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Strategic Flexibility: the Obama Administration after Egypt

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by Nicholas Kitchen

A month on from President Ben Ali's ouster in Tunisia, a wave of protest has swept across the Arab world. With varying degrees of popular support, protests against ruling elites have sprung up in Algeria, Libya, Yemen, Jordan, Bahrain, Iran, and of course Egypt, where weeks of protest culminated in the resignation of Hosni Mubarak.

Whilst the motivations of the protesters in each of these countries reflect their specific political contexts, the inspiration drawn from Tunisia and Egypt points to more general grievances across the region. The core dynamics: ageing leaders who have held on to power too long; corruption, censorship and a lack of accountability; youthful populations; and most significantly, economic malaise that has rendered much of that youth jobless and poverty-stricken. Combine these structural features of regional politics with the opportunities afforded by the communications technology which is increasingly becoming a defining element of interaction in the international system, and there exists the potential for rapid and widespread political change in the Arab world, with profound strategic consequences.

Nowhere would those consequences be felt more sharply than the United States, which has regarded the balance of power in Middle East as a key strategic interest at least since Britain's withdrawal from the region was confirmed by Suez. Over the past two decades, America's alliances with ageing autocrats in the region have brought stability, although at no small cost both to the US taxpayer and to the United States' standing on the Arab street, costs that led The Economist late last year to wonder whether [America's obsession with the region](#) had been worth it.

A distinctly difficult relationship

The United States' highly sensitised and simultaneously ambivalent relationship with the region has been reflected by the commentariat's response to the Obama administration's reaction to and handling of the Egypt crisis. Condoleezza Rice [sought to credit the policies of the Bush administration](#) for encouraging the aspirations for freedom of the Egyptian people that precipitated the fall of the Mubarak regime while Anne-Marie Slaughter, the recently departed Director of Policy Planning at the State Department, pointedly noted that the roots of the Egyptian uprising were wholly internal and [essentially 'leaderless'](#).

The neoconservative (for want to a more accurate designation) strand on the right were particularly excised by events in Egypt, with [my colleague Niall Ferguson](#) simultaneously lamenting Obama's twin failures to ride the wave of popular and democratic dissent on the one hand and to risk Israeli and Saudi disgust by failing to prop up Mubarak on the other. Professor Ferguson's somewhat schizophrenic reaction reflects the deep uncertainty on one part of the American right between their admirable support for human freedom and democratic governance on the one hand and their exaggerated sense of fear of Muslim opinion on the other. Citing [Obama's speech in Cairo in 2009](#), in which the President stated that 'America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition', Professor Ferguson demurs:

"Those lines will come back to haunt Obama if, as cannot be ruled out, the ultimate beneficiary of his bungling in Egypt is the Muslim Brotherhood, which remains by far the best organized opposition force in the country—and wholly committed to the restoration of the caliphate and the strict application of Sharia. Would such an outcome advance "tolerance and the dignity of all human beings" in Egypt? Somehow, I don't think so."

Without wanting to dwell on Ferguson's characterisation of the Muslim Brotherhood, [inaccurate though it surely is](#), his broader complaint that the Obama administration lacks a strategy for the Middle East is worth considering. If it is true that, [as reported by the New York Times](#), the administration had failed to think strategically about the possibility that unrest in Egypt might endanger Mubarak's regime, then that represents a major failure of strategic planning, however unpredictable events in the region may have been. Yet predefined strategies can close off options when what is required is tactical flexibility in responding to events.

In this respect the Obama administration has managed the crisis rather well. Rather than sending out mixed messages – as the critics alleged – the administration kept its options open, and got on the right side of history only when the direction that events were taking became clear. Had the United States been seen to be actively interfering – either by Arab publics in terms



Official White House photo by Pete Souza

of propping up Mubarak, or by nervous allies in terms of attempting to force democratisation – it might have created further difficulties for American policy in the region. Yet for all the administration's tactical adroitness in co-opting the Egyptian army, whose status past and future depends on American largesse, gauging the broader impact on America's strategic posture of revolutionary change in the Arab world is more difficult.

The United States in the Arab World

That the United States has important interests in the region is not in doubt. According to [figures from the US Department of Energy](#), 15% of the US's total crude and liquid oil product imports come from the Persian Gulf. Saudia Arabia alone accounts for 8.5%.

