

Prioritizing Democracy: How the Next President Should Re-Orient U.S. Policy in the Middle East

It seems unlikely that U.S. policy toward the Middle East will get much attention during the 2012 presidential campaign, especially when it comes to the epochal transformations under way in the Arab world, colloquially referred to as the “Arab Spring.” It received painfully little airtime as the various Republican contenders jostled for their party nomination. There may be some discussion of how best to confront Iran. If Iraq slides back into civil war, as seems ever more possible, there may be some painful debates over who “lost” it. And Republicans have routinely attacked Barack Obama for being insufficiently supportive of Israel, and will continue to do so. But there is seemingly little desire to address what are likely to prove the most influential events of all those currently transpiring across the region. This is in stark contrast to the 2008 contest, where Middle East policy figured prominently in the campaigns of most major candidates.

It was in 2008 that Barack Obama positioned himself as the anti-Bush, drawing sharp contrasts with Republicans on democracy promotion, the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iran, and, of course, Iraq. For many Americans—and many Arabs—the

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promise to reorient U.S. foreign policy was key to Obama's appeal. Yet after a brief honeymoon period, opposition to American policies in the region soared under the Obama administration. In fact, according to several polls, U.S. favorability ratings have been lower under President Obama than they were during the final days of the Bush administration.

What was once a major strength and source of appeal for Obama has become a potential liability. Indeed, on the Middle East, President Obama's first term will be defined by the Arab Spring and his response to it. In part because it initially deprioritized democracy promotion in the region, the Obama administration was caught unprepared. As late as January 25, 2011—the day Egypt's revolution began—Secretary of State Hillary Clinton famously stated, "Our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable." Eventually, senior U.S. officials responded to Cairo's massive demonstrations by calling for an immediate transition and by using their influence to urge Egypt's military—which receives over 20 percent of its budget from the United States—to refrain from using force against protesters. Since then, the administration has tried to get on the right side of history, with President Obama repeatedly proclaiming his support for Arab democratic aspirations. Yet the rhetoric has not been translated into clear policy initiatives, let alone significant material assistance. A major critique of neoconservatives and Arab revolutionaries alike is that the Obama administration has—in nearly every country facing mass protest—been slow to support protesters on the ground.

For its part, the Obama administration has avoided articulating a broader vision or grand strategy and instead emphasized the need for a "boutique strategy" that focuses on the specifics of each particular case. Considering the vastly different contexts of each country, this is unavoidable. Yet, a case-by-case approach, to be successful, needs to be guided by a coherent vision. Despite the historical import of the Arab Spring, there is nothing approaching the unified purpose of Truman's Marshall Plan or even the rhetorical sharpness of Bush's short-lived "freedom agenda." The scale and scope of Obama's declared policies can at times seem tepid. The amount of U.S. economic assistance promised to transitional countries is minimal, dwarfed by the commitments made by the Gulf countries.

In the United States, there is growing sentiment, particularly on the Left, that America's declining influence and negligible credibility in the region compel it to adopt a "hands-off" approach and reduce its footprint in the Arab world. Yet it is precisely because of its still considerable power and influence in the region that the United States can and

should provide critical support to Arab countries transitioning to democracy. After supporting autocratic regimes for more than five decades, the United States has a second chance to get it right and, in the process, build considerable goodwill among Arab populations and the governments they elect. That new governments are likely to be Islamist in orientation only strengthens the argument for sustained U.S. engagement. By establishing a working relationship with Islamist parties, the United States can encourage them to consider and respect key U.S. security interests, such as isolating Iran, pursuing peace with Israel, maintaining a stable oil market, and continuing vital counterterrorism cooperation.

Whether Obama is reelected or replaced by a Republican, the United States must:

- Articulate a comprehensive strategy toward the Middle East that advances American long-term interests by prioritizing the support of democracy and democrats in the region.
- Institutionalize the promotion of Arab democracy by coordinating the funding of a multilateral “reform endowment” that would provide clear incentives to Arab countries to implement necessary reforms.
- Pursue a strategic dialogue with rising Islamist parties in key countries of interest.
- Recognize that the window for a two-state solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict is closing, commit to rebuilding frayed ties with Israeli and Palestinian leaders, and outline clear U.S. parameters on borders, right of return, and the status of Jerusalem.

