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➤ The Contradictions of Hegemony: The United States and the Arab Spring

Nicholas Kitchen

In the United States' response to the events of the Arab Spring, the Obama administration has been consistently careful not to get ahead of fast-moving developments. Critics have decried the administration's apparent lack of a coherent approach, and its willingness to talk the language of democratic ideals whilst acting to protect national interests. Supporters, on the other hand, have praised the blending of pragmatism and principle as evidence of a smarter approach to international affairs than that of Obama's predecessor. The United States' cautious and contradictory approach, which has at times amounted to the endorsement of the inevitable, reflects wider strategic tensions in the United States' approach to the Middle East, and the reality that whilst the US may be the most important external power in the region, its ability to dictate outcomes is limited. Yet by 'muddling through' and insisting on keeping the United States on the right side of history throughout the course of the Arab revolutions, the Obama administration has ensured that the new regimes in the region will have to continue to work with the United States, and ensured that the US is not diverted from its overriding strategic reorientation towards the Asia-Pacific.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The United States' strategic involvement in the Middle East is rooted in two sources: a hegemonic interest in secure and stable oil markets, and an overarching ideological commitment to the state of Israel that is reinforced by significant domestic pressures. The consequence of these core interests has been that since the early part of Cold War the United States has maintained a strategy of preventing any one regional or extra-regional power from gaining regional hegemony, largely by maintaining a deterrent force 'over the horizon', and on occasion intervening to uphold a regional balance. Thus in 1990, the United States went to war in the Persian Gulf to prevent Iraq using its occupation of Kuwait as a launching pad to control Saudi Arabia's oil reserves and threaten Israel's security. Throughout the Cold War, whilst becoming increasingly committed to Israel as the sole democracy in the region, the United States had built alliance relationships with autocracies as part of the wider cause of anti-communist containment, to ensure that oil supplies would not be disrupted for political ends, threatening not only the American economy but the system of industrial capitalism itself. Those relationships were maintained throughout the 1990s both to derive support for the continuing isolation of Iran and Iraq under the policy of 'dual containment', and as the price for the maintenance of peace agreements with Israel.

Yet if following the Cold War most of the regimes in the region were pro-American, their publics certainly were not. The United States' commitment to stability and the status quo in part sustained the stagnant economic, political and social systems of the region and drove the rise of Islamism and Salafism. Having failed to successfully overthrow the authoritarian regimes of the region, from the 1990s, terrorism came to focus on the 'far enemy' that sustained them, the United States. Of particular concern for Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda was the presence of 'infidel' American troops in Saudi Arabia, which hosts two of Islam's holiest sites in Mecca and Medina, the United States having abandoned 'over the horizon' hegemony following the Gulf War in order to actively contain Iraq. Supporting the Saudi monarchy had become central to American strategy in the region, since as the world's largest oil producer any disruption in Saudi supply would prove difficult for other producers to replace, yet this hegemonic interest increasingly came into conflict with American national security priorities, particularly after it emerged that fifteen of the nineteen hijackers that were responsible for the attacks of September 11, 2001 were citizens of Saudi Arabia.

Indeed, following 9-11, some argued that the major benefit of regime change in Iraq would be that it would allow the United States to withdraw its troops from Saudi Arabia. In reality of course the invasion and occupation of Iraq did more to catalyse anti-Americanism across the region than America's enforcement of Iraqi no-fly zones from Saudi soil ever did. Moreover, the imperatives of the 'war on terror' reinforced America's relationships with authoritarian regimes, and in particular their intelligence services, which were simultaneously legitimated in their tactics – used equally against political dissenters as against terrorist suspects.

Yet for all the priority given to oil supplies, Israel's security and the regimes that sustained American hegemony over the Arab world, after 9-11 the United States diagnosed the region's authoritarian regimes as the root of the terrorist problem, and prescribed democracy as the solution to the Middle East's socio-economic woes. Launching the 'Freedom Agenda' in 2003 at the National Endowment of Democracy, George W. Bush renounced sixty years of 'excusing

and accommodating' in the Middle East, asserting that 'in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty.' Bush emphasised that democracy promotion was not just a case of promoting American values, but was emphatically in the American national interest, since regimes that oppressed their populations created the conditions for radicalisation and terrorism.

