

The New Middle East and the United States: What to Expect After the Uprisings?

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ABSTRACT

Recent uprisings and unrests across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have brought new leadership to Egypt and Tunisia, and could possibly result in more leadership changes. While it is too early to assess the meaning and implications of the MENA uprisings, it is even more difficult to predict whether the current ferment could fundamentally reshape the region by bringing real democratic transformation. What is evident, however, is that the United States' old bargain with autocrats is collapsing; and that U.S. strategic interests are seemingly better served, at least during this historic period, by working with governments that genuinely reflect the will of their people. This essay's central argument is that change and transformation in MENA has resulted from bottom-up, anti-establishment popular movements that have exposed the flaws of the U.S. foreign policy and will most likely challenge the conventional U.S. policies in the region for years to come.

A wave of unrest and political change across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has brought new leadership to Egypt and Tunisia, and could result in yet more leadership changes in the future. While it is too early to gauge the meaning of the uprisings in the MENA region, it is even more difficult to foretell whether the current ferment could fundamentally reshape the region by bringing real democratic change. Revolutionary changes are typically slow to come by and usually take many years to become fully visible. What is evident, however, is that the United States' old bargain with autocrats is unraveling and that the strategic interests of the United States are better served, at least during this historic period, by working with governments that genuinely reflect the will of their people.

Faced with popular unrest and a potential transformation of the US's foreign policy goals

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and strategies, the region's autocrats now have three options: step down (as in Tunisia and Egypt), cede more power to the people (as promised in Yemen, Bahrain, and Jordan), or use greater force to suppress dissent (as in Libya, Iran, and Syria). Arguably, there may be a fourth option for those who can afford it: buying people off (as in Saudi Arabia). Undoubtedly, these uprisings and the re-

gional and global response to them are likely to have measurable impact on oil prices, human rights conditions, and the United States' role in the region. But without a deeper understanding of the historical context, it is impossible to evaluate the scope of such changes and their long-term implications.

World War Two ended with the decline of the European powers and a surge in US might, but the legacy of post-colonialism and nationalist resistance movements stuck with the United States for years to come. Instead of embracing such movements, the United States pursued the old bargain of working with autocrats to the detriment of their people's democratic aspirations. For the ensuing 64 years, US foreign policy toward the MENA had a myriad of paradoxes. The United States frequently found itself faced with the all-too familiar foreign policy dilemma: whether to stand firmly behind authoritarian but pro-Western regimes, or to support the aspirations of their people—a majority of whom sought basic human rights and meaningful economic and political reforms. The United States more often than not supported authoritarian regimes out of the fear that by supporting democracy anti-American Islamist regimes might come to power as, for example, was the case with Hamas's electoral victory in early 2006.

In recent times, concerns about rising living costs, set against the background of frustrating economic underdevelopment in the MENA region and the general global economic meltdown, constitute perhaps the most potent force driving social change in the region. While, in some parts of the MENA region, criticism of inept government policies and rampant corruption has formed into calls for revolt, in other parts it has led to calls for more autonomy to pursue goals and aspirations brought into focus by rising levels of education and globalization.¹ Some of the oil-rich countries of the region have attempted to defuse similar tensions and uprisings by paying off their people in different ways.² But, especially for those countries that do not produce oil, a combination of modernizing youth and tough economic times has driven an unprecedented wave of change.³ In the wake

of these uprisings, two key questions arise: How will US foreign policy respond to the MENA region's rapidly changing social and political landscape? And how can such revolutions properly be exploited for the benefit of the people?

This paper's core argument is that change and transformation in the Middle East and North Africa has resulted from bottom-up, anti-establishment popular movements that have exposed the flaws in US foreign policy and will most likely challenge the conventional US policies in the region in the coming years. To flesh out this argument, this paper situates US foreign policy in four periods: (1) the period from 1945–1989, known as the Cold War era; (2) the period from 1990–2001, the era of political liberalization and opening, also known as the post-Cold War era; (3) the period from 2001–2010, known as the post-9/11 era; and (4) the period from the uprisings (2011–ongoing), which we will call the “democracy era.”

