

For America, An Arab Winter

The fall of Arab autocrats creates more risks than opportunities for the United States. As Arab political horizons expand, the space for America to pursue its interests may well contract.

BY AARON DAVID MILLER

MARK TWAIN ONCE OBSERVED THAT HISTORY doesn't repeat; it rhymes. As America reacts to the dramatic changes sweeping the Arab world, it would be wise to keep Twain's insight in mind.

These aren't quite secular revolutions like those of 1789 and 1917, and they certainly aren't Islamic ones, like Iran's in 1979, at least not yet. They more resemble popular uprisings like those in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991.

But even here the differences eclipse the similarities. The Arab world is not shaking off domination by a great imperial power that has entered into decline. And it includes a much wider range of polities than did Eastern Europe ca. 1990—monarchies, republics, and authoritarian regimes of various complexions. The amount and nature of change varies dramatically from country to country. In some cases (Egypt and Tunisia), the uprisings have left many established governmental institutions and political parties in place. In others, efforts to change the status quo have failed and led

to state repression (Bahrain and Syria) or civil war (Libya and Yemen). Elsewhere, in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Kuwait, Jordan, and Lebanon, there's been much less change so far or none at all.

The broader point is that America has never been here before. Whatever rhythmic patterns link the current political turmoil to the past are trumped by the reality that the United States finds itself in terra incognita in a part of the world vital to its national interests, without a unified doctrine to guide it. But the absence of such a lodestar is actually fortuitous. No single strategy could possibly accommodate the differences and variations in play or harmonize America's values, interests, and policies. The last thing the United States needs right now is ideological rigidity. Great powers at times behave inconsistently—even hypocritically—to protect their interests. It's part of their job description.

During most of the time it has been engaged with the Arab world, the United States has dealt either with acquiescent authoritarians who were its allies (in Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia) or with adversarial authoritarians (in Syria and Libya). Iraq was for a time an ally, then an adversary.

All of this (or a great part of it) has now come undone. With some exceptions, most notably Saudi Arabia, every

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In dealing with each Arab ruler, the United States has struck a different balance between its values and interests. Several key figures gathered at a 2006 summit, including Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi (right), with Syria's Bashar al-Assad at his side and Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh (far left).

major U.S. ally or adversary in the Arab world has faced disruptive change. On balance, when President Barack Obama's 3 AM phone call came, his first real-time foreign-policy crisis, he responded pretty well under tough circumstances. He made no fatal mistakes or galactic stumbles. And despite the criticism from liberal interventionists and neoconservatives who demanded a more muscular American response, the administration got the big issues right. It has been roundly criticized for its half-in/half-out approach to military intervention in Libya, but even that may prove to have been the best of bad alternatives if Muammar al-Qaddafi falls. The president will have been judged to have accomplished his goal without heavy American involvement, even though for many in Congress it seems too much.

What abound in America's policy aren't failures so much as contradictions and anomalies. The president has called for the removal of one cruel dictator (Qaddafi) but not another (Syria's Bashar al-Assad). His administration helped to ease Egypt's Hosni Mubarak out of power, but couldn't or wouldn't

press the Khalifa monarchy in Bahrain or Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen quite as hard. That the administration's approach to these different situations where values and interests collided came to resemble a giant game of Whac-A-Mole is a result less of the administration's failings than of the impossible situation it faced. It also reflects another key reality: The Arab Spring was not primarily an American story. The United States' capacity to shape events was always quite limited.

As America watches these events unfold, it should be humble and respectful of history's power and uncertainty. The fall of the Arab dictators in Libya and Syria would be a good thing. Even the stability offered by the acquiescent autocrats (in Egypt and Tunisia) was always at best a false one. The long arc of history may smile kindly on the Arab world and over time bring better governance, gender equality, and greater respect for human rights to a region that is in desperate need of them.

But the short term will prove to be a difficult period

for the Arabs, and the United States too. Democracy, or whatever strange hybrid of popular government, weak institutions, and elite control replaces the autocrats, will be a double-edged sword. And American policies, already marked by contradiction and challenge, won't escape its cutting edge. The gaps separating American values, interests, and policies could actually grow, and the

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space available to the United States to pursue its policies—from Iran to Gaza to the Arab-Israeli peace process—could contract. The growing influence of Arab public opinion on the actions of Arab governments and the absence of strong leaders will make it much tougher for the United States to pursue its traditional policies. For America, the Arab Spring may well prove to be more an Arab Winter.

In late April, a new poll on Egyptian attitudes toward the United States told the story. Only 20 percent of those surveyed had a favorable view of the United States, with little more than a third expressing confidence that President Obama could be expected to do the right thing in world affairs.

