United States Foreign Policy Towards the Arab Spring

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U.S. President Barack Obama came into office deeply skeptical about the policies of his predecessor, George W. Bush, to make democracy promotion a key, if not dominant, aspect of American policy toward the Middle East. Shortly before his own inauguration in January 2009, Obama stated that while he did not discount "the sincerity and worthiness of President Bush's concerns about democracy and human rights," he was critical of what he said was Bush's push for, and reliance on, elections in the Middle East as a barometer for democratic progress. (1) Implicit in this criticism was that Bush's policies also angered long-standing U.S. allies in the region with few positive results to show for it. When authoritarian leaders like Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak resisted U.S. pressure to democratize in the late 2005-early 2006 period after initially making some political reforms earlier in 2005 in response to this pressure, there was no "Plan B" in the administration's playbook. The Bush administration ultimately backed down, and U.S. policy was left with the worst of all outcomes--a disappointed group of democratic activists in the Arab world (whose hopes were raised and then dashed) and an angry group of authoritarian leaders who believed that U.S. officials were ungrateful for the stances that they had taken to support unpopular U.S. policies in the region. (2)

Instead, President Obama pursued four tracks in the region that he believed would set him apart from the Bush administration and ultimately work to the U.S. advantage. First, he would concentrate on solving the very difficult Israeli-Palestinian conflict that would also bring about a general Arab-Israeli peace, finally removing this chief thorn in the region. Second, he would pursue a major outreach to the Muslim world to improve the U.S. image which had taken a battering during the Bush years. Third, he would draw down the U.S. military forces in Iraq which had been a major source of anti-Americanism in the area. And fourth, he would try to negotiate with Iran, labeled one of the "axis-of-evil" countries in the Bush years, to ensure that Tehran would not pursue nuclear weapons and to put the troubled U.S.-Iranian relationship on a different (and better) keel.

The Obama administration devoted considerable time and energy to these policies, at least initially. The highly respected former U.S. senator, George Mitchell--credited for helping to bring about peace in Northern Ireland--was appointed special envoy for the
Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and President Obama took a very tough and principled stand against Israeli settlement building in the West Bank. President Obama himself delivered a major speech in Cairo, Egypt in June 2009 in an effort to reset U.S. relations with the Muslim world and to dispel popular notions in the Middle East that the U.S. was somehow at war with Islam. (3) He reduced the U.S. military footprint in Iraq and used U.S. diplomatic pressure to help bring Iraq's disparate political groups together to form a government. And he sent messages to the Iranian leadership and the Iranian people to offer better relations while coordinating negotiating strategies with the other P5+1 (UN Security Council permanent members plus Germany) vis-a-vis Iran on the nuclear issue, a process that had already begun in the last year of the Bush administration.

The results were mixed. Although Obama fulfilled his campaign pledge to draw down U.S. forces from Iraq and ultimately end the U.S. military's combat mission, and he compelled Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to freeze settlement construction for a time (with the notable exception of such building around Jerusalem), the peace process floundered. The Palestinians, taking Obama's position on settlements to heart, wanted a permanent settlement freeze, including Jerusalem, and Netanyahu and his mostly right-wing cabinet seemed to make a two-state solution with no defined borders contingent on the Palestinian Authority explicitly accepting Israel as a Jewish state, which the Palestinians believed would preclude any right of return, even symbolically. President Obama's outreach speech in Cairo--in which he spoke of the "legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own" (4)--was well-received, but his failure to bring about Israeli-Palestinian peace later dampened what goodwill the speech had achieved.

As for Iran, its flawed presidential elections in the summer of 2009 seemed to put the Obama administration in a quandary. When thousands of Iranians took to the streets to protest the elections, in which President Ahmedinejad was declared the winner even before the votes were counted, and the regime used violence against the demonstrators, the Obama administration was initially hesitant to take a strong stand. It reticence was due to the fact that it believed it must deal with the Iranian government over the nuclear
issues and, therefore, angering this government would put such negotiations in jeopardy. In addition, given the strong sense of nationalism prevalent in Iran, any embrace by the U.S. of the opposition, as represented by the so-called Green Movement, might have the effect of labeling the opposition as U.S. lackeys and be counter-productive. (5) Although Obama later came down on the side of the protestors, his initial, cautious reaction proved to be a disappointment to Iranian democratic activists and provoked anger among many of his Republican critics in the United States.

In his Cairo speech in June 2009, Obama spoke about the people's desire for universal freedoms, such as "the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed," but democracy promotion was not at the top of his agenda. Indeed, in that speech, democracy promotion was mentioned toward the end of his address. Moreover, Obama did not call for authoritarian governments in the region to be toppled. Rather, he mentioned in a general way that governments should maintain power through consent, not coercion, respect the rights of minorities, and participate in the political arena through tolerance and compromise. (6) This can be characterized as a sort of "status quo policy with reforms," but the Obama administration was clearly not pushing this policy very hard amidst its other priorities in the region.

It is not that President Obama did not care about the issue of democracy in the Middle East in his first years of his presidential term. (7) Rather, the mixing of democracy promotion with U.S. policy that had characterized the Bush presidency had many negative connotations (like the Iraq war) that Obama wanted to distance himself from. Moreover, democracy promotion had proven to be very difficult and had angered longstanding U.S. allies in the region—better to leave that issue for another time when conditions were more conducive was probably the thinking. In the meantime, Obama wanted and needed these authoritarian leaders for help with the peace process, and no one foresaw that the actions of an inconspicuous street vendor could set off a chain of events that would change the Middle East in profound ways.
President Obama's approach to the Arab Spring