Between 1945 and 1989, US foreign policy in the MENA region promoted stability and the preservation of the status quo, reinforcing repressive rule in the Arab world. The period from 1990 to 2001 saw the end of the Cold War, shifting the balance in favor of expanding civil society and political opening in some parts of the Middle East and North Africa. With the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, however, US foreign policy reverted back to supporting repressive regimes in a bid to secure their cooperation in the so-called “war on terror.” While the US invasion of Afghanistan (2001) was based on confronting and removing the Taliban, which harbored the al-Qaeda terror network, the subsequent invasion of Iraq (2003) was intended to destroy weapons of mass destruction and promote democracy under the rubric of a strategic transformation in the region. But what the American troops could not bring to Iraq—democratic change imposed from the outside—a determined mass of Tunisian and Egyptian protesters successfully brought to their respective countries, unleashing an unprecedented wave of protests in the region and breathing new life into the heavily-suppressed democracy movement in Iran. To examine the implication of the democracy era, however, we must first examine its underlying historical context.

The Middle East and the US in the Cold War Era (1945-1989)

The end of World War II marked the era of dwindling European power and the surging global role of the United States. During this period, the United States employed the full panoply of instruments ranging from financial and military aid, trade, and investment to engineering coups and military interventions, and supporting friendly but repressive regimes throughout the globe.⁴ These instruments were seen as pivotal to both a successful reaction to the acts of rebellion against

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the status quo and the prevention of any possible attacks in the future against existing regimes. In the post-war period, security concerns led to the American support for right-wing dictatorships and military *juntas* in the name of anti-Communism, marginalizing—and even excluding—human rights.⁵

During the Cold War era, the United States acted as the sole extra-regional hegemonic power on the basis of its military pre-eminence in the MENA region, guaranteeing the persistence of pro-West but dysfunctional and corrupt regimes. Many of these regimes owed their political longevity and power to their readiness, albeit tacitly, to adhere to the US line in foreign affairs.⁶ Looking back on a half-century of US foreign policy in the MENA region, it is obvious that a slew of contradictory measures propped up unpopular regimes, caused disillusionment, prolonged the plight of the people, and produced deepening confusion regarding who was a US ally or enemy.

During the second half of the 20th century, US foreign policy toward the MENA centered on protecting the flow of oil from the area, supporting Israel and the region's pro-West but authoritarian regimes, and maintaining political stability largely to deter, contain, and, if necessary, confront Communism. This list later expanded to include other objectives such as combating terrorism, brokering a truce between the Palestinians and the Israelis, and preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction. In pursuit of these objectives, the United States relied on the use of force, covert intervention, economic and military assistance, arms sales, military presence, and diplomacy. The continued support for the monarchies in Saudi Arabia and the smaller Persian Gulf states proved critical, especially when they faced threats from outside their borders.⁷

During this time, the MENA region was plagued by numerous conflicts, both intra-regional (such as the Arab-Israeli wars, the Iran-Iraq war, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait) and inter-regional (such as the civil war in Lebanon and the subsequent stationing of US Marines there in the early 1980s, Iran's Islamic revolution, and the growing Islamic radicalism and associated terrorism). In response to this long list of destabilizing events, the United States continued to build up its military presence in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf, especially after the collapse of the Shah's regime in Iran in 1979.⁸

Consequently, the region became home to some of the world's most repressive regimes, an oppressive Israeli occupation, human rights abuses, economic disparities, unelected governments, and corrupt political systems. The Arab defeat in the wars with Israel and the failure of parliamentary democracy to make ruling elites and military institutions electorally accountable precipitated a deepening sense of disillusionment and crisis in many Muslim societies, culminating in the resurgence of political Islam by the late 1970s.⁹ This resurgence came to be seen as a potent backlash against the failure of secular states and ideologies, such as liberal nationalism and Arab socialism.¹⁰