Whilst Iraq headlined the Freedom Agenda in the region, there was significant development of institutional capacity for democratisation, and by the end of Bush's presidency hundreds of millions had been spent on democracy promotion in the Middle East and North Africa. Initiatives such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) and the Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA) were regional expressions of a clear policy shift, and caused significant concern among Washington's regional allies, most notably in Cairo and Riyadh, who had to be reassured by senior administration officials that they were to be 'partners' in this policy rather than targets.

Nonetheless, the contradictions of the Freedom Agenda as part of the wider 'war on terror' were clear. Did the United States seek short-term counter-terrorism measures enacted through the security apparatus of allied authoritarian regimes, or was it prioritising the long-term emancipation of societies in the Middle East in an attempt to address the deeper roots of marginalisation and underdevelopment from which violent extremism grew? The administration's reaction to Hamas' victory in elections in Gaza in 2006 highlighted the broader contradiction between supporting democracy and the implications for Israel and the United States of what the popular will of societies in the region expressed, and increasingly led democracy promotion efforts to focus on economic liberalisation over political reform. Officials in the State Department and the Pentagon were well aware that the United States was pursuing policies in the broader Middle East that were fundamentally at odds with one another, driven by competing bureaucracies in Washington and the region in the absence of genuine strategic coordination. Yet the tensions – long-term versus short-term; hegemonic interest versus specific security priorities; stability versus reform – were in some ways insurmountable.

THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION AND THE ARAB SPRING

There can be no doubt that these basic contradictions formed the sclerotic backdrop to the United States' response to the unfolding events of the Arab Spring. Obama had come to office determined to reverse what one senior official called America's 'Middle East detour over the course of the last ten years' and to refocus America's strategic priorities on the Asia Pacific region in which China had been allowed to rise unchecked. Yet the legacies of his predecessor's war on terror had first to be addressed, as Obama attempted to rebuild America's reputation among Muslims within a region that in 2008, according to the Pew Research Centre, had more confidence in Osama Bin Laden than they did in George W. Bush. Obama's speech in Cairo in June 2009, in which he proclaimed his intention 'to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world', did improve the United States' credibility and standing, at least initially, and the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq proceeded as per the Bush administration's schedule. Yet the administration's failure to follow through on the hopeful rhetoric – particularly the failure to successfully pressurise Israel with regard to the Palestinian question – if anything led to a further deterioration in America's standing with publics in the region. In Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian territories, as well as in Turkey, over three-quarters held an unfavourable view of the United States at the time of the Arab Spring. Moreover, the pro-democracy movements haven't themselves improved perceptions of the United States, with views remaining profoundly negative, as they have been for a decade.

If dealing with 'legacy issues' had at best mixed success, the more fundamental contradictions in American policy remained. Foreshadowing the Arab Spring, protests in Iran in June 2009 represented the first test for an administration committed to engagement with Iran in the hope of opening up diplomatic pathways on the Iranian nuclear programme. The White House was determined not to 'interfere' in Iranian domestic politics, both to avoid the regime being able to present the protests as rooted in foreign conspiracy and to keep open the possibility of engaging Ahmadinejad's government. The actions of a junior staffer in the

State Department, who contacted Twitter to ask the social network to postpone upgrade work that would have shut down the service in Iran, exposed the divisions within Obama's foreign policy team that reflected the deeper issues in American policy. In part this was a deliberate decision to create a 'team of rivals', giving voice to both foreign policy realists such as Robert Gates and Tom Donilon, as well as hawkish liberal internationalists including Anne-Marie Slaughter, Susan Rice and Samantha Power. These divisions would be exposed later in the debate over whether to intervene in Libya, in which the latter two 'interventionistas' (Slaughter having left the administration complaining of a gender divide within the national security architecture) teamed up with Hilary Clinton to successfully make the case for intervention, a position that saw them dubbed 'Valkyries' by *The National Interest*.