Barack Obama, in contrast to his predecessor, George W. Bush, thus did not have a proactive policy on democratization in the Middle East for the reasons mentioned earlier. When the Arab Spring broke out unexpectedly in early 2011, it soon became the dominant story in the Middle East, eclipsing all other issues for a time. The Obama administration was, therefore, compelled to grapple with this democratization wave in ways it had not thought through before and to fashion a policy approach to these revolutionary upheavals. As will be seen by the following case studies, he and his administration were buoyed on the one hand by the yearnings of the people of the region, particularly its youth, for democratic and accountable government, and tried to get on the "right side of history" by embracing these movements. On the other hand, as leader of a superpower with large strategic stakes in the Middle East, as well as one with a public that was increasingly wary of additional military entanglements in the region, the Obama administration tended to approach each upheaval on a case-by-case basis. This proved to be a classic struggle between ideals and self-interest. In some cases, events on the ground produced a meshing of these two strands in foreign policy, while in other cases ideals clearly took a back seat to self-interest. Consequently, U.S. policy toward the Arab Spring has been inconsistent even though, on the rhetorical level, the administration has consistently spoken out in favor of democratic change in, and against repressive policies of, countries in the region, even of its allies.

Developments in the Arab Spring - Five cases studies

Tunisia

This was the backdrop when the Arab Spring broke out in Tunisia in January 2011. The Arab Spring took place initially without any U.S. role. Indeed, the United States was not part of the story. The spark literally started the previous month with the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor who was despondent over the humiliation he experienced by
the Ben Ali regime's security apparatus and the lack of economic opportunities faced by his generation. The vendor's death ignited street protests that ultimately led to the fall of the Ben Ali regime in just a few short weeks, but at the cost of some 338 lives and more than 2100 wounded. (8) Although the United States had good relations with the Ben Ali regime, Tunisia was not a significant player in Middle East politics compared to other countries in the region, nor did Tunisia have great strategic value to the United States. At the time, as some scholars have pointed out, "the ripple effects for the rest of the Middle East [from Tunisia] were not expected to be profound."(9) Moreover, although Tunisia had an underground Islamist movement, most of the demonstrators tended to be young people of secular-liberal, middle class backgrounds who yearned for democratic government and economic opportunities that were in tune with American values. Hence, there was no alarm in Washington when Ben Ali fled from Tunisia, and probably some relief that an authoritarian leader who had a poor human rights record was now gone from the country.

Egypt

Egypt presented a different case to U.S. policymakers. It was the most populous country in the Arab world, strategically situated in the heart of the Middle East bordering Israel and one which maintained a cold but steady peace treaty with the Jewish state. Egypt, since the late 1970s, had close military relations with the United States and had granted over-flight rights and expedited transit through the Suez Canal, for U.S. military aircraft and naval ships, respectively. Moreover, as the leading intellectual center of the Arab world--with its well-known secular and religious institutions like Cairo University and Al-Azhar University--what happened in Egypt was watched closely in other parts of the Arab world. (10) In addition, Egyptian President Mubarak, since coming to power in 1981, generally supported U.S. policy initiatives in the region and was seen as a key U.S. ally.
Soon after the toppling of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia, young democracy activists in Egypt took their demands to the streets by using the new social media tools. Trying to understand the protestors but not wishing to anger longstanding ally, Mubarak, Secretary of State Clinton stated publicly on January 24, 2011: "Our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people." (11) Clinton's comments were not well-received by the protestors who demanded the resignation of Mubarak and pressed on with their protests in the face of increased repression by the Egyptian government's security forces.

As the demonstrations increased in late January 2011, the Obama Administration tried to chart a middle course--hoping to work with the Mubarak government to accommodate some of the protestors demands but not calling for a change of government. For example, on January 28 after several days of protests and police violence against the demonstrators, President Obama stated publicly that the Egyptian government should respect the people's universal rights but indicated that he wanted to work with the Mubarak government for a more just and a more free Egypt. Soon after this statement, the White House press spokesman called on Egypt's security forces to refrain from violence and put Egypt on notice that U.S. security assistance would be reviewed based on developments on the ground. (12)

Around this time, the Obama administration sent former U.S. Ambassador to Egypt Frank Wisner to Egypt to confer with Mubarak about an orderly transition. Mubarak had just appointed his General Intelligence Chief, Omar Soliman, as vice president, and Soliman had initiated a dialogue with so-called wise men from the opposition. When Mubarak announced shortly thereafter that he would step down from power in September when the next presidential elections were to be held, that was insufficient for the protestors amassed in Tahrir Square. President Obama then phoned Mubarak on February 1 to urge him to speed up the process, but to no avail. With more demonstrations and bloodshed occurring in the streets of Cairo and other Egyptian cities, Obama went public with his message, urging the Mubarak regime to begin the transition "now." (13) Shortly before this interchange, the Egyptian military establishment most
likely made a decision that their long-term interests rested more with the populace than with the Mubarak government and its internal security apparatus. On January 31, the Egyptian military issued a communiqué in which they pledged that they would not fire on the protestors and said the demands of "freedom of expression through peaceful means" would be guaranteed. President Obama responded positively, and praised the Egyptian military for their patriotism. (14)

What must have gone on behind the scenes is that the U.S. side assessed that with the Egyptian military essentially backing the protestors, Mubarak was now expendable. Even though the Mubarak regime was an authoritarian presidential system, the military was the backbone behind it and had served to shore up the regime when all else failed in the past. But now the military was showing daylight between itself and Mubarak, and the U.S. policymakers concluded that it would back the institution with which it had maintained longstanding ties. Indeed, the Egyptian military always received the lion's share of U.S. assistance to Egypt--for many years this total assistance package was around $2.1 billion, of which the military portion was 1.3 billion. When overall assistance dropped to $1.5 to $1.6 billion, the military share remained at $1.3 billion, an indication of how much both the Egyptian military and the U.S. valued the military component of this aid.