Access to oil figured prominently in US foreign policy in the MENA region. The Western world found it easier to access oil resources by working with dictators rather than democratic regimes. The 1953 coup in Iran is a notable case in point. CIA and British agents, in collaboration with internal army generals, engineered a coup against the nationalist and constitutionally elected prime minister of Iran, Mohammad Mossadeq, who had nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Mossadeq was deposed and the Shah was restored to power. US foreign policy between 1953 and 1978 stressed a special relationship with the Shah and his inner circle, while largely disregarding the needs and demands of the Iranian people. Increasingly, the US presence and interventionist policies became integral parts of domestic politics in Iran.¹¹ When, in the late 1970s, President Carter's concern for human rights had to be balanced against US support for the Shah's repressive regime, the policy of having it both ways boomeranged, precipitating the fall of the monarchy.

Indeed, the quest for oil and security continued to push the United States further into supporting autocratic regimes in the region. The human rights implications were dire. One study reveals the dismal human rights conditions of five Arab states—Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia—considered “U.S. friends in the region.” The United States, according to this study, exerted little or no political and diplomatic pressure on these governments to adopt liberal reforms.¹² The most glaring example of this willful blindness was Saudi Arabia, which was (and still is) a close US ally, yet has one of the worst human rights records in the Middle East. Considerations of human rights and democratic principles were clearly subordinated to US strategic, military, and commercial ties with the Saudi regime.¹³

The Post-Cold War Era (1990-2001)

The post-Cold War era was fraught with challenges and contradictions for US foreign policymakers. In Afghanistan, the secular state-building project was abandoned following the Soviet withdrawal in 1988. Still in the Cold War mind-

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set, the United States remained focused on confronting and deterring Communism. In fact, throughout the 1990s, the United States had no reconstruction plan for post-Soviet Afghanistan. As a result, chaos and poverty prevailed, providing fertile ground for the measure of stability the Taliban brought to Afghanistan.¹⁴

Osama bin Laden was the price of US victory over the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.¹⁵ With the active encouragement of the CIA and Pakistan's ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), the *mujahideen* played a significant role in dislodging Soviet forces from Afghanistan throughout the 1980s. The Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan by the mid-1990s was made possible by Pakistan's ISI, which in turn was influenced by the CIA. The actions of the Taliban at that time largely served the geopolitical interests of the United States.¹⁶ The drug trade in the region, according to one observer, was also used to finance and equip the Bosnian Muslim Army and the Kosovo Liberation Army.¹⁷

The unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict further complicated US policy in this era. The MENA region's oil-producing nations were under pressure to keep supply lines open. Regimes that depended on US military protection faced a populace increasingly agitated over the Palestinian issue. The second *intifada*, erupting in September 2000, concerned a significant number of regional governments and businesspeople who regularly dealt with the United States and Europe.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the United States continued to support both Israel and the region's corrupt and dysfunctional regimes, further alienating reformist social movements and discrediting its foreign policy in the region.

Rolling back Iraq's invasion of Kuwait opened an opportunity for a series of negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians under the Oslo Accords. The United States found itself amid yet another paradox: brokering a truce while favoring Israel. Those talks were dead on the arrival. The collapse of the peace process and the continuing plight of the Palestinians under occupation pointed to contradictory US diplomacy that made unrealistic any prospects for successful mediation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Such diplomacy bred further radicalism not only among the Palestinians living inside the occupied territories but also throughout the Muslim world. The Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, lacked a vision for where the conflict was going. Chairman Yasser Arafat had no solution

to stop terrorism and was rapidly losing control of popular politics to Palestinian radicals. Meanwhile, the United States' unqualified and unconditional support for Israel made it difficult for the United States to challenge Israeli defiance on such contentious issues as the settlements in the occupied territories.

