actions may yet come to represent the genuine will of its people and lead Iran forward into a more inclusive society, both within itself and with the world at large. The mixed messages from Washington reflect a White House aware both that stricter sanctions could dampen prospects for any diplomatic "reset" with Iran, and that encountering the pro-sanctions movement in US Congress will carry a political cost at home. Regardless, President Rouhani will surely find the job of selling renewed diplomatic outreach more challenging if Iran accumulates further sanctions and if a diplomatic resolution appears far off. The new leadership in Iran wants to avoid the impression that it is making concessions in the face of new threats and pressures.[1]

POLICY SHIFT OR ITS ABSENCE

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have maintained their status in the region for a long time. US policy toward these countries is largely stagnant,

1. Jasmin Ramsey, "Iran's New President Puts Obama in a Quandary," Aljazeera, August 4, 2013, available at <www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features /2013/08/20138432644859784 .html.>. Accessed on August 9, 2013.

and continues to be the same as it was decades ago. The questions frequently raised in this context are: can Iran afford to be largely isolated from the world? And can Saudi Arabia continue to dismiss the right of political participation for its citizens? We can in fact see a similar narrative connecting the two traditional “enemies” here, particularly in regards to Saudi Arabia: the Western-propped, foreign-backed Shah of Iran maintained an iron grip on the state while oppressing and limiting the political participation of his people. In response, they turned instead to a system of government far more oppressive internally and injurious to US interests than was originally thought possible. Iran is of course a unique case, both within the Middle East and in terms of Islamic countries, but an abstract parallel between it and the autocratic regimes that the US continues to bankroll is not difficult to draw, and serves as a cautionary tale.

Another fact that runs counter tothe conventional US policy over the last 40 yearsis that the US main source for oil is no longer the Persian Gulf. Energy tycoon, T. Boone Pickens, puts it aptly: "It's insane that we have the 5th Fleet of the U.S. Navy tied up there to protect oil that ends up in China and Europe.”[1]A new report from the International Energy Agency (IEA) highlights the shift in the Middle East oil trade. The Paris-based organization projects that by 2035 nearly 90 percent of the Persian Gulf oil exports will go to Asia, with the United States receiving a negligible amount. Critics also argue that any cost-benefit calculations are offset by the enormous amount of money it takes to maintain the strong US naval presence in the Persian Gulf in order to safeguard key shipping lanes.

The US should start involving other states in the security question and stop taking on the question of protecting Middle East oil on its own. While complete detachment is not possible, and continued US

1. Vasquez, Philip D. Steptoe & JohnsonEnergy Essentials, 2013 http://www.steptoe-johnson.com/blog/international-energy/opec-focus-turns-to-asia/ (Accessed June 30, 2013)

support is in fact necessary—as any increase in oil prices will destabilize the increasingly globalized economy, and in turn the US economy—heightened cooperation with other states, even with traditional rivals such as China, in order to lessen the cost, pressure and blame on the US seems to be the answer. But the question arises: will age-old conventions continue to determine the course of a nation? One part of US foreign policy widely seen as extremely unlikely to change is the "special relationship"that the US shares with Israel.

US-ISRAEL RELATIONS: BEFORE AND AFTER THE ARAB SPRING

Prior to its inception in 1948 and thereafter, Israel's ties to the US have always been very strong. After giving up on consistent help from the British following the 1939 White Paper, the Zionists turned to the US for aid, and they were not disappointed. Time and again throughout the wars with its Arab neighbors, whether in 1948, 1956, 1967, or 1973, the US has never hesitated to bail out 'the only democracy in the Middle East' with billions of dollars in military and other forms of aid every year, amounting to $3.1 billion in the past year alone.[1]Israel takes this support with an attitude best described in this quip by former Chief of Staff of the IDF Moshe Dayan: "Our American friends offer us money, weapons, and advice. We take the money, we take the weapons, and we decline the advice."[2]

While the US since the 1970s has usually been the mediator during peace talks between the Palestinians and the Israelis, many prefer to deem the US "Israel's Lawyer" due to a perceived lack of impartiality. While the blatancy of the bias has receded somewhat

1. Shirl McArthur, "A Conservative Estimate of Total US Aid to Israel: More than $123 billion," Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, available at <www.wrmea.org/congress-and-us-aid-to-israel/494-congress-a-us-aid-to-israel/11203-u-s-aid-to-israel.html.>. Accessed on August 10, 2013.