The Obama Record

Obama’s record on the Middle East, and the Arab Spring in particular, is challenging to assess because of the unrealistic expectations set early on. When he first took office—in part because of how he ran his presidential campaign and in part because he seemed the opposite of George W. Bush in every way—Arabs of all stripes (and often of radically different viewpoints) were well disposed toward the president. His June 4, 2009, Cairo address was applauded across the Middle East and seemed to be the first sign that Obama would be the sort of leader that so many in the region had hoped for. But the disappointment quickly set in. Beyond some limited programming on entrepreneurship and some science and technology cooperation, there was surprisingly little follow-up

after the speech.

Initially, the administration put the pursuit of Arab-Israeli peace at the core of its Middle East policy—as signified by the appointment of special envoy George Mitchell. Administration heavyweights let it be known that they believed that once the conflict was satisfactorily resolved, a truly refashioned relationship with the Middle East would become possible. But the administration’s almost single-minded focus on halting settlement construction backfired, arousing the ire of the Israeli government while distracting from the key Palestinian concerns of borders and the right of return. Faced with this initial rebuke, the administration seemed to lose interest in the Israeli--Palestinian issue, and thereafter few new ideas or initiatives were forthcoming. When Senator Mitchell resigned in May 2011, the administration made no move to replace him with someone of similar stature.

Compared with its predecessor, the Obama administration put little emphasis on promoting democracy abroad. As early as March 2009, Egypt’s ambassador to the United States, Sameh Shukri, approvingly noted that bilateral ties were improving because Washington was dropping its demands “for human rights, democracy, and religious and general freedoms.” In her first trip to Cairo, that same month, Hillary Clinton assured the Egyptian government that “conditionality is not our policy.” Meanwhile, U.S. democracy assistance to Egypt was slashed by 60 percent (from \$54 million to \$20 million) and funding for civil society and good governance programs in Jordan fell by 44 and 36 percent, respectively.

The administration’s priority, instead, was strengthening government-to-government relations, something that Obama administration officials felt had suffered unnecessarily under the Bush administration. The relationship with Egypt had gotten so icy that President Hosni Mubarak suspended his annual visits to Washington for five years. Journalist Spencer Ackerman, who interviewed Obama’s foreign policy advisers extensively during the 2008 campaign, wrote that the Obama Doctrine was “dignity promotion” rather than democracy promotion. Indeed, the common thread throughout the statements and speeches of Obama and his senior advisers is the emphasis on institutional reform, economic development, and poverty alleviation first, and free and fair elections later. Such gradualism may have made sense for status quo powers like the United States that sought to avoid the untidiness of rapid democratization, but it made little sense for Arabs, who had already waited decades and only seen their societies grow more closed and repressive.

In the lead-up to elections in Egypt, Jordan, and Bahrain in late 2010, the Obama administration did little to exert pressure on leaders in these countries, all three of them close allies. The polls produced the most unrepresentative parliaments in Egyptian and Jordanian history—in Egypt because of widespread fraud and in Jordan because of an opposition boycott. Throughout the region, there was a pervasive sense of steady political deterioration, after the short-lived democratic openings of the “first Arab Spring” of 2004 and 2005, triggered in part by the Bush administration’s democracy promotion measures.

After the Arab uprisings began in early 2011, the Obama administration stated that it supported the peaceful struggles for freedom and congratulated the Tunisian and Egyptian people on their revolutions. The administration’s rhetorical support for democracy—particularly the pressure on Mubarak to leave office—was seen as an ominous sign by Arab regimes, particularly Saudi Arabia, and created significant tension between the two countries. At the same time, the United States tried to reassure Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and other allies that it stood behind them. President Obama reportedly called King Abdullah of Jordan personally to assure him of American support. He also sent the State Department’s then number three official, William J. Burns, and Admiral Michael G. Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on a tour of Arab capitals to demonstrate Washington’s commitment to their bilateral ties. Rather than assuaging the fears created by the Arab uprisings, the administration’s diplomatic efforts backfired. They alienated a wide range of potentially pro-American groups, simultaneously convincing Arab protesters and revolutionaries that Obama was siding with the dictators and panicking Arab autocrats into suspecting he was backing revolutions across the board.