The Palestinians saw a double standard at work: the right of return for Soviet Jews was upheld by the United States, but the return of Palestinian refugees was not guaranteed. For many Palestinians, US diplomatic initiatives made no difference to their lives under occupation. As a result, they continued to lose faith in US diplomacy, even as they came to grips with the reality that active and sustained US engagement was crucial to the resolution of the conflict. This mentality, in turn, created conditions among the Palestinians that assured the extremists of moral and material support. Because of America's reliance on the region's oil, there was arguably an incentive for the United States to help in the resolution of the dispute. But other economic and geopolitical interests often overshadowed this incentive. With the United States playing the dual role of the main mediator of the conflict as well as the chief diplomatic, financial, and military supporter of Israeli occupation forces, US policy was mired in a critical paradox.¹⁹

September 11, 2001 and the "War on Terror"

While under the Cold War mindset the US's focus was on confronting and deterring Communism, in the post-9/11 era that fixation was replaced with the Islamist threat. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, US domestic law enforcement's scrutiny of Muslims raised the concern that the war against terrorism would be seen as a war against Muslims.²⁰ US foreign policy-makers warned against such proverbial fault lines, as they shifted their focus to threats posed by radical Islamic movements.

The September 11 tragedy reminded us of the political side effects of a flawed foreign policy in need of restructuring. In the absence of a transparent strategy, the US government's war on terror appeared as a legitimization device for military escapades wherever or whenever the Bush Administration deemed appropriate. Old policies resulted in seemingly irreconcilable and confusing objectives, and their continuation only intensified the resentment that now festered throughout the region. The war on terror had a two-fold effect. First, it threatened the domestic realms of civil rights, due process, and the right to privacy, especially with the passage of the Patriot Act in 2001. Secondly, it led to several cases of illegal detention, extraordinary rendition, military tribunals, and capital punishment, seriously undermining the United States' standing in the global community.

In the area of investigation and prosecution, the federal government engaged in widespread practices that ran counter to the liberal democratic values underlying the American political and judicial processes. Such acts clearly violated the civil rights and freedom of non-citizens. These included, among others, extended detention and interrogation, expanded surveillance powers and tools, the instituting of financial strictures and rewards, the altering of the judicial system, and the requirement for greater information sharing between agencies.²¹ The extended detention and questioning interrupted the due process of law, as many suspects were held incommunicado. Additionally, a Bureau of Prisoners (BOP) regulation authorized the BOP and the Department of Justice (DOJ) to monitor communications between suspects and their attorneys. The application of this practice in certain cases amounted to harassment of an ethnic minority. By January 2002, of the more than 1,200 individuals detained on terrorism *suspicions*, only a few were considered material witnesses, with the others held on minor immigration violations. This was a clear violation of equal protection before the law and amounted to a discriminatory practice based on religion and ethnicity.²²

What made the issue of detainees particularly alarming was that the two available options were to either hold them indefinitely or subject them to military tribunals. The detainment camps in Guantanamo Bay drew strong criticism both inside and outside the United States for widespread allegations of torture and due process violations. The detainees held by the United States army were classified as “enemy combatants” and not entitled to the protections of the Geneva Conventions. Some were subject to indefinite detention, while others to flagrant and widespread abuse of their religious beliefs, including flushing the Qur’an down the toilet. Many detainees filed petitions complaining of the inhumane conditions under which they were being held. The pervasive pattern and practice of abuse pointed to direct connections with official policies of the US government.

The US government argued that it was reasonable for “enemy combatants” to be detained until the cessation of hostilities, and that in any case prisoners of war were not entitled to civilian trials. Critics argued that the detainees’ status, as potential or active terrorists, was not defined in any ratified treaties. The Bush Administration considered al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters as “unlawful enemy combatants”—not uniformed soldiers of a recognized government—and thus not deserving of being treated as soldiers. On June 29, 2006, the US Supreme Court ruled against such an interpretation in *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld*, holding that military commissions set up by the Bush Administration violated both the Uniform Code of Military Justice and the four Geneva Conventions signed in 1949. Moreover, the growing security culture overshadowed the rights culture, bringing the United