The reality may be a long way from some of the rhetoric of American 'dependence' on Middle Eastern oil, but the imports nonetheless remain significant, and the free operation of the oil industry in the region reflects broader American strategic interests in an open global economic system. It is [to ensure the unfettered movement of these oil resources](#) that the U.S. Fifth Fleet is headquartered in Bahrain, itself now the subject of significant protests directed at absolute monarchy government of Shaikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa.

Alongside these resource issues three clear and linked strategic priorities loom large over the United States' relationships in the region: the state of Israel; Islamic terrorism and Iran.

Israel, the most domestically sacrosanct of America's special relationships, is also a [profoundly inconvenient alliance](#) for the United States. The United States' moral and strategic support for Israel translates in practice into a near-unconditional support for Israeli policies which infects all aspects of America's interests in the Middle East.

It has been America's relationship with Israel that has largely defined its partners and enemies in the region, leading the United States to support regimes that though undemocratic could be prevailed upon to accept Israel as a fait accompli. The refusal of Iran to acknowledge Israel's right to exist is in turn the source of its enmity with the United States. The condition of Palestine, which endures as a result of America's ultimate acquiescence to its junior partner, remains the strongest recruiting tool of Al Qaeda and Islamist groups.

A Strategy of Flexibility

Popular protest in the Arab world would then seem to be the worst of all possible worlds, as pro-American leaders give way to the expression of popular sentiment that decries US support for Israel and aligns itself with Iran and Islamists. This, at least is the received wisdom in the West among commentators who value regional stability and American material interests over ideals of democracy and universal liberty.

But the received wisdom may be wrong. One does not have to subscribe to notions of democratic peace to believe that the spread of democracy in the Arab world might actually suit American interests. The wave of protests have been fundamentally built around specific nationalisms and expressions of domestic political discontent than they have relied on anti-Israeli, anti-American or Islamist ideology, so much so that in Tahrir Square, protestors chanted "[Mubarak, Ben Ali, and Now Seyed Ali.](#)" in reference to Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei. The flaring up again of the Green Revolution there, and the continuation of protests in Libya despite Gaddafi's ruthless crackdowns, reinforces the fact that it is autocratic dominance of political discourse, rather than the promise of Islamism or fury at the West, that is spurring the current wave of protest.

The United States should therefore be relatively sanguine about the strategic consequences of regime alterations in the region. Certainly, regime change bought about by broad-based popular protest predicated on internal discontent is preferable to having to play an active role in the succession of ageing autocratic leaders. Three principles should therefore guide American diplomacy in the weeks and months ahead:

First, be flexible. As in Egypt, play cautiously and don't overcommit the diplomatic hand. There are certain to be different outcomes in different countries, don't attempt or expect for there to be a one-size fits all policy. The United States does not need to [assert a doctrine](#).

Second, as in Egypt embrace those democratic revolutions that are succeeding, and commit resources to ensuring that transitions are managed in the spirit of emancipation rather than rancour.

Third, and crucially, commit to support the new democracies in the region for the long-term. Decades of authoritarian neglect must be reversed with sustained investment so that the young populations that have brought about these political upheavals may see the fruit of their labours in increasing economic prosperity. Significant development policies – a Marshall Plan for the Arab world – will be required to ensure that once the euphoria of revolution fades it is not replaced by discontent that creates space for extremists.

One size fits none

A policy of strategic flexibility is all the more important given the different levels of influence that the United States has across the region. In Libya, there is surely nothing that the United States can offer the regime that would persuade it to halt its repression of the demonstrations and embark on a political transition that takes account of popular opinion. The same is surely true of Iran. In Bahrain, on the other hand, as in Egypt, America's diplomatic ties have allowed it to pressurise the authorities into acting with relative restraint and undertaking reforms. There is no uniform 'leadership option' towards this wave of protests, any more than there will be identikit political outcomes across the countries currently experiencing political turmoil.

Ultimately, the United States should not feel its interests threatened by popular protest and democratisation, even where interests are as delicately poised as in the Middle East and even when the autocrats under siege have long been useful allies. Rather, the spread of democratic governance, and the evidence of people's desire for it, should be of more concern to the governments of [Beijing and Moscow](#), and most significantly Iran. The US can ride this wave out, it is for others to fear on whose shores it might break.

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