The administration’s efforts at a nuanced policy toward the Arab Spring—what its critics damned as half-hearted and half-baked—produced additional confusion with its decisions on Libya. There, the Obama administration initially disparaged the appropriateness of a military option. Washington, to its credit, later reversed course and took decisive action after Muammar Qaddafi’s forces threatened to commit massacres in Benghazi, the seat of the democratic rebellion. Even then, however, France and Britain, Libyan rebels, and some Republicans like Senator John McCain attacked Obama for waiting too long. Moreover, after the first few weeks of the NATO operation, Washington publicly distanced itself from the ongoing fight and withdrew considerable American military hardware, once again leaving Arabs to wonder just what parts of the Arab Spring the United States was trying to support—and why. Ultimately, Libya was a qualified

success for President Obama. Without American diplomatic and military support, the NATO intervention would not have happened and Qaddafi would almost certainly still be in power today. Yet it did little to ease the confusion over how the administration intended to pursue American interests in the region.

Washington's handling of Syria has only muddied the waters further. If the administration's handling of Libya was a qualified success, then Syria can only be seen as the opposite. Early on, the intensifying regime violence and the militarization of some opposition elements provoked only the most grudging and tardy of condemnations from the United States, coupled with half-hearted diplomatic efforts. Moreover, the violence in Syria provided a rebuke to the Obama administration's early attempts to peel Syria off from Iran and bring it into the Western orbit, making those efforts seem naïve or even cynical in retrospect. After holding out hope that Bashar al-Asad might be persuaded to reform, the United States finally called on him to step down in August 2011 and began implementing asset freezes, travel bans, and sanctions on the regime and its most senior officials. As the Syrian uprising reached its one-year anniversary, the Syrian regime's assault against civilian population intensified, dragging the country into all-out civil war. With the international community failing to stop the killing, the criticisms that the United States was either leading from behind—or not leading at all—persisted.

In formulating responses to the many and varied Arab uprisings, the Obama administration has opted for slow deliberation and caution, avoiding the strong, sometimes impulsive, gestures of the Bush administration. But the line between caution and irresolution can easily be blurred. Whatever the genesis of the term “leading from behind,” it does seem to capture key aspects of the administration's approach to the Middle East and the president's temperament on foreign policy more generally. The declining influence of the United States in comparison with the influence of rising powers like China, Brazil, India, and Turkey has led many American policymakers and analysts to conclude that the United States cannot act like it once did and that it must allow, even encourage, others to lead. Senior American officials routinely emphasize the inability of the United States to shape events in the Arab world and alter the behavior of reluctant allies. However, America's actual influence often stems from how others, friends and enemies alike, perceive it rather than from a strict assessment of its objective ability or (more often) willingness to take action. By repeatedly discounting U.S. leverage in the region, the Obama administration has undermined the impact of its own declarations and policy

measures when it does choose to act.

The result, in the Arab world, has been a noticeable power vacuum, with growing confusion over the thrust of American policy. What role does the United States see for itself in a rapidly changing region? “I’ve never seen Americans so confused and worried as I have ever since January [2011],” said Egypt’s Hisham Kassem, a prominent liberal publisher. While this may be overstating the case, the narrative of a United States that is feckless, incoherent, and increasingly irrelevant is one that has taken hold in Arab public discourse. And in the Middle East, perception is often reality.

The Republican Critique

Republican responses to Obama’s policies toward the Middle East in general and the Arab Spring specifically run the gamut. Republican hawks who remain close to the neoconservatives, such as John McCain and to a lesser extent Mitt Romney, believe Obama’s “less is more” approach has endangered efforts to promote democracy in the region. Other Tea Party–influenced Republicans, animated by a sense of American overcommitment abroad, have criticized Obama’s adventurism in Libya and suggested that he too quickly withdrew support from embattled allies, including President Mubarak.

As varied as they are, two common threads run through Republican critiques. First, they portray President Obama as an indecisive leader whose ad hoc, incoherent policies have undermined American credibility abroad. Second, they argue that Obama is not comfortable with American supremacy and is abdicating leadership to others in acknowledgement of a “post-American century.” With few exceptions, the Republican candidates failed to offer anything resembling a coherent alternative to Obama’s policies. To the extent that they have, the candidates, save Ron Paul, focused primarily on three issues—Israel, Iran, and the threat of Islamism—which gives some sense of where priorities will lie under a Republican administration. Republican policy toward emerging democracies—or existing autocracies—would primarily be a function of a given government’s positions on Israel and Iran as well as whether or not it had an Islamist orientation.