States into closer cooperation with the governments of China, Egypt, Pakistan, Russia and Saudi Arabia—regimes that engaged in widespread and systematic repression of their own populace. These regimes in turn used the threat of global terrorism to weaken the fragile edifice of human rights law.²³ The war against terror cost the United States the moral ground on human rights, and this moral crisis persisted unabatedly. The Bush Administration, under the guise of counterterrorism, violated human rights by abusing prisoners as a matter of policy, and dispersing detainees into a network of secret prisons, some to countries that practice torture (Egypt, Syria, and Morocco, for example). This outsourcing of torture, military detention, and security and intelligence operations fueled serious human rights abuses across the globe.²⁴

Victory in the so-called “war on terror” will be attainable if the United States and the rest of the Western world support pro-democracy movements and uprisings in the region

More recently, the killing of Osama bin Laden on May 1, 2011, has reinforced the notion that the so-called “war on terror” can be won. Yet, closing this chapter on terrorism has raised a myriad of questions about the most effective ways to deal with looming problems. To be sure, bin Laden’s killing will affect US military involvement in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Also at stake is the hugely complicated relationship between the United States and Pakistan, given that the latter is an alleged sanctuary for terrorists and their network affiliates. The most daunting task for the Obama Administration is to avoid any rupture in relations that could endanger the fragile counterterrorism network that the United States has so painstakingly constructed in Pakistan over the last few years. The question that hangs over any future recalibration of US-Pakistan relations is whether the previous level of cooperation between the two is sustainable given their different strategic objectives regarding the endgame in Afghanistan.

Perhaps the most crucial question relates to the extent to which Pakistan has been a sanctuary for members of Taliban and al-Qaeda. If Pakistan’s involvement has been extensive, then the center of gravity of terrorism has clearly shifted away from Afghanistan to Pakistan. Since 9/11, the US government has given \$10 billion worth of military and development aid to Pakistan. The fact that Osama bin Laden lived in a compound near a well-known military academy not far from Islamabad has raised the very real dilemma about whether the Pakistani army or intelligence is incompetent or—a more sinister assessment—has been in cahoots with the terrorists. Both the Pakistani army and intelligence officials denied any knowledge of bin Laden’s location—a claim impossible to prove. For its part, the United States

Addressing the political and economic grievances of the people in the region is the most effective counterterrorism tool

appears reluctant to overhaul its relations with Pakistan, in part because Washington considers Islamabad an important partner in counterterrorism.

It is worth noting that the recent Arab revolts in the MENA region have already undermined al-Qaeda's narrative of violent change. To restore their sense of lost dignity, the vast majority of people in the Middle East have chosen the counter-narrative of peaceful democratic change, as evidenced by the 2011 uprisings. Victory in the so-called "war on terror" will be attainable if the United States and the rest of the Western world support pro-democracy movements and uprisings in the region, rather than despotic regimes under the rubric of "stability" and "security." Support for corrupt, autocratic, and oppressive regimes in the name of the "war on terror" will almost always foster more and more extremism, forcing the American people to bear hefty costs of fighting ongoing wars. Addressing the political and economic grievances of the people in the region is the most effective counterterrorism tool.

The Democratic Era

Revolutions in North Africa

On December 17, 2010 Mohamed Bouazizi—a Tunisian street vendor—set himself on fire to protest the confiscation of his fruit cart and the harassment and humiliation that he suffered at the hands of the local police. This incident prompted a nationwide uprising in Tunisia, sparking street demonstrations and riots throughout the country against economic decay, symbolized by Bouazizi's plight. Resentment and violence intensified following Bouazizi's death, leading then-President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to step down on January 14, 2011 after ruling the country for 23 years. The Tunisian uprisings provoked a deep sense of sympathy in the neighboring country of Egypt, unleashing years of bottled-up resentment towards the Egyptian government. After 18 days of peaceful protests and demonstrations, Hosni Mubarak's government collapsed. In both Tunisia and Egypt, a combination of similar factors paved the way for the uprisings: a sharp rise in food prices, high unemployment rates (especially among the youth), and widespread resentment directed at corrupt and repressive governments. Some analysts have attributed the economic difficulties to neoliberal IMF and World Bank interventions in the region, arguing that privatization, falling real wages, and the accumulation of wealth in the hands of ruling families and their cronies contributed largely to the popular uprisings.²⁵