2. Oz-Salzberger, Fania. "What America Means to Israel." The Daily Beast, April 22, 2013. http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2013/04/22/fania-oz-salzberger-what-america-means-to-israel.html (Accessed June 30, 2013).

during the Obama administration, no real pressure has been put on Israel to cease some of its activities that are blocking peace, even as the international community condemns Israel for violating international law on multiple occasions.

Settlement expansion, for example, has continued in spite of the Oslo Accords, which specified: "neither side will take any step that would change the status of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip pending the outcome of permanent status negotiations."[1]The UN, the International Court of Justice, and the international community regard the settlements as violating international law. Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention prohibits the occupying Power from transferring parts of its own civilian population into the territory that it occupies. A 2013 United Nations mission noted that the Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, violate this provision and are, thus, illegal under international law. In 2009, a confidential EU Heads of Mission Report on East Jerusalem was published in which the Israeli government was accused of "actively pursuing the illegal annexation" of East Jerusalem.

Since its occupation and annexation by Israel (illegal under international law and not accepted by the international community), the increasing integration of East Jerusalem into Israel has left Palestinian neighborhoods ever more isolated. Israel is, by legal and practical means, actively pursuing its annexation by systematically undermining the Palestinian presence in the city.[2]

Another system of separation in the famous Sharon-built barrier, which is built mainly in the West Bank and partly along the 1949 Armistice line, or "Green Line" between Israel and Palestinian West

1. Oslo Accords. Arabic/Islamic - Miscellaneous, Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, 13 September 1993 http://www.refworld.org/docid/ 3de5e9 6e4.html (Accessed June 30, 2013)

2. EU Heads of Mission Report on East Jerusalem, (p.2) 8 December 2009 (Accessed June 30, 2013)

Bank; that barrier is one of several built by the Israelis. Israel argues that the barrier is necessary to protect Israeli civilians from Palestinian terrorism. However, the International Court of Justice concluded in 2004 that "Israel cannot rely on a right of self-defense or on a state of necessity in order to preclude the wrongfulness of the construction of the wall."[1] Opponents to the wall argue that the route deviates from the Green Line into the occupied territories captured by Israel in 1967, and that the barrier is an illegal attempt to annex Palestinian land under the guise of security, violates international law, undermines negotiations by establishing new borders, and severely restricts Palestinians who live nearby, particularly their ability to travel freely within the West Bank, including to and from the lands on which their subsistence depends, and to access work in Israel. The Court asserted further that "the construction of the wall and its associated régime are contrary to international law."[2] In spite of all this—with the continued help of the United States – construction and illegal occupation have continued unabated.

PRE-ARAB SPRING: THE CASE OF EGYPT

The only country that comes closer to the same foreign-aid record as Israel is Egypt: receiving $1.3 billion in aid in 2013.[3] Egypt began its own handout practices after making peace with Israel in the1978 Camp David Accords. Coming after years of attacks on Israel and saber-rattling by pan-Arab nationalist President Gamal Abdel-Nasser, the overtures by President Anwar Sadat in the form of war-as-diplomacy in the 1973 war actually signaled a breath of fresh air for

1. International Court of Justice Press Release: "Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory" (2004)http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/index .php?pr=71&code =mwp&p1=3&p2=4&p3=6

2. Ibid.

3. "U.S. quietly allows military aid to Egypt despite rights concerns". Reuters, Jun 6, 2013 (Accessed 7 July 2013) http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/07/us-egypt-usa-idUSBRE 95600J20130607?feedType=RSS&feedName=politicsNews&rpc=22

the United States and Israel. Agreeing to come to the table to discuss returning Sinai – but not other captured territories—to Egypt, in exchange for lasting peace, must have seemed like an extremely prudent deal, and it was. In the end, the ink dried on a victory for Israel: it had achieved peace with the most powerful military in the region while making no major concessions of its own territory.

To a smaller degree, Egypt got what it wanted as well, albeit with major repercussions for its own relations with other Arab nations. It was widely decried and even expelled from the Arab League. Though these reactions eventually thawed, an element of distrust toward Egypt's continued cooperation with Israel persisted. Israel's blockade of Gaza, starting in 2007, would have been meaningless without Egypt's blocking of its own border city with Gaza, Rafah. The Arab street was furious; they were not necessarily backing Hamas, but to enable the application of collective punishment on the entire population of Gaza was akin to collaborating with the enemy. This wrath only intensified more with each of Israel's ground offensives into the Gaza Strip, during which hundreds of innocent civilians were killed.[1]Gaza is still considered the world's biggest open air prison.