Gender stereotyping aside, Obama's foreign policy team reflected the President's eagerness to hear diverse voices, a process vividly demonstrated throughout the protracted review of the Afghan strategy, in which Obama's confidence in his ability to play the role of honest broker between competing factions almost amounted to a desire to be his own National Security Advisor. On no issue was the debate more fraught than over the Arab Spring, as competing ideologies and worldviews within the administration wrestled with longstanding conflicts between American interests in a region of vital strategic importance. It has been suggested that a President inexperienced in foreign policy was 'pushed and pulled' in all directions by this divided team, but on the evidence of the Afghan strategy deliberations it seems more likely that open debate is at the heart of Obama's decision-making style, in which he seeks out all the options before attempting to find the middle ground.

It has been regularly asserted that the events of the Arab Spring took the administration by surprise and found it uncertain and underprepared. Whilst the White House was reportedly irritated – rather unfairly – that the CIA had failed to provide early warning of the explosions in Tunisia and Egypt, the administration had been reconsidering the sustainability of the status quo in the Middle East since the protests following Iran's Presidential election in 2009.

The President himself, in the aftermath of the failure the 'Green Revolution', took the time to think through the potential for unrest in the region, and in August 2010 wrote a five page memorandum entitled 'Political Reform in the Middle East and North Africa' which was circulated among senior members of his national security team. Documented by Ryan Lizza in the *New Yorker* in May 2011, the memo observed that socio-economic trends were feeding into citizen discontent, and that progress towards political openness had stalled at the same time as a number of countries, most notably Egypt, were facing the challenge of upcoming political successions. America's autocratic allies, the President noted, were likely to 'opt for repression rather than reform' when faced with domestic dissent. Such developments might leave the United States 'with fewer capable, credible partners' as well as undermining America's credibility 'if we are seen or perceived to be backing repressive regimes and ignoring the rights and aspirations of citizens.'

Obama's memo mandated a Presidential Study Directive, a country-by-country review of strategies for political reform. Led by Power, alongside Gayle Smith, Senior Director for global development in the National Security Council, and the roving Dennis Ross, the review attempted to rethink the costs and benefits of American support for its allies in the region from first principles. The resulting report, finished 'the week that Tunisia exploded' according to one official involved in the process, came down firmly on the side of the liberals within the administration; political reform was in the overarching interests of the United States, and was neither unsustainable in the region nor incompatible with America's other priorities. Such conclusions tallied with the analysis of the 'Egypt Working Group', composed of neoconservatives, liberal hawks and human rights activists outside the administration, with which Ross had been overseeing the White Houses contacts.

Yet the long-term indefensibility of the status quo clashed with both America's hegemonic interest in the stability of the world oil market and America's unchallengeable commitment to Israel which generated immediate interests in the survival of the Saudi regime and the containment of Iran; notwithstanding the ongoing campaign against Al-Qaeda in the region.

Obama was reluctant to throw the weight of the United States behind revolutions and in doing so threaten those core interests. Moreover, the White House was keenly aware of the hamfistedness of its predecessor's Freedom Agenda, and worried that over-enthusiastic American support might actually undermine the revolutions' authenticity. Obama's rhetoric in public was therefore cautious, as he sought to balance competing interests in the context of events that exhibited great contingency and whose outcome was fundamentally uncertain.

Yet whilst seeking to avoid getting 'ahead of the game' in public, the administration used its long-developed relationships in the region to attempt to shape developments. This was most clear in Egypt, where the United States' decade of bankrolling the Egyptian military had enriched its generals and arguably made the Egyptian top brass more dependent on Washington's patronage than on their relationship with Mubarak's inner circle. Accounts of US diplomacy during the protests in Tahrir Square paint a picture of constant badgering of the Egyptian military through contacts at all levels – from Joe Biden in the White House to the Pentagon top brass right down to mid-ranking officers – as America's mil-mil relations were leveraged for diplomatic purposes to insist that under no circumstances should Egyptian forces fire on protestors. Communication with Mubarak was less well coordinated, and the White House's mixed signals almost certainly contributed to the Egyptian President's increasingly bizarre attempts to hold on to power by offering the protestors vague commitments of reform. In Egypt then, America's military relationship proved stronger than its political commitments, allowing the protestors to (initially at least) carry the day.