The wave of protests in the MENA region also showed that US foreign policy mistakes had eventually come home to roost. The Mubarak regime, supported by the United States since 1981, was toppled when it became abundantly clear it no longer represented the aspirations of the Egyptian people. Mubarak was seen as an autocrat who perpetuated the interests of a corrupt regime and a ruler who owed his power to external support and foreign assistance, largely from the United States (1.3 billion USD annually). The US's backing of the region's corrupt and dysfunctional regimes, such as the Mubarak's, has alienated reformist social movements and further discredited US foreign policy in the region. Nearly 20 percent of Egyptians live below the national poverty line, according to the World Bank, and about 44 percent of the population lives on 2 USD per day or less.²⁶ Moreover, uneven development has led to the emergence of an affluent class in predominantly lower middle class and poor cities such as Cairo and Alexandria. Since 1991, under IMF and World Bank guidance, Egypt has adopted a myriad of neoliberal policies, constantly causing workers strikes and demonstrations.

The Fallout from the Uprisings

Several far-reaching implications will follow from these uprisings. First, we will witness the spread of solidarity and democratizing movements throughout the region. The uprisings will have particular importance for a country such as Iran where a theocratic system grew out of a revolutionary movement. Ending the bargain with autocrats may lead to a push for a reasonable resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Finally, many ruling elites in the MENA region will seriously question the neoliberal policies of previous US administrations that have arguably led to economic difficulties and rising levels of unemployment for the youth, at least in the short term.

Amid the growing celebration and the joy of rebellion against tyranny, it is important not to forget to ask the serious questions. What will the new MENA region look like? For Egyptians, there is a long way to go to end the Mubarak regime's legacy. It is premature to say that the power vested in the government is moving to the people in the Second Republic. We do not know the answers to several other questions that will most likely bedevil Egypt and its leaders in the coming years. Who will emerge from this revolution, another military leader or a civilian government? Which government can better cope with the economic reality of life in Egypt, given that nearly 40 percent of Egyptians live on 2 USD or less a day?²⁷ How can the developed world recalibrate its policies toward Egypt and use its leverage to nudge along this transition successfully? How would this popular revolution and images of mass euphoria on Cairo's streets affect the rest of the Arab world?

The strategy of pressuring non-democratic Arab regimes to introduce reforms will produce positive results

No one can say with a modicum of certainty whether the political landscape of the region has changed irrevocably. By most accounts, other monarchies in the MENA region may come under pressure very soon, if they have not already. The

Egyptian experience could send out a strong message to the young monarchs of Morocco and Jordan. If democracy is going to be a reality in Egypt, the old structures of power must be dismantled. We should be mindful of what comes next and the extent to which different groups (secular and non-secular) will be fairly and justly represented in the formation of a democratic government. True, the army decided *not* to go down with Mubarak, but will it be the mid-wife of a nurturing democracy in Egypt?