With the world's sole superpower firmly in its corner, Israel has no real incentive to create any lasting change in its mode of operation when it comes to the Palestinian territories. The Obama administration has admittedly been more vocal in its condemnation of some of Israel's activities, but that is no longer enough. Many Americans are asking the question: if we give so much aid to Israel, why does it (a) flagrantly ignore our requests that it respect international human rights law and (b) use these weapons in ways that, by extension, harm US interests in the region?

1. Harel, Amos. "IDF in Gaza: Killing civilians, vandalism, and lax rules of engagement." Mar.18, 2009http://www.haaretz.com/news/idf-in-gaza-killing-civilians-vandalism-and-lax-rules-of-engagement-1.272379 (Accessed June 1, 2013)

Many believe that this 'special relationship' needs to be reviewed. As the conflict stretches on, intractable, year after year, the saga continues to unfold. Without accountability and left to its own devices, the loss of Israel's identity as a peaceful state may yet be the outcome. In a region that is fluctuating so quickly after the advent of the Arab Spring, instability can prove very damaging—and the United States must come to terms with solving that, even if it means abandoning what have always been core tenets of its staunch relationship with Israel: unbridled support even in the face of clear violation of law and ethics, and unquestionably providing for Israel's needs. It is only in the US broader strategic interests to do so.

US Reactions to Tunisia and Egypt

The narrative has become a familiar one: a region erupts without warning following the self-immolation of a humble street seller (Mohamed Bouazizi) in SidiBouzid, a provincial city in central Tunisia. Regimes topple and hold fast in turn, as part of what is in no way a predictable event. The United States, and other countries helplessly looking on, must scramble for solutions for which there has been no precedent. In this section, we argue that the United States did its best to strike a difficult balance between the urge to remain on the 'right side of history' and to remain true to erstwhile foreign policy concerns – and that still more is needed in order to truly triumph in the history books.

As the world reeled in surprise at the news of Tunisian dictator Ben Ali's fleeing to voluntary exile following one month of nationwide protests, President Obama was putting the United States firmly in the people's camp. "After decades of accepting the world as it is in the region," he said, "we have a chance to pursue the world as it should be." He declared: "America values the dignity of the street

vendor in Tunisia more than the raw power of the dictator."[1]

To the Obama administration, these uprisings were nothing less than inevitable: the people of the Middle East and North Africa were taking their future into their own hands on the road to freedom, emancipation from years of oppression and democracy. When Mubarak's turn came in Egypt, Obama picked up the phone and told him unequivocally it was time to go, contrary to the advice of many in the White House. It seemed that, finally, a foreign policy based on the will of the people might be hoped for. The tide of hope was riding high, and it was all the United States could do to ride on it.

Mubarak stepped down and subsequently Mohamed Morsi became the Egypt's first popularly elected president. The Egyptian army acted professionally by returning to the barracks. Egypt's economic and political strains continued unabated. Unable to escape the neoliberal economic policies of his predecessors and the lack of consensus on governance undermined his one-year old tenure of the office. On July 3, 2013, the army engineered a coup by removing Morsi and putting him under house arrest and in detention. Public anger toward the Brotherhood was driven in part by fear that it was behind jihadi violence in Sinai, but largely as a result of frustration over policies that many Egyptians blame Morsi for causing economic decay.[2]

Egypt's democratic transition entered a bumpy ride. The coup marked a huge setback for the prospects of a democratic Egypt, precipitating a process of radicalization that is bound to poison Egyptian politics for many years to come.[3] The new government has

1. "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa". US Press Secretary, The White House. May 19, 2011. http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa (Accessed June 1, 2013)

2. Christa Case Bryant, "In Egypt, Mood Hardens," The Christian Science Monitor, August 12, 2013, pp. 10-11; see p. 10.

3. Nader Hashemi, "Don't View Egypt's Coup with a Western Lens," The Christian Science Monitor, July 22, 2013, p. 35.

held the Muslim Brotherhood—the main supporter of President Morsi—responsible for the ensuing violence and breaking the law. The standoff between the country's military and the Islamist supporters of the deposed President Mohamed Morsipresents one of the most serious challenges facing the country in recent times, as Egypt is rushing along into uncharted territory.