Republican candidates have reserved their harshest rhetoric for Obama’s approach to Israel. Romney, for example, has regularly attacked the administration for throwing “Israel under the bus” and blames Obama’s policies of “appeasement” for encouraging the Palestinians to pursue statehood at the United Nations. Meanwhile,

several candidates cast doubt on the very notion of an independent Palestinian state—the product of decades of bipartisan consensus. Most famously, former Speaker Newt Gingrich called the Palestinians an “invented people.” In addition, he declared shariah law a “mortal threat to the survival of freedom in the United States and the world as we know it.”

Indeed, Republicans have routinely brought up the specter of an Islamist threat and have tended to lump nonviolent Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, with violent ones, such as al Qaeda. The Obama administration, in contrast, has begun engaging, if reluctantly, with the Muslim Brotherhood and has repeatedly affirmed the need to respect democratic outcomes, regardless of who wins. President Obama’s willingness to engage with Islamists has invited a flurry of attacks from conservatives that he is soft on extremism and indulges anti-American forces. There is some degree of fantasy in these criticisms. Notwithstanding the aggressive anti-Islamist rhetoric coming from most candidates, a Republican administration would have little choice but to adapt to new realities and work with Islamically influenced governments too.

Middle East Policy in the Next Presidential Term

None of the extant problems of the Middle East are likely to abate over the next four years. There may be some bright spots—Tunisia in particular shows considerable promise—but the overall regional trend is unlikely to improve significantly for some time, and it could well get worse before it gets better. Thus the central question for the next American president is the extent to which he wants to try to alleviate the problems of the region and help steer it away from the worst paths and toward better ones. The inward turn of American public opinion, political deadlock in Washington, and the country’s continuing economic problems will all limit just how much any president might do for the Middle East. None of these obstacles, however, is so great that determined leadership might not be able to overcome or at least mitigate them.

The direction of U.S. policy toward the region is far from settled and is likely to vary considerably depending on who wins the November election. During the primary campaign, different presidential candidates staked out very different positions, from neo-isolationism, to restrained involvement, to a much more muscular role in the region. On the Middle East, the divide between the Democratic administration and mainstream Republicans has continued to grow, certainly in rhetoric but also, increasingly, on policy—

a result of real philosophical differences over the importance of American leadership during a time of significant financial constraints and greater global competition. If President Obama is not elected, there is still a considerable range of views within the Republican Party itself.

With the lack of bipartisan consensus or even a consensus within either party, there is an opportunity for a frank and wide-ranging debate about the past and future of U.S. policy in the Middle East. The relative decline in America's influence and standing in the region—whether real or perceived—can, and should, be reversed, and the Arab Spring presents a particularly opportune moment to do so. Many of the American establishment's long-held assumptions about the Middle East have proved false. A Democratic or Republican administration must be prepared to think creatively about how to reengage with the region on the basis of a new set of principles. The aspirations of ordinary Arabs can no longer be cast aside as irrelevant to U.S. interests. Americans are no longer engaging solely with unelected and unaccountable regimes but with populations that are demanding a voice not just in their own affairs but in foreign policy as well.

Active and consistent support for democratic change in the Arab world—even if it means occasionally angering long-standing allies—is important for a number of reasons. First, it aligns American policy with regional trends that are irreversible. Instead of being caught unaware once again, the United States should anticipate the changes to come—and recognize that the region is growing more, not less, democratic. It means little to support the demands of protesters after they have already won. It will send a much stronger signal to the region's future leaders if Washington encourages and defends them when it is not easy and when their victory is far from a foregone conclusion.

Second, before the Arab Spring, anti-American sentiment could be—and often was—ignored or dismissed as irrelevant. After all, it mattered what governments did, and most Arab governments were firmly in the pro-U.S. orbit. In the coming years, however, what Arabs think and what their governments do will be much more closely linked. And, as long as tens of millions of Arabs dislike the United States, viewing it as a destructive force in the region, Arab democracies will feel compelled to act against American interests to gain popular support. Of course, Arab public opinion, fueled by deeply held resentments, will not change overnight, but, over the long run, the United States can work to build new relationships—based on shared values and common interests—with the region's rising democracies.