Positive results will follow if the military “negotiates” the transition toward democracy with other groups in the interim period. On March 4, 2011, Prime Minister Ahmad Shafiq and his cabinet resigned and Ossam Sharaf was renamed the new interim prime minister to form a new cabinet. The army has pledged to end the state of emergency imposed since 1981, lift regulations on political parties and the press, and dissolve Mubarak’s National Democratic Party. These changes notwithstanding, the army remains a key player—either overtly or behind-the-scenes. The credibility of the army will soon be put to another political test: What is going to happen to the current group of senior commanders, who have owed their positions to the former President Mubarak and have benefited from the status quo by becoming a privileged economic class? How are they going to deal with the demands of the majority of Egyptians who seek a fairer distribution of the country’s wealth and power? It is not yet clear, as one observer notes, whether the generals’ understanding of “democracy” comports with the hopes so vividly expressed by the Egyptian people.²⁸ History has also shown us that revolutions typically begin with goodwill and a general sense of empowerment, but too often wind up with less than desirable—if not tumultuous—results. It will be interesting to see how the ensuing power struggle among Egyptian ruling elite takes shape. In the following sections, we address some of these issues with an eye toward their broader implications for the region.

Solidarity, Rebellion, and Emerging Divisions

The democratic uprisings in North Africa demonstrate that maintaining order and stability can no longer be divorced from upholding human rights, human security, and social justice.²⁹ The young generation of educated men and women throughout the Arab world and beyond appear to be more open and sympathetic

to a liberal, constitutional order. Increasingly, this generation has shown more interest in addressing economic and political grievances, including the issues of governmental competence, corruption, and growth, than grand ideological statements.³⁰ The leaderless uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and the rest of the Arab world attest to the fact that the time has come to end the bargain with autocrats.³¹

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The strategy of pressuring non-democratic Arab regimes to introduce reforms will produce positive results. There are, however, risks associated with promoting reforms, but those risks are far more manageable than the risks associated with continuing to support autocrats—a posturing that has become an unfortunate staple of US foreign policy. In the future, a US position of supporting political reforms will serve a dual purpose: It will contain further unrest and uprisings in the region; but more importantly, it can and will successfully reduce the capabilities of terrorist groups and organizations—both financially and socially—to operate and recruit. The triumph of a peaceful popular movement to rid Egypt of its longtime autocrat, Hosni Mubarak, has been a nightmare for groups such as al-Qaeda. For the United States, this may be a time of great promise for the much-vaunted, ongoing “war against terror,” but only through diplomacy and promotion of human rights can the final goal of a safer world be reached.

While the essence of these uprisings in the Arab world has been that people can forge a new sense of national identity built on the idea of citizenship, one that will transcend sects, ethnicity, clans, and other political or ideological divisions, the emerging political dynamics on the ground demonstrate that the sense of national identity has given way to violence pitting the Coptic Christian minority against their Muslim neighbors in Egypt, a Sunni Muslim majority against Christians and heterodox Alawite Muslims minorities in Syria, and coastal Tunisians with secular leanings against those who live inland and are deeply committed to religious ideologies. Although many people continue to struggle to imagine new possibilities, some remain fearful of instability and insecurity in states that have failed to come up with a sense of self that transcends such divisions.³²

Today, two cases of Bahrain and Libya are emblematic of such divisions that threaten the promise of Arab uprisings. Bahrain, a tiny island kingdom, is a new boiling pot where rhetoric and reality have clashed head-on. The revealing details

regarding the pockets of poverty in Bahrain—a country of less than a million people, known for being the center of banking in the Persian Gulf region, and in fact one of the richest countries in GNP per capita terms (14,187 USD)—should come as no surprise.

The United States and the United Kingdom have supported Bahrain's ruling family because they have allowed the United States to operate naval bases on 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.

Similarly, the uprisings in Libya are reactions to the uneven distribution of oil wealth and life in a police state, reflecting widespread frustration among Libyans who have just seen their immediate neighbors to the east (Egypt) and west (Tunisia) achieve what they have sought for a long time. With a population of just 6.4 million and a GNP per capita of 16,430 USD, Libya is one of the region's wealthiest countries. The disparity of wealth in western Libya and Benghazi, however, has caused periodic revolt. Just like Bahrain's autocratic leadership, the 41-year reign of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi now faces unprecedented demands for the rule of law, basic rights, social justice, and a fairer distribution of wealth. The international community has vehemently denounced the Libyan regime's deployment of foreign—especially African—mercenaries to shoot unarmed protesters.