The interim government has been pursuing a relentless campaign to portray Islamists as a threat, and has increasingly lashed out at journalists who paint a different picture, especially the foreign news media.[1] Through it all, the military is seen as exploiting power, spillingblood and spreading chaos to justify its ever tighter grip over the country and secure its supremacy. Egyptian liberals, according to some observers, were naïve to trust the military. For all intents and purposes, the US-backed military has hijacked the popular struggle in the name of the global war on terrorism—a disingenuous tactic used as a cover up for waging a political campaign against the opposition.[2]The fact remains that "the military is more interested in maintaining ultimate control than democratizing society, even if it has to unleash unprecedented waves of terror on the streets of Egypt's cities."[3]In many respects, Egypt's turmoil bears a striking resemblance tothe 1992 Algeria's bloody civil war. Thus far, Muslim Brotherhood members have refused to participate in a renewed democratic process.

US REACTIONS TO UPRISINGS IN BAHRAIN

Enterthe next round of revolutions. This one presented a significantly

1. Rod Nordland, "Islamists Killed While in Custody, Egypt Confirms," The New York Times, August, 2013, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/19/world/middleeast/morsi-supporters-vow-to-defy-egypts-military.html.>. Accessed on August 19, 2013.

2. The Editors, "On Egypt's Day of Infamy" Middle East Research and Information Project, August 20, 2013, available at <http://www.org/egypts-day-infamy>. Accessed on August 21, 2013.

3. Stephen Zunes, "Washington and The Egyptian Tragedy," August 20, 2013, available at <http://fpif.org/author/stephen-zunes>.Accessed on August 21, 2013.

more complicated front to the United States, particularly in the case of Bahrain. Rather than an unequivocal show of support, for the sake of maintaining its alliance with Saudi Arabia it was all the United States could do to urge restraint on behalf of the governments embroiled in what quickly became a sectarian struggle.

As its political system, Bahrain has a Sunni monarchy ruling over a restive Shia majority. Sectarian tensions are fuelled by the constant confrontations between Iran and its Gulf Arab neighbors, especially Saudi Arabia - and by Bahrain's strategic importance as headquarters of the US navy's Fifth Fleet. The Bahraini government often levels accusations at Iran of encouraging turmoil though there they offer no evidence beyond shrill propaganda. Two years after the main events, there are still tensions, but former Secretary, Hillary Clinton did say unequivocally that "mass arrests and brute force are at odds with the universal rights of Bahrain's citizens, and will not make legitimate calls for reform go away."[1]

The Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) has frequently reported that half of the Bahraini citizens are suffering from poverty and poor living conditions, with many being unemployed. Although some beneficiaries of social aid are unable to work, others are employed with meager incomes. This level of poverty, which is pervasive among the majority Shia population, has harbored deep socioeconomic and political resentment against the Sunni minority that rules with a tight grip. The Bahraini regime's campaign of repression and intimidation has also touched almost every sector: the universities, the civil service, labor organizations, professional associations, and schools. The sectarian crackdown has shocked many of the region's political observers, as doctors have been convicted and imprisoned for treating wounded protesters, and students and faculty

1. DeYoung, Karen. "In Arab Spring speech, Clinton defends U.S. stance on Syria, Bahrain." The Washington Post, November 07, 2011.

dismissed from universities for supporting the protest movements.[1]

The United States and the United Kingdom have supported Bahrain's ruling family because they have allowed the United States to operate naval bases out of Bahrain's territory and assisted it in preserving the status quo. Today's rising public frustrations, as manifested by new waves of unrest and protests, are fueled largely by young Shia groups. Crying out for dignity and a decent life, these protests are rarely, if ever, motivated by sectarian and religious factors, although the escalation of the security crisis in Bahrain could potentially transform the nature of the protests along more sectarian lines. The deployment of forces from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to help secure the country for the Sunni ruling family will only further radicalize the more religious segments within the Shia majority.[2]

INTERVENTIONS IN LIBYA & SYRIA

Although NATO's intervention in Libya (March 19, 2011) went beyond the UN Resolution (1973) that called for protecting civilians and enforcing an arms embargo, it was clear that NATO supported the rebels in a civil war. This intervention, however, has raised myriad questions about possible interventions in the future. Critics argue that NATO risks becoming the military arm of the UN in similar situations and that it surely exceeded its core mission: protecting its member states' boundaries and population. The division within NATO regarding the Libyan mission came to surface, as only eight NATO allies took part in these combat operations. Germany, for instance, pulled its crew out of NATO support aircraft, raising further questions

1. March Lynch, The Arab Uprisings: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East, New York: Public Affairs, 2012, p. 138.