As for countries that are not democracies, and may not be anytime soon, a forward-looking strategy is required. Many, including Morocco, Jordan, and Kuwait, will follow a middle path, somewhere between outright revolution and total repression. Here, the United States and like-minded nations should work to persuade them that they must start or continue down the path of reform because substantive change, however difficult, is ultimately the only viable option. Rather than being satisfied with partial, cosmetic reforms, the United States should clarify that the ultimate goal is a revamped political system in which the king or dictator relinquishes significant power to elected bodies. The United States should judge reform efforts by that standard. In these cases, it is critical that American policy be seen as supportive and beneficial to those who are willing to tread this arduous path. Reform is costly and often painful, and material assistance of all kinds from the United States and its allies should figure at least as prominently as the threat of sanctions—diplomatic, economic, and otherwise—in Washington’s efforts to help foster stabilizing change in the Middle East.

Moving in this direction requires measures that institutionalize the promotion of Arab democracy. The next president should coordinate the funding of a “reform endowment” that would provide clear incentives to Arab countries to implement necessary reforms. The endowment would include a minimum of \$5 billion and would be available to all interested countries. Receiving aid would be conditioned on meeting a series of explicit, measurable benchmarks on democratization. These benchmarks would be the product of extensive negotiations with interested countries. Unused funds would be reinvested, while new democracies would be asked to contribute annual dues to help grow the endowment over time. For skeptical Arab audiences, the message from the United States and other donor countries would be clear—democracy cannot be imposed, but it can be actively and vigorously supported.

For transitional states like Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, benchmarks could include military noninterference in civilian affairs, the establishment of judicial independence, and the protection of a vibrant, independent press. For liberalizing monarchies, such as Jordan, Morocco, and Kuwait, benchmarks should focus on expanded political space for opposition groups and the gradual devolution of power to elected institutions that are accountable to the people. This reform endowment should be funded with contributions from the United States, European nations, Turkey, Brazil, Qatar, and other like-minded powers. An international board would apportion loans and grants to states seeking to bring

about real reform.

Democracy skeptics will counter that such efforts are in vain and that democratization has its dark side in light of the rise of Islamist parties. In a sense, they are right; in the Middle East, the future is Islamist. Instead of denying or fighting what is now an unmistakable reality, the United States and Europe should adapt by pursuing a strategic dialogue with Islamist actors across the region. Such parties are either already playing major roles in parliament and government or are likely to do so in the near future. Therefore, U.S. interests in the region will, whether Americans like it or not, be inextricably tied to theirs. With this in mind, there is an urgent need to foster a degree of mutual understanding and trust with these groups. Many of them, including Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, have made clear their desire to engage with the United States, realizing that American support will be critical to boosting trade and attracting foreign investment. Again, timing matters. Such relationships should be developed before these parties come to power, rather than afterward, when American leverage is likely to be less effective. With such channels, the United States can exert influence—and, if necessary, pressure—when Islamist parties overreach and take action that threatens vital U.S. interests in the region.

It is, by now, a cliché, but the importance of getting on the “right side of history” should not be underestimated. Yet all the support of Arab democracy will still fail to usher in a refashioned U.S. relationship with the region if, as currently seems likely, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to fester. There is reason to fear that the window of opportunity for a two-state solution is closing, and the next president will have the weighty task of trying to resuscitate a defunct peace process. A Republican administration is unlikely to make this a priority, while a second-term Obama administration will continue to be constrained by its tense and sometimes acrimonious relationship with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (or a similarly minded right-wing government). A top priority for the next president must therefore be rebuilding trust with Israeli leaders and reaching out to the Israeli public. A presidential visit and public address in Israel, focusing on the concerns and fears of Israelis, would be a good place to start.

The Arab Spring will see the emergence of governments that are less amenable to Israel's security interests. The more democratic the Middle East becomes, the more anti-Israel new elected governments will be. Israel's isolation is only likely to grow. With this in mind, the United States should make clear that it stands firmly by Israel during a difficult time, while also impressing upon it the need to act sooner rather than later to

make the difficult but ultimately necessary compromises for a durable peace.