What can or should be done? Can the enforcement of a no-fly zone work? Several disagreements within NATO have occurred over who would take the lead on the no-fly zone or on how to proceed in enforcing the United Nations' arms embargo against Libya. The leaders of Germany, and Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan voiced concerns that this mission might end up becoming an occupation—not a brief intervention.³³ Eventually, however, a consensus was reached within all 28 NATO member states to take over the responsibility of enforcing the no-fly zone and arms embargo.

The Arab League's support for a no-fly zone as well as Arab countries' (Qatar and the United Arab Emirates) participation in establishing such a zone and offering humanitarian missions was equally crucial. Yet, the lack of clarity regarding

the extent of the allied mandate in the operation against Libya raises a key question: What is the endgame? Is it to promote a selective containment or removal of Qaddafi's regime? A selective containment is likely to lead to a divided Libya, a less attractive option given the foreboding specter of an all-out intertribal and interprovincial war on the horizon.³⁴ Similarly, the post-regime scenario remains unclear. The opposition movement headed by the Libyan National Council (LNC), the so-called provisional government, which controls the country's eastern parts, lacks a democratic agenda at this stage. Despite defending their cause, the Obama Administration appeared uncertain about the political and ideological position of these rebels. US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, was blunt on this issue, saying that the administration lacked a clear picture of the rebels. Senator John McCain, in contrast, has noted they were "ordinary people" united by a desire to topple Qaddafi: "I do not see any al-Qaeda influence here. These are people who rose up against a brutal dictator."³⁵ Critics have insisted that without decisive military power and stronger backing for the rebels a perilous stalemate is likely. The United States, they have argued, should give the rebels communication gear and recognize their provisional government.³⁶

Conclusion

Some Western scholars have expressed doubts about the worldwide spread of human rights, arguing that although the human rights discourse has achieved a pivotal place on the global political agenda in recent years, it has not succeeded in making the transition to the local sphere, especially in non-Western, traditional societies.³⁷ The promise of democratic change sweeping across the MENA region challenges this argument, illustrating that the Arab world is more politically mobilized and that the habit of deference to authoritarian rule has been broken.³⁸ The aspiration for basic human rights, articulated in universal terms, by the people in the MENA region is emblematic of a yearning for the same basic civil and political liberties that Westerners have—both conceptually and institutionally—sought. As the entire region experiences an awakening, the political parlance is changing. To some observers, ordinary citizens themselves depict the heart of this moment as a revolution for dignity. To others, however, these uprisings are not merely political demands for more democracy, but direct popular backlashes to widespread economic despair, rising food prices, and high unemployment rates, especially among the youth. In this basic sense, these revolts are a clear expression of the people's rejection of the neoliberal policies imposed by the IMF and World Bank.³⁹

As far as the Western world, and especially the United States, is concerned, the policy of unmitigated political support for unpopular and corrupt govern-

ments in the region is unsustainable. It has become increasingly clear that US strategic interests dovetail nicely with democratic, rather than autocratic, governments. Defending revolutions in North Africa but protecting other undemocratic regimes in the Middle East is increasingly reminiscent of a 64-year US foreign policy that has been chiefly based on safeguarding the status quo. The real question is how to make the proper policy adjustment on the basis of the new realities. There is a need to reflect on the deeper causes of the revolution in North Africa, to re-examine the policy approaches that have so far yielded no solution to the lingering problems of political unrest and change. As the terms of governance in the region are permanently altered, diplomatic maneuvers and marginal adjustments alone are not enough.

The search in the West for a new foreign policy towards the MENA region has just begun. It should be based on fostering emancipatory politics from below rather than containing chaos and political Islam. The road to regional democratization goes through a “Marshall Plan” for the MENA region that addresses the massive structural challenges facing the region’s economies. The pursuit of democratic changes and reforms, such as government transparency and a more effective distribution of oil and aid money for infrastructure development and education, is a worthwhile goal.

Endnotes

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