2. MahmoodMonshipouri and Ali Assareh, "The New Middle East and the United States: What to Expect After the Uprisings," Insight Turkey, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2011, pp. 121-138; see p. 134.

about the future of such operations.

It was only natural that after a largely successful intervention in Libya and the toppling of Qaddafi's government there, the question loomed large of whether or not the same approach could be applied in the case of Syria. The Obama administration's continual refrain is that since these countries are so different, it would be foolish to take a cookie cutter approach toward dealing with them irrespectiveof circumstances on the ground. As made clear in a March 2011 speech by Obama,[1] the criteria for U.S. action in the interests of humanitarian intervention should depend on an intersection of our values and our interests. According to Obama, allowing a bloodbath to happen in the city of Benghazi, epicenter of the Libyan revolution, would have been unacceptable. Today, democratic movements clash with fervor for Jihad in Libya, as lawlessness increases. Libya has been awash with weapons and roving armed bands and so-called "militia" that are not accountableto the central government and are often engaged in internal infightings. While the situation is Libya is far from civil war, it is akin to a state of chaos and lawlessness.[2]

Civil war and bloodbaths, by contrast, are transpiring in Syria on a daily basis. The key difference is this: military action in Syria would be far riskier than it was in Libya, thanks to Syria's more sophisticated air defenses and military forces. Factors like the quality of opposition is different: the Syrian opposition is less organized, more divided and more undeveloped than the Libyan rebels were. Assad still commands allegiance within Syria, more so than was Gaddafi, and, unlike the case in Libya, international bodies like the United Nations and Arab

1. "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa". US Press Secretary, The White House. May 19, 2011. http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa (Accessed June 1, 2013)

2. David Kirkpatrick, "Lawlessness Increases in Libya," NPR, August 9, 2013, available in <www.wbur.org/npr/210412638/lawlessness-increases-in-libya>.Accessed on August 9, 2013.

League have not called for intervention. Strategic complications might ensue from any intervention in Syria due to its ties to Russia and Iran. But other factors need to be taken into account. The fact remains that we know little about the opposition in Syria and to what extent its governance of the country would be based on the rule of law and respect for human rights. There are increasing reports about rebel atrocities as well as the role Al Qaeda operatives play in leading some of the rebel forces.Much of the confusion surrounds US foreign policy and regional actors' role in supporting rebel groups with arms supplies.

Considerable doubt has been raised about whether the US strategy of "limited and tailored" air strikes and military intervention in the Syrian conflict will aid a democratic-minded opposition or whether or not the opposition groups on the receiving end of the lethal aid will be primarily Islamic extremists. This confusion is reinforced by mounting frustration over the fact that "there is no central clearinghouse for the shipments, and no effective way of vetting the groups that ultimately receive them."[1]Merely arming the opposition is equivalent to support them without "boots on the ground." Other concerns enter the picture as well. The unfortunate truth is that the Obama administration didn't intervene in Libya despite great risk. He did it because it was a relatively low-risk venture, and the same cannot be said about Syria.[2]

Some experts see a path to peace in Syria through protecting minorities. The main reason Syria's minorities—Alawites and Christians—tend to back the regime is not their loyalty to the Assad

1. David E. Sanger, "Rebel Arms Flow Is Said to Benefit Jihadists in Sryia," New York Times, October 14, 2012, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/15 /world/ middleeast/jihadists-receiving-most-arms-sent-to-syrian-rebels.html?nl=todaysheadlines&emc=edit_th_20121015>.Accessed on October 15, 2012.