Mubarak finally realized that the game was up and formally resigned on February 11. Power then passed to the leadership of the military establishment, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which took charge of Egypt for the transition period of the democratic process with the support of the populace. In his February 11 speech praising the democratic upheaval in Egypt, President Obama was at his most eloquent. He stated that "Egypt has played a pivotal role in human history for over 6,000 years. But over the last few weeks, the wheel of history turned at a blinding pace as the Egyptian people demanded their universal rights...Egyptians have inspired us, and they've done so by putting the lie to the idea that justice is best gained through violence. For in Egypt, it was the moral force of nonviolence...that bent the arc of history toward justice once more." Obama added that "Today belongs to the people of Egypt, and the American people are
moved by these scenes in Cairo and across Egypt because of who we are as a people and the kind of world we want our children to grow up in." (15) Obama was essentially saying that the ideals Americans cherish are being replicated in Egypt, but it is the Egyptian people who are inspiring us with their courage and commitment to freedom.

If the Egyptian revolution comported to U.S. ideals about democracy, the revolution was also comforting to the United States on the strategic level. Many, if not most, of the young revolutionaries who took part in the large demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir square seemed to be from the university-educated middle class and espoused liberal political values. Although joining them were those who also came from Islamist organizations which were strongly opposed to U.S. policies in the region, the message emanating from the crowd was a positive one of Egyptian patriotism and unity, not anti-Americanism. Some protestors told foreign correspondents that for the first time in their lives, "We felt proud to be Egyptians," (16) meaning that finally the Egyptian people had woken up and had taken control of their destiny and were eager to shape their new government. In addition, the institution that was in charge temporarily was the Egyptian military which generally had a favorable attitude toward the United States. The leaders of the Egyptian military were well-known to U.S. defense officials, and the communication between the two militaries during the revolutionary upheaval was reassuring to Washington.

The problem for the United States (and for Egypt) was that the transition to an elected government in Egypt proved much more difficult--and violent--than anticipated. The ruling generals in the SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) proved to be largely inept in managing this process and exhibited many repressive tendencies, like trying thousands of Egyptians in military courts and subjecting some female protestors to "virginity tests." (17) Throughout most of 2011, U.S. policymakers avoided any direct criticism of the SCAF--hoping to preserve their longstanding ties to the military--while it pursued a dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest and best organized force in Egyptian politics, recognizing that this organization would likely play a role in any future government. (18)
But events inside Egypt in the autumn of 2011 compelled U.S. policymakers to reassess their policy of not criticizing the SCAF. First, demonstrations by Christian Copts in front of the Maspero television station in Cairo on October 9 over an attack on a Coptic church in Upper Egypt resulted in a harsh crackdown of the protestors with many casualties (25 dead in all, 21 of whom were Christians). Footage of the incident--showing armored military vehicles running over demonstrators--went viral over the Internet and prompted sharp criticism of the military by Copts and human rights groups. The military's subsequent decision to take full control of the investigation of the incident only compounded the problem. (19) Next, in November, large demonstrations took place in Tahrir square by both Islamists and secular protestors who were angry over the SCAF's proposed "super constitutional principles" that appeared to shield the military from any parliamentary scrutiny. The SCAF responded by sending in military police who fired into the crowds and beat demonstrators. Protests against the military also broke out in other cities in Egypt. Between November 18 and November 22, over 40 protestors were killed and almost 1800 were injured. These clashes resulted in the resignation of the interim cabinet and the appointed of a new one headed by a former prime minister from the 1980s, Kamal Ganzouri.

The November 2011 clashes also prompted direct criticism from the White House. On November 25, President Obama issued a statement which "condemned the excessive use of force" against the protestors and called for restraint on all sides. He also called for the new Egyptian government to be "empowered with real authority immediately," and said the "transition to democracy must continue," adding that the "full transfer of power to a civilian government must take place in a just and inclusive manner...as soon as possible." (20) Obama's statement was issued not only to criticize the use of violence by the SCAF but to compel the SCAF to set presidential elections sooner rather than later because the SCAF had been vague about when they would relinquish power--exacerbating instability in the country.

U.S. criticism against the SCAF resurfaced the following month, as security forces beat female protestors during a demonstration for women's rights. More clashes followed,
resulting in the deaths of 9 people and 300 wounded. On December 19, 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in a major speech at Georgetown University devoted largely to the empowerment of women as a foreign policy goal, stated forcefully: "Women are being beaten and humiliated in the same streets where they risked their lives for the revolution only a few short months ago." She went on to say that women have been largely shut out of the decision-making process in Egypt and "have been specifically targeted both by security forces and by extremists." (21) Shortly after this speech, the Washington Post reported that some Egyptian officials had denounced it as interference in Egypt's internal affairs, but that did not cause any backtracking on the U.S. part. (22) Meanwhile, that same December, the U.S. Congress approved an Omnibus spending bill which attached conditionality to the $1.3 billion in U.S. military assistance to Egypt--stating specifically that Egypt had to meet certain democratic benchmarks before the aid could be released. Although the Obama administration initially opposed this conditionality, they did receive a national security waiver from Congress. (23)

This was the backdrop to the most serious crisis in U.S.-Egyptian relations in many years--the crackdown on American NGOs (non-governmental organizations) involved in democracy promotion work--that occurred at the end of 2011. On December 29, 2011 Egyptian security forces raided the offices of NDI (National Democratic Institute for International Affairs), IRI (International Republican Institute), and Freedom House among other NGO offices. Equipment was confiscated and some workers were arrested, and the head of the IRI office, Sam Lahood, son of the U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray Lahood, took refuge in the U.S. Embassy in Cairo. (24) Although it is probable that the SCAF did not initiate this crackdown on the NGOs (all evidence points to Minister of International Cooperation Fayza Abouel Naga, a holdover from the Mubarak regime, as the chief instigator), the SCAF initially did nothing to ameliorate the situation.