To put it simply, when the Arab uprisings occurred, America wasn't in the most favorable position to cope. It was neither admired and respected nor feared as much as it needed to be in a region that is vital to its national interests.

For at least 18 years, under Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, America's approach to war and peace had produced very mixed results—some would argue failure. In two wars (in Iraq and Afghanistan), victory seemed to be measured not in terms of when the United States would prevail but by when it would be able to leave. Sanctions and cyberworms launched against Iran took a toll on its nuclear program, but high oil prices and an Iranian commitment to uranium enrichment kept the centrifuges spinning. On Arab-Israeli peacemaking, the Obama administration pushed for an Israeli settlements

freeze in 2009 and lost. With no negotiations and no freeze, a good deal of American credibility has been lost as well.

The sum total of the difficulties—those inherited and those self-inflicted—had left President Obama's image much diminished relative to the expectations (inflated to be sure) when he entered office. Words had also outstripped deeds on

both the peace process and democratization. Obama's 2009 speech in Cairo calling for a "new beginning" in relations between the United States and the Muslim world was brilliant, but his actions—such as backing off from pressing Mubarak and other autocrats for reforms—

betrayed his words. Wary of the impracticability of his predecessor's freedom agenda, the president had all but dropped it.

The main event in the Arab upheavals was the fall of Mubarak in Egypt. And the main problem for the United States was that for 30 years, Mubarak had been one of the good guys—supporting U.S. policy on Iran, Gaza, counterterrorism, and the peace process. Egypt was no democracy, and Mubarak was an authoritarian whose security services arrested, tortured, and imprisoned his people, but for every American president since Ronald Reagan he had been a partner and friend.

Mubarak was the epitome of the acquiescent autocrat, the kind of leader with whom America had cut bargains decades earlier. In exchange for a pass on questions of governance, such leaders supported U.S. war- and peacemaking policies. Sure, the Department of State issued tough human rights reports every year, and for a time the George W. Bush administration actually took its freedom agenda seriously. But there was no sustained pressure on issues of human rights or political reform. The Bush administration needed Mubarak's support for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and its efforts to contain Iran.

In Egypt, the Obama administration actually got lucky. The Egyptian military understood history's moment, forced Mubarak out, and refused to launch a massive crackdown on the opposition. With the public's support, it took over the country to oversee a transition until parliamentary and presidential elections could be held. Still, the issues at stake—the

role of the military in an emerging democracy, the influence of the Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood, how Egypt's economy would fare, what the Egyptian-Israeli relationship would look like—remained unresolved. The United States maintained its close ties with the military and was viewed as a key partner. But it was clear that with the rise of more popular voices, Islamist and secular nationalist alike, the political process would be more open and dynamic. That would almost certainly mean a foreign policy more independent of the United States, and more critical of Washington's policies, not to mention Israel's. It seemed all but certain, as Egypt moved to reach out to Iran and open the border with Hamas-ruled Gaza, that the space for U.S. influence in Cairo would contract. That it was Egypt that brokered the Fatah-Hamas Palestinian unity agreement signed in May, without consulting with Washington, was a telling sign of how much things had already changed.

Elsewhere, the United States wasn't so lucky. In Bahrain, the ruling Khalifas, encouraged and abetted by Saudi Arabia, cracked down on the Shia opposition. American efforts to mediate were rebuffed. The Obama administration, fearful of losing invaluable access to naval and air base facilities, backed off pressuring the regime—at least publicly.

In Bahrain and again in Yemen, unlike in Egypt, America's interests (port facilities, air bases, counterterrorism cooperation) were clearly in conflict with its values (allowing peaceful opposition and pressing hard for reform). The Saudis, worried about the specter of an Iranian presence in a neighboring country with a Shia majority and the restiveness of their own Shia minority, pushed for and supported the repression in Bahrain. Angry about Obama's decision to abandon Mubarak, the Saudis drew the line on the Arab Spring in Bahrain. And there was little the United States was prepared to do about it.

It was striking that of all the countries in the region exposed to pressures for change, Saudi Arabia seemed least affected. Plentiful oil money to buy off discontent, the public's respect for the king, the conservative nature of the society, and a weak tradition of street opposition seemed to make the Saudis different and almost unassailable—at least for the moment. For the Obama administration, it was just as well. How Washington would have responded to serious unrest and a crackdown in the Arab world's most important oil producer was a challenge the White House was glad not

to face. In this regard, most of the monarchies (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Morocco) had weathered the winds of change far better than the presidencies and republics.