2. Michael Crowley, "The Obama Doctrine: Syria vs. Libya Intervention." Time Magazine, June 01, 2012. http://swampland.time.com/2012/06/01/the-obama-doctrine-syria-vs-libya-intervention/ (Accessed June 1, 2013)

regime or hatred of Sunnis but their legitimate fear of the alternative—that is, a post-Assad political order in which they will be objects of bloody revenge at worst and politically marginalized at best. This anxiety is understandable given the historical discrimination and exclusion of Alawites under Sunni regimes prior to the 1970 coup that brought his father, Hafez Assad, to power, as well as today's cruelty and sectarian proclivities displayed by Sunni rebels.[1] As such, they suggest that the United States and Europe should offer these minorities a strong and practical security guarantee in the form of an international peacekeeping force.[2]

CONCLUSION

Revolutions and uprisings alike take time to settle, persevere, and take root. They tend to revive ideals and intensify universal aspirations for ethical governance based on respect for human rights, social justice, and the rule of law. Yet their consequences are varied, many, and unpredictable. Washington encounters unique opportunities and challenges in the face of the evolving political strategies and diplomatic tasks, while at the same time seeking a proper balance between securing its strategic interests and maintaining its ideals and values. The revolutionary developments in the MENA region have provided reason to rethink foreign policy options with an eye toward blending pragmatic, ideological, and value-based approaches. Yet one should not be under any illusion that the Arab Spring is broadly viewed as a welcome development by US foreign policymakers, even as American politicians seemingly push for reforms and change. The question persists: what kind of democratic movements, if any, could/should the United States support in the Middle East?

1. Thorsten Janus and HelleMalmvig, "Path to Peace in Syria: Protecting Minorities," *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 12, 2013, pp. 35-36.
2. Ibid.

The current, fluid political ambiance in the MENA region presents a unique opportunity for US foreign policy interests. The United States might be forced into an untenable situation—that is, not wanting to advocate regime change in some countries in the region, but feeling a need to press for democratization process there. One can see how even the best intended, prudent policies can later falter, especially when the United States needs states that are not amenable to reform. Unambiguous support for democratic movements in the region will most likely undermine extremist groups, allow the younger generation to seek an active role in shaping their society, and cause the archaic institutions of power to collapse, opening the way for new politics and social forces.[1]

Adding sanctions before starting a new round of talks with Iran's new President Rouhani is far from reconciliation or diplomatic outreach. Pursuing parallel objectives of imposing stricter sanctions while seeking engagement with Iran are counterproductive. The old zero-sum calculations of Iran-US relations must be reconsidered given the region's post-Arab Spring tensions and conflicts. The need for defining common interests between the two countries has never been greater. With many political uncertainties in both Afghanistan and Iraq, in the face of US troop withdrawal, the necessity of holding direct talks with Iran—as a country with much leverage there—has become more apparent than ever.

Regarding Israel, a more realistic assessment of what is useful for the United States in the long run is needed. Israel must come to the sober realization that it cannot count on the US unconditional support in the face of flagrant disobedience of international law and order, and international condemnation. As President Obama has said so many

1. MahmoodMonshipouri, *Democratic Uprisings in the New Middle East: Youth, Technology, Human Rights, and US Foreign Policy*, Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014, pp. 176-177.

times before, ties between countries must be grounded in mutual cordiality and respect.The post-Arab Springworld is starkly different and demands discarding the past and obsolete paradigms. Policies and priorities need to shift accordingly—and always in accordance with the will of the people in the region. The best possible lasting legacy of the Arab Spring is to ensure that.

US foreign policymakers must find a way to reconcile American national interests with new democracies in the region. Seeking engagement with democratic movements should guide the US foreign policy framework. It is time to debunk the myth of the past century premised on an unchanging Arab region that is devoid of democratic politics and cultural traditions.[1] Proactive engagement with both states and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to promote democratic peaceful change is consistent with both a pragmatic and principled foreign policy. History has taught us that de-politicization and professionalization of the Egyptian military will be critical to determining democratic transition in Egypt.[2]The fact remains that the Egyptian military retains the support of the oil-rich states of the Persian Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, which have pledged approximately $12 billion in aid to the new government.[3]That said, US military aid to Egypt needs to be re-evaluated given the post-revolutionary trajectory of events there. Absent such reassessment, US foreign policy will be strongly contested by further uprisings and the reassertions of democratic movements from below.❖

1. Ibid.

2. JavedMaswood and UshaNatarajan, "Democratization and Constitutional Reform in Egypt and Indonesia: Evaluating the Role of the Military," in BahgatKorany and Raba El-Mahdi, eds., *Arab Spring in Egypt: Revolution and Beyond*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012, pp. 223-249; see p. 224.

3. Ellen Knickmeyer, "Saudi King Offers Support to Egyptian Military," *The Wall Street Jo*urnal, August, 18, 2013, available at <<http://online.wsj.com /article/ SB10001424127887323423804579020510228645356.html>>.Accessed on August, 19, 2013.