The crackdown on the NGOs prompted several influential members of Congress to call for a suspension of aid to Egypt. This was not surprising given the fact that these NGOs have long had strong supporters on Capitol Hill. The Obama administration weighed in at the highest levels with the SCAF, as did some influential members of Congress. After
several weeks of back and forth negotiations, the SCAF agreed to let the American and other foreign NGO workers leave the country (prompting sharp criticism from the Egyptian judiciary and political circles) but it left unresolved the status and the indictments against the NGOs themselves and their Egyptian nationals' staff. (25)

Even though the exit of the American NGO workers did not resolve the NGO issue, the Obama administration went ahead in March 2012 in releasing U.S. aid to Egypt by exercising the national security waiver in the legislation. This action prompted sharp criticism of the Obama administration by individuals and groups that normally support the administration, like Senator Patrick Leahy, Democratic chairman of the Senate Foreign Operations Appropriations Subcommittee, and various human rights groups. (26) The administration did not make a convincing case why it was exercising the waiver, but what was likely behind the move was the need, in the administration's eyes, to maintain links with the Egyptian military in the face of a new dynamic within the Egyptian polity. The parliamentary elections of late 2011 and early 2012 resulted in the victory of the Islamist parties, with the Muslim Brotherhood winning about 46 percent of the seats and the more fundamentalist Salafi party winning an additional 24 percent, prompting the Brotherhood to win control of Speakership of the People's Assembly and key parliamentary committees. Although the United States began a dialogue with the Brotherhood in 2011, this was a new relationship and not one with a great deal of trust. Amidst this backdrop, the administration, by continuing the aid flow, demonstrated that it did not want to burn its bridges with the Egyptian military despite its criticisms of the SCAF in late 2011.

Coming into the presidential election phase of the transition (May-June 2012), the Obama administration avoided any public statement about the presidential race so as not to be seen trying to influence the outcome. Such interference would likely backfire. Most probably, the administration would prefer to see a secularist win the presidency as a way of balancing the power of the Brothers and the Salafis in parliament. It would still want the Egyptian military to return to the barracks as they have pledged to do, believing that
continued military rule would only inflame the street, lead to more instability, and ultimately weaken the military as an institution and perhaps the U.S.-Egyptian alliance.

The Egyptian revolution that the Obama administration so warmly embraced in February 2011 has followed an uneven democratic path with many disappointments. On the strategic level, while Egypt has not taken a radical turn or reneged on the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, there are some signs of concern for Washington, like the suspension of the Egyptian-Israeli gas deal in the spring of 2012. (27) During this time of uncertainty, the Obama administration is pursuing a multifaceted approach: trying to defuse the still unresolved NGO issue; trying to maintain links to the Egyptian military; trying to establish new links to the Muslim Brotherhood; trying to avoid becoming an issue in the presidential elections; and trying to come up with new aid to assist the struggling Egyptian economy. Once the presidential elections are held, a new constitution is written, and the military returns to the barracks, it is possible that a somewhat more normal relationship can be re-established between the two countries. However, unlike the past when there was one center of power (the president), the new Egypt will have a more pluralistic polity, necessitating a more nuanced and multifaceted approach than the U.S was used to pursuing.

Libya

Libya presented a different case for the Obama administration. The U.S. had only recently re-established relations with Libya in the last years of the George W. Bush administration after a troubled history that included terrorism against United States soldiers and civilians. While some U.S. oil companies had come back to the country, Libya was not considered a strategic asset to Washington, and so the stakes were different. Several days after Mubarak's ouster in Egypt, demonstrations erupted in Libya. These protests were met with force, and the opposition soon became an armed rebellion against the mercurial and oppressive Qadhafi and his regime. It quickly spread to the eastern region of the country, particularly the city of Benghazi where the rebels took over, and then broke out in the middle coastal part of the country and took on
characteristics of a civil war. Qadhafi, however, quickly regained control of the rebellious parts of the capitol city of Tripoli and then mounted a military offensive against the central coastal cities and appeared to be headed to take Benghazi. All the while, Qadhafi said he would hunt down the oppositionists and kill them "like rats." (28)

The Obama administration was divided on what to do. The Defense Department, under Secretary Robert Gates, publicly voiced strong reservations about intervening militarily. (29) Most likely, having just wound down the costly U.S. military engagement in Iraq, and still in the midst of a war in Afghanistan, Gates was not eager to commit U.S. troops in another Muslim country with all of the headaches, heartaches, and deployments that would entail. On the other side of the debate was the State Department and the staff of the National Security Council who were cognizant of past U.S. failures to intervene in somewhat similar circumstances (such as Rwanda and Bosnia) where the lack or the delay of military intervention wound up costing hundreds of thousands of lives.

A number of interests came together to support U.S. military involvement, albeit without boots on the ground. First, Qadhafi had few, if any, friends in the Arab world, and some leading Arab countries like Saudi Arabia were more than happy to see him go. The Arab League took the unprecedented step of actually endorsing foreign military intervention in another Arab country. Second, Britain and France, for a variety of ideological and economic reasons, appeared to want to take the military lead to oust Qadhafi, or at least aid the rebels in their fight to do so. And third, President Obama appears to have recognized himself or have been influenced by some of his advisors (like Samantha Power, who had written a well-regarded book about how the United States had failed in the past to intervene to stop genocides) to not let a similar situation like a Bosnia or a Rwanda happen on his watch. Speaking at the U.S. Holocaust Museum in 2012 and reflecting back on the Libya situation the year before, Obama stated: "When the Libyan people demanded their rights and Muammar Qadhafi's forces bore down on Benghazi, a city of 700,000, and threatened to hunt down its people like rats, we forged with allies and partners a coalition that stopped his troops in their tracks. And today, the Libyan
people are forging their own future and the world can take pride in the innocent lives that we saved." (30)