The United States had no such relationship with Colonel Gaddafi's forces, following more than a decade of international isolation before the Libyan leader's post-9/11 rapprochement with Western weapons inspectors. Here the White House allowed pressure on the regime to be driven by the Europeans, and in the ill-judged words of one administration official, sought to 'lead from behind'. The phrasing may have politically difficult for the President, but it captured both the administration's concern that the United States should not be seen to be dictating movements

for liberation, and the post-Bush awareness that American unilateralism often caused more difficulties than it solved.

If the administration's publicly cautious but privately proactive management of the Egyptian crisis ultimately led it to the conclusion that Mubarak could be abandoned and Gaddafi overthrown, in other areas of the Arab Spring the United States had either less capacity to support change or less inclination to bring it about. In Yemen, where American counterterrorism assistance had been directed at reinforcing Ali Abdullah Saleh's ability to exert control over a failing state, the dictator flatly refused direct American demands that he cede power. The Sunni monarchies in the Gulf were not questioned, even as Saudi Arabia led troops from the Gulf Cooperation Council to 'maintain order' in Bahrain, where the regime, responsible for some of the worst human rights violations of the Arab Spring, is the pliant host of America's Fifth Fleet.

In Syria, the Assad regime's crackdown exposed the limited range of options in the United States foreign policy toolkit. With no leverage to bring to bear over a regime that the United States had sought to isolate as a result of its alliance with Iran, and the administration's commitment to UN routes stymied by Russia, and to a lesser extent China, it was left to Kofi Annan to attempt to broker a distinctly unconvincing ceasefire. The administration is now urgently seeking new policy options on Syria, having hardened its stance to insist that Assad step down, and seems prepared to push for a Libyan-style escalation. Yet even with regional actors such as Turkey and the Gulf states committed to anti-Assad positions, their demands for 'American leadership' in providing resources, legitimacy and political cover threaten to involve the United States in precisely the kind of complex regional conflict that the administration had come to office seeking to extricate itself from.

PROSPECTS

The United States has had to tread a fine line between support for its values – and what it conceives as its long-term interests – represented by political reform in the region, and the protection of what it perceives as its core regional interests. Doing so has however had its own impact: whilst Israel expressed its concern at the United States' willingness to jettison its Egyptian ally, the Saudi government reportedly threatened to prop up Mubarak rather than see him 'humiliated'. Yet the irony is that the very channels of influence that allowed the United States to successfully prevent the Egyptian regime from using mass violence against pro-democracy demonstrators now align the United States with a ruling military elite more interested in protecting its position than in transitioning to genuine democracy. King Abdullah's friend Mubarak has gone, and the budgets of democracy promotion programmes on the ground in Egypt have been boosted, but the United States remains wedded to a transition run by a military leadership that represents more continuity than change.

In essence the United States remains limited in the impact it can have in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The reality is that Washington no longer holds most of the cards in the region, if it ever did. Its capacity to cajole, co-opt and coerce varies immensely from place to place, as does its willingness to do so.

Moreover, the reality remains that in a region that exhibits strong anti-American sentiment, coup-proofing illegitimate regimes creates stronger ties between patron and client than the United States could hope to forge with regimes that command broad societal support. Yet the paradox is that propping up inherently weak regimes can never generate the lasting domestic stability – and with it, a degree of constancy in international behaviour that the United States craves in the region – in the way that social contracts based on consent can; indeed, it has been America's support for failing regimes that is the source of much of the region's anti-American opinion.

If the United States is serious about turning off its Middle detour and genuinely reorienting itself strategically to focus on the challenges of the Asia-Pacific, then in the Middle East and North Africa the US needs to prioritise long-term trends over short-term concerns. This may not always mean pushing for revolutionary change in support of democratic values in the region. But it would mean making it clear that continued American support for those regimes that have ridden out the storm of the Arab Spring will be made dependent on their putting in place processes of political reform.

Whether a long-term strategy for political reform in the region can survive either the short-term pressures presented primarily by Iran's nuclear programme remains to be seen. Moreover, the challenge to America's economic hegemony presented by the rise of China, the source of Obama's desire to become 'the Pacific President', cannot be disassociated from the United States' support for the House of Saud, and its share of the world's dollar-denominated oil supply. The United States' cautious and contradictory approach to the Arab Spring thus reflects the fact that the Arab world does not exist in a vacuum, and there are wider issues at stake. ■