After American citizens were evacuated from Libya in February 2011, Obama announced unilateral U.S. sanctions on Libya, freezing some $30 billion of its assets in the United States. At the same time, Obama tried to forge an international consensus on Libya and found a receptive audience, In late February, the UN Security Council imposed an arms embargo on Libya and referred Qadhafi to the International Criminal Court for war crimes. Then, in early March, Obama stated that Qadhafi had lost his legitimacy and must go, but events on the ground painted a different picture. At this point Qadhafi, relying on regime troops and mercenaries, mounted an offensive to take back areas that had fallen to the rebels. With the Arab League calling for the imposition of a no-fly zone, that gave the Western powers the authority to act. The UN Security Council then passed a resolution, with Russia and China abstaining, to provide "all necessary means" to protect the civilians of Libya who were under attack by Qadhafi's forces. Britain, France, the United States and other NATO powers interpreted this resolution liberally and struck Qadhafi's forces. The U.S. took the lead in taking out Libya's air defense systems, and then passed the baton on to the British and French who took the lead in mounting air strikes against Qadhafi's forces, including buildings where Qadhafi might be situated. These strikes were welcomed by the Libyan rebels. (31)

One of Obama's advisers, perhaps not realizing the political ramifications of his words, described the Libyan operation as the U.S. "leading from behind." Obama's Republican critics quickly pounced on this phrase to try to show that his administration was not exercising American leadership. But this policy actually sat well with the American public which did not want the United States to get involved in another messy and costly Middle East engagement. After a few months, the NATO air campaign against Qadhafi's forces and the assistance it provided to the rebels paid off. The Qadhafi regime collapsed and Qadhafi himself was killed by the rebels. That same day, Obama told the American people in a televised address that the fruits of multilateral engagement, as opposed to the U.S. going it alone, achieved positive results: "We've demonstrated what collective action
can achieve in the 21st Century." (32) The cost to the U.S. taxpayer was $1.1 billion, a small fraction compared to the costs of the Iraq war, and no U.S. lives were lost in the Libyan operation. (32) In sum, Obama pursued this type of multilateral approach toward regime change in Libya because: 1) there was international consensus that Qadhafi should go; 2) U.S. allies in NATO were eager to take the lead, with Arab League political support and some military support; 3) engagement would stave off mass killings and avoid a blot on Obama's record (not repeating President Clinton's mistake in Rwanda); 4) the American public, while opposed to Qadhafi, did not favor U.S. ground troops; and 5) the rebels welcomed the NATO airstrikes. It was hard to imagine another case where these factors would be repeated. Indeed, during the Libya rebellion, another country, Bahrain, faced an Arab Spring, which resulted in a totally different set of circumstances and U.S. policies.

Bahrain

In February 2011, as the Egyptian revolution led to the ouster of Hosni Mubarak, demonstrations broke out in the small Gulf kingdom of Bahrain. Like Egypt, Bahrain was a close, strategic ally of the United States, hosting the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet. This base has been an important area for U.S. security of the Persian Gulf for the past several decades. Since 1971, when British military forces left the Gulf, and especially after 1979, when the Shah of Iran was overthrown in an anti-Western revolution, the United States has been the primary power ensuring the security of the Gulf and the free passage of oil through the Straits of Hormuz. The role of the United States was demonstrated in many ways: the U.S. reflagging of Kuwaiti ships during the last years of the Iran-Iraq war (ensuring their protection from Iranian attacks); the deployment of some 500,000 U.S. soldiers to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf during the second Gulf crisis of 1990-1991, precipitated by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait; and continuing deployments of U.S. naval ships in the Persian Gulf, in large part to check Iran's ambitions in the area. With the world still heavily dependent on oil from the Gulf, the ability of the U.S. to defend this area and ensure the free flow of oil through the Gulf makes the 5th Fleet's base in Bahrain vitally important.
Politically and socially, however, Bahrain was much different than Egypt. In Bahrain, the ruling family was from the Sunni minority on the island (representing about 30 to 40 percent of the population) whereas the majority of Bahrainis are Shia Muslims (60 to 70 percent of the population). The U.S. has long recognized that, given this sectarian divide in Bahrain and social and political discrimination faced by the Shia on the island, Bahrain is a powder-keg, having the potential to explode at any time. The Arab Spring was the spark that ignited protestors (mainly the Shia) to do so. Most of the demonstrators demanded political reforms, but some demanded the ouster of the ruling royal family. (33)

Demonstrators in Bahrain used the Pearl Roundabout in the capital city of Manama as a sort of Tahrir Square, copying the Egyptian example, and camped out there to highlight their opposition. When the Bahraini authorities used rubber bullets and tear gas to confront the demonstrators, President Obama called on the Bahraini king, Hamad Bin Isa Al-Khalifa, to support political reform. But the Bahraini authorities ignored the U.S. advice and went ahead and used forced to try to clear out the protestors from the Pearl Roundabout, which had grown to 100,000 people. The Bahraini security forces then shot into the crowd, an act which prompted oppositionists from the Shia Wefaq party to resign from parliament. On February 18, President Obama again called the Bahraini king and urged him to use restraint in the face of another major confrontation. For a time, tensions de-escalated as the Bahraini regime offered to hold a dialogue with the opposition. But mistrust grew on both sides, with elements of the ruling family urging the king to take a tougher posture while oppositionists demanded the resignation of the hardline prime minister before a dialogue could take place. On March 4, the protestors were back in even stronger numbers (200,000) in the Pearl Roundabout. (34)

A week later, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates flew to Bahrain to confer with the king. The fact that it was the defense secretary, not another cabinet member, underscored the strategic aspect of the U.S.-Bahraini relationship. According to Gates, he urged the king and the crown prince to take meaningful steps on political reform; prolonging this process, he continued, would only further ignite sectarian tensions and give the Iranians
an opportunity to exploit the situation. (35) Although the United States knew that the Shia in Bahrain had demonstrated against the regime without Iran's involvement, they did fear that prolonged instability would give the Iranians an opening in the kingdom that they would otherwise not have.

But Gates' mission did not succeed for both internal and external reasons. On March 13, the day he left Bahrain, protestors marched on Manama's financial district, effectively closing it down, alarming the Bahraini regime. President Obama, though a White House statement, supported Gates' earlier message that the Bahraini authorities use restraint and begin a meaningful dialogue with the opposition. But it was the Saudis who then took the lead. Saudi Arabia looked with alarm at developments in Bahrain for several reasons. First, the feared a spillover of demonstrations to its eastern province, home to both its minority Shia population and the bulk of its oil fields (there were indeed some protests in this province but they quickly dissipated after a show of force by the security forces). Second, the Saudis saw the Shia opposition in Bahrain as an extension of Iran's influence. Third, the Saudis were angry at the United States for what seemed like a policy of turning against Arab presidents and monarchs (Saudi King Abdullah reportedly had a very testy telephone conversation with President Obama at the time of the Egyptian revolution, angry that the U.S. was abandoning Mubarak). (36)

The following day, March 14, some 1200 Saudi and 800 UAE (United Arab Emirate) troops crossed the causeway linking Saudi Arabia to Bahrain and took control of Bahraini government buildings and other institutions. With this force as a backup, Bahraini authorities cracked down hard on the protestors and cleared them out of the financial district and the Pearl Roundabout, an act which resulted in at least three dozen dead; the authorities also destroyed the Pearl Roundabout monument so that it would not re-emerge as a symbol of protest. Hundreds of Shia were arrested, including some doctors who had treated wounded protestors.

The United States response was muted. Although the White House called for restraint and a political solution to the crisis based on dialogue, there was no public criticism of
the Saudi and UAE military intervention. President Obama did speak privately with the Saudi and Bahraini kings after this crackdown, and reportedly emphasized the need for a political solution, but neither monarch apparently budged. The press reported that the Saudi monarch told Obama that Saudi Arabia would never allow Shia rule in Bahrain. (37) The message here was that Saudi Arabia regarded the Gulf as their sphere of influence, and the United States should not meddle in the internal affairs of these sheikhdoms.

In a major policy speech delivered on the Middle East at the State Department on May 11, 2011, which addressed in large part the subject of the Arab Spring, President Obama displayed the struggle between ideals and self-interest. On the one hand, he stated forcefully that "mass arrests and brute force are at odds with the universal rights of Bahrain's citizens...and you can't have a real dialogue [between the government and the opposition] when parts of peaceful opposition are in jail." On the other hand, Obama stated that "Bahrain is a longstanding partner, and we are committed to its security. We recognize that Iran has tried to take advantage there, and that the Bahraini government has a legitimate interest in the rule of law." Underscoring this ambiguity, Obama stated earlier in his speech that "...there will be times when our short-term interests don't align perfectly with our long-term vision for the region." Nonetheless, he went on, "we will speak out for a set of core principles."(38)

The question remains why the Obama administration took such a different approach toward Egypt and Bahrain, helping to ease Mubarak out of power while tacitly supporting the Bahraini king. In Egypt's case, there was a clear and (what looked like) a pro-U.S. alternative--the Egyptian military, which would rule temporarily while steering a process that would lead to a democracy. In Bahrain, the alternative was an opposition that was largely sectarian and which might eventually allow Iran to make gains in the Gulf (even though U.S. officials understood that Shia grievances in Bahrain were legitimate and not imported from the outside). (39) Additionally, the United States believed it risked angering the Saudis, their longstanding ally in the Gulf and the largest oil producer in the region, if it pushed the Bahraini monarchy too far. Finally, there was the issue of the 5th
Fleet and the question of leverage. Rather than the 5th Fleet base being a lever for the United States to use to pressure the Bahrainis, it was actually the other way around. The Bahraini authorities knew that it would not be easy for the United States to find another country in the Gulf to host the 5th Fleet and used this perception to resist U.S. pressure to make meaningful reforms. Although as late as April 2012 the United States was still issuing statements critical of some Bahraini internal policies, like its detention of a prominent opposition figure, the fundamentals of the U.S.-Bahraini relationship had not changed. (40)

Syria

Syria presented a case somewhat similar to Libya but with important differences. Like was the case with Qadhafi, Syrian President Bashar Assad has few friends in the Arab world. His regime is largely run by his minority Alawite sect--an offshoot of Shi'i Islam--and members of this sect dominate the military and security apparatus, not for religious reasons (they are secularist) but to maintain power. Bashar's father Hafez Assad, who ruled Syria from 1970 to 2000, was adept at playing Arab politics, even while he maintained an alliance with Iran, but Bashar, an ophthalmologist by training who was thrust into succession by the death of his older brother in a car accident, was a novice in the political arena. He has made many enemies in the Arab world, not only for his policies (such as his probable role in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri) and support for the Shia Hizballah organization, but for denigrating leaders of Arab Sunni governments, such as Saudi Arabia, during the mini-war between Israel and Hizballah in the summer of 2006. (41)

Bashar Assad had one major advantage, however. As leader of a front-line state against Israel (and a state involved in the Arab-Israeli peace process from time to time), he was courted by various regional and international players, including the United States. His father had almost struck a deal with Israel over the return of the Golan Heights (captured in the 1967 war) that would lead to a peace treaty between Syria and Israel, but for various reasons an agreement did not come to pass. Nonetheless, various players in the
peace process kept coming to or dealing with Damascus in the hope that a deal could be realized.

Additionally, as a member of the younger generation of Arab leaders, Bashar was looked upon as somewhat more progressive than his elders and more modern (he started the "Syrian Computer Society," for example). When he first took power, he even relaxed some of the repressive policies of his father. However, this political openness did not last long, and the repression was re-instated. During the Iraq war, Syria became the conduit for many Sunni Muslim extremists to travel to Iraq to fight the U.S. and coalition forces, even though, ideologically, the Syrian regime was opposed to what these extremists stood for. At other times, the Syrian regime tightened the border to prevent such infiltration, according to public comments by U.S. military officials. (42) This type of gamesmanship also extended to the Arab-Israeli peace process. Both the Bush and Obama administrations initially believed they could deal with Syria as a peace process partner in trying to foster an Israeli-Syrian peace deal, only to be disappointed.

When the Arab Spring broke out in Tunisia and Egypt, Bashar Assad made public comments to the effect that Syria was stable and its society was immune from such upheavals because its people were patient about political change. (43) That proved not to be the case, particularly among the Sunni Muslim majority (most of Syria's minority groups, however, tended to support the regime because the Assads--father and son--had allowed them religious and cultural autonomy). When demonstrations broke out in the southern Syrian city of Daraa in March 2011 over the arrests and torture of teenagers who had scribbled anti-regime graffiti on walls, the protests spread to other Sunni Muslim cities. The protests, mostly peaceful, were violently attacked by the regime's security forces. By the spring and summer of 2011, unrest had spread to the cities of Homs, Hama, Latakia, and Der el-Zor, and the civilian death toll grew into the thousands. Bashar Assad promised reforms and dialogue with the opposition, but nothing serious took place. The regime continued to use force against the opposition.
For a variety of reasons, the Obama administration was initially not as forthcoming about calling for the ouster of Bashar Assad as it was toward Qadhafi, despite the fact that its energetic and principled ambassador on the ground, Robert Ford, had witnessed first hand some of the atrocities that were taking place against the Syrian citizens and was being harassed by the regime. (44) The administration also had strategic interests in seeking Assad's demise—it would deny Iran one of its few allies or friends in the Arab world and an entry point to influence events in the Levant. Syria was Iran's conduit through which it was able to assist Hizballah and some Palestinian groups on the State Department's terrorism list. However, calling for regime change in Syria had implications because the next questions would be: How to bring about this change? What about the views in the Arab world and the international community? And who or what would replace the Assad regime? Would the Muslim Brotherhood, which staged a violent campaign against the regime of Hafez Assad in the late 1970s and early 1980s, only to be brutally crushed, re-emerge and install an intolerant government? And what about the minorities in Syria, such as the large Christian community? Would they have a place in the new Syria? These questions did not have clear answers. What was known were the negatives: unlike Libya, there was no international consensus, especially because Russia was a backer of the Assad government, and China was not interested in setting the precedent for involvement in another country's internal affairs; most Arab countries, while opposing Assad, were not in favor of intervention from the West; and the Syrian opposition, at least initially, did not want such intervention.

As the situation on the ground grew worse, and the death toll mounted, the Obama administration eventually announced in August 2011 that it was time for Assad to leave. (45) It also imposed additional sanctions on Syria and froze all Syrian government assets in the United States. Obama probably calculated that he could not remain silent about regime change as the atrocities mounted day by day. The Obama administration's announcement was followed by European sanctions against Syria and the boycott of Syrian oil. Although the U.S., Britain, France, and other countries tried to push for strong UN Security Council resolutions, they were blocked by Russia, which did not want to abandon its ally in Damascus, as well as China, which did not favor setting an
example of the international community meddling in the affairs of another country for obvious reasons. In early February 2012, for example, Russia and China vetoed a Security Council resolution on Syria, saying they the resolution's vague wording left the door open to possible military intervention and created a picture which favored the opposition over the Syrian government. The Russian ambassador added that the resolution failed to include proposals such as isolating the Syrian opposition from violent extremist groups. (46) As a sign of how divided the international community was on this issue, US Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice said the U.S. was "disgusted" by the Russian and Chinese veto. (47)

In March 2012, U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee in which he outlined the administration's Syria policy. Reiterating the administration's position that the Assad regime has lost its legitimacy and should step aside, Panetta underscored that this "terrible situation has no easy answers." Favoring a multilateral approach, Panetta said the Obama administration was pursuing four tracks: 1) encouraging other countries to support sanctions that are being followed by the U.S., European Union and the Arab League; 2) providing humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people; 3) working with the Friends of Syria group to strengthen and unify the opposition; 4) reviewing additional steps that could be taken to protect the Syrian people and end the violence against them, "including potential military options if necessary."(48) Despite listing this last option, Panetta emphasized that "currently the Administration is focusing on diplomatic and political approaches rather than military intervention." Moreover, for the United States to "act unilaterally would be a mistake," he added, and that outside military intervention could make the situation "even worse." (49)

Although President Obama was assailed by some influential members of Congress, like Republican Senator John McCain, his opponent in 2008, for not doing enough to help the Syrian people (such as giving military aid to the opposition), other members of Congress said they were against military intervention. Still others were suspicious that if the Obama administration did decide to intervene, it would avoid seeking Congressional approval, similar to what it did during the Libyan intervention. (50) When Panetta
testified before the House Armed Services Committee in April 2012, he tried to allay some of these concerns by saying that if the Obama administration decided to act militarily, it would be in consultation with international partners and the U.S. Congress. Responding to concerns about the similarities between Libya and Syria, Panetta said the Syrian case is different from the Libyan case because Assad still enjoys the support of a large segment of the Syrian military and the Arab countries are not unified in support of military intervention, as was the case in Libya. (51) The question remained, however, why the United States intervened to save lives in Libya but not in Syria.

In April 2012, the international community came together to support a UN Secretary Council resolution in favor of a plan by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan for Syria. The Annan plan called for 300 UN monitors to be sent into Syria, the withdrawal of tanks and other armored vehicles from population centers, a cease-fire by the regime and the opposition, and for negotiations to take place between the government and the opposition. (52) The Annan plan was criticized for being weak and lacking teeth, but as this was the most the international community could agree on, the United States was willing to go along with it in the absence of other alternatives. As of May 2012, this plan was in dire trouble as the regime continued to use violence in various Syrian cities. The White House spokesman on May 4 said the plan was "failing" and said the United States and the international community would have to assess what to do next. (53)

As of this writing, the Obama administration still appears to be reticent about military intervention in Syria. The reasons appear to be more tied to domestic U.S. politics than anything else. Military intervention in Syria would not be as easy as it was in Libya. The United States would have to face a stronger and more disciplined military, and the Syrian air defense system is much more developed than that of Libya. (54) The risk of a military entanglement looms large in such a scenario, and the American public is in no mood for another war in the Middle East, especially after the costly ones in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Obama administration is clearly hoping that the combination of sanctions, international isolation, and opposition from the majority of Syrians will bring down the regime, but earlier predictions of the regime's demise have proven to be illusionary. With
the Syrian regime retaining the strong support of the Alawite community and the tacit support of the other minority groups in the country, it could last for some time. (55) The longer it lasts, however, the more civilian deaths will occur, leaving the Obama administration with another Bosnia situation on its hands, something it had wanted to avoid. In the Syria case, the policy of self-interest has won over the pursuit of ideals, but it is not the self-interest of geo-political concerns, as in the case of Bahrain, but rather the self-interest of avoiding a costly military entanglement for U.S. domestic reasons.

**Conclusion**

Defense Secretary Panetta made the point during his Senate testimony in April 2012 that, "as a global leader with a vital interest in the stability of the broader Middle East, this Administration has been determined to do everything we can to positively shape the course of events in the Middle East. But each situation--by virtue of the politics, geography, and history of each country--is unique, and demands a unique response." He added, "There can be no cookie cutter approach for a region as complex and volatile as the Middle East." Panetta then tried to say that, nonetheless, there were three principles that have guided U.S. policy in this period of the Arab Spring: 1) opposition to the use of violence and repression by regimes against their people; 2) support for the exercise of human rights; and 3) support for political and economic reforms that can meet the legitimate needs of the people of the region. (56)

In terms of pronouncements from the Obama Administration, Panetta's remarks ring true. Even in places where there are strong U.S. national security interests, like Egypt and Bahrain, the United States has invoked these principles or ideals even when they were not welcomed by the ruling regime. However, in terms of actual policies that have been carried out, the U.S. approach has varied considerably from country to country, not just because of the "politics, geography, and history," but because of other factors like oil interests, the availability (or not) of a pro-U.S. alternative to the ruling regime, and U.S. domestic politics.
The case studies in this monograph have shown that the United States can abandon a longtime authoritarian ally (Mubarak) in a strategically important country in favor of a popular revolution if one of the pillars of the new regime is an institution (the Egyptian military) with which it has close ties, and the revolutionaries are espousing democratic values. This study has shown that the U.S. can continue to embrace this institution even when it acts in an undemocratic manner. The U.S. can criticize another longstanding ally (Bahrain) for undemocratic and repressive practices but will not fundamentally alter its relationship with the regime when another, more influential (and oil-rich) friend (Saudi Arabia) objects to what it sees as meddling in its back yard. The U.S. can participate militarily and multilaterally from the air against a regime (Libya) that is not a strategic ally and with the blessing of the Arab countries and can couch this intervention in moral terms as preventing mass atrocities, which indeed it helped to avoid. On the other hand, when similar atrocities are occurring in another Arab country (Syria), the U.S. has shown that it prefers not to intervene militarily even by air, citing the lack of international and Arab consensus as well as a more complicated picture on the ground, because it wants to avoid a military entanglement that would not be supported by the American people.

The struggle between ideals and self-interest is thus exemplified by this complex and sometimes convoluted U.S. policy toward the Arab Spring. In their heart of hearts, U.S. policymakers would like all of the countries of the Middle East to be democratic and tolerant, but actual policies are based on a multiplicity of factors that lead to inconsistencies, and for ideals to often take a back seat to self-interest.
END NOTES


3. See "Remarks By the President on a New Beginning," Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt, June 4, 2009 www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09

4. ibid.


6. As quoted in "Remarks by the President on a New Beginning."

7. Conversation with a State Department official, June 2009.


12. Indyk, Lieberthal and O'Hanlon, p. 145


16. www.vancouverobserver.com/blogs/betweenus/2012/01/25/egypt%e2%80%99s-revolution-one-year-later


20. "Statement by the Press Secretary on Recent Developments in Egypt," November 25, 2011
See also, "Egypt's prime minister calls for calm amid clashes," CNN.com, November 22, 2011

http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/12/179173.htm

http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2012/04_egypt_hamid/04_egypt_hamid.pdf

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See also, Steven Lee Myers, "Once Imperiled, U.S. Aid to Egypt is Restored," New York Times, March 23, 2012


See also "Remarks by the President at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum," April 23, 2012


32. As quoted in Indyk, Lieberthal, and O'Hanlon, p. 165


34. Indyk, Lieberthal, and O'Hanlon, p. 153

35. Ibid., p. 154

See also https://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/saudiarabia/index.html


40. See the Washington Post editorial, "Bahrain's slow burn," April 14, 2012


44. http://content.usatoday.com/communities/theoval/post/2012/02/obama-calls-for-syrian-presidents-ouster/1

45. Indyk, Lieberthal and O'Hanlon, p. 177


47. ibid.

   http://www.cfr.org/syria/panettas-testimony-syria-march-2012/p27605

49. ibid.


51. ibid.


53. ibid.


   http://www.cfr.org/syria/panettas-testimony-syria-march-2012/p27605
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