Change visited not only America's friends but also its adversaries. In Libya, violence even triggered a U.S.-led (for a time) NATO military intervention, and in Syria, quite to the surprise of many political analysts, the Assad family faced the most serious threat to its rule in 40 years. In both instances, there would be clear gains for the United States if the regime fell, though in the case of Syria, the Obama administration acted as if the risks of Bashar al-Assad's departure outweighed the advantages. Like a Wall Street heavyweight, Syria was too big and important to fail.

The differences in the way the United States reacted to the situations in Libya and Syria pointed up the contradictions in its responses to this incipient Arab Winter—situations in which repression rather than regime change or reform carried the day. Moreover, both situations reflected the limits of U.S. influence and ability to shape the outcomes quickly, easily, or, perhaps in the case of Syria, at all.

In Libya, the United States, pushed by the French and fearing regime atrocities, found itself involved in a strange kind of civil war that pitted poorly organized, underarmed rebels controlling much of the east against Qaddafi's forces in Tripoli and the west.

The U.S. response in Libya was a lowest-common-denominator effort to protect civilians and encourage the opposition in the face of a brutal dictator's harsh repression. The not-so-subtle subtext was that President Obama was determined to avoid heavy American military involvement, let alone boots on the ground and overt efforts at regime change. The United States already occupied Iraq and Afghanistan; it didn't want to own Libya too. The focus from the outset was on getting others to carry the load.

The result—a UN Security Council resolution, a NATO military operation, and an Arab League buy-in for an augmented no-fly zone—produced what one might have imagined: a military stalemate in which NATO bucked up the rebels largely through airpower. The rebels (even with NATO support) weren't strong enough to defeat Qaddafi. And NATO wasn't prepared to do what was necessary to accomplish that end. America's turning over leadership to NATO was further evidence that for President Obama, Libya was not a front-burner issue. Qaddafi's arc, however, seemed headed downward, and given Libya's relatively minor importance in the American scheme of things, the partial U.S.

response, however painful some of its consequences were to watch, may well prove to have been the best one possible.

On the other hand, in Syria, a country of much greater consequence to American interests in the region, the United States didn't even have bad options. Military intervention was out of the question, since Syria possesses real air defenses and chemical and biological weapons. Nor was it possible to construct a coalition to pressure Assad to reform or to resign. This was partly because the Turks, Saudis, and Israelis were all wary of what might follow Assad should he fall.

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Driven partly by fear of what would come after Assad (Sunni extremists, civil war) and partly by a lack of capacity to influence events, President Obama settled on a limited response—tougher rhetoric and targeted sanctions. But there was no doubt where the administration's bottom line lay. Though there might be considerable benefits to toppling Assad (a cruel regime ended and Syria's ties with Iran loosened, along with a weakening of Syrian clients Hamas and Hezbollah), there were also risks.

The administration's limited response to both the Arab Spring and the Arab Winter reflected certain realities that would likely continue to define U.S. policy.

First, the Middle East upheaval wasn't primarily an American story. Even if the United States had desired a stronger role, it would have only made matters worse by intervening. The historic changes loosed this year throughout the Arab world represented a legitimate and authentic response by the Arabs to the need to reshape their own societies without much in the way of external reference points. This was as it should have been.

Second, even if the Arabs had wanted more intervention by the United States, the Obama administration had little desire to push its way in. Iraq and Afghanistan cast long shadows. Obama's foreign policy had already begun to mirror many of the elements of his predecessor's. As Libya demonstrated, owning Arab countries, putting American forces

on the ground, and regime change were tropes, policies, and outcomes the Obama administration strongly wished to avoid.

The administration also understood that America was still very much caught up in a devil's bargain with a number of authoritarian regimes (Bahrain, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan), and had to be cautious in what it said and did about reform. The United States might argue for democratic change, but its interests might nonetheless demand a strong regard for the status quo. Strikingly, there were no repeats of

the assertive "Qaddafi must go" speech from the White House for Bahrain, Yemen, or Syria.

One of the most notable developments in a region traditionally obsessed with the Israeli-Palestinian issue was how little this subject figured in the political turmoil

that swept through it. Missing were the traditional anti-Zionist, anti-Semitic tropes, burning of Israeli and American flags, and demonstrations for Palestinian rights. None of this meant that the Arab world had given up the cause of Palestine, but it did reflect changing priorities and a focus on domestic matters. It wasn't until mid-May, largely in response to al-Naqba day (the "day of catastrophe," when Palestinians mark the anniversary of Israel's creation and their exile), that violence erupted, as Palestinian protesters—their actions orchestrated by Syria—tried to cross Israel's borders with Syria and Lebanon.

The Israelis might have taken heart from the fact that they weren't the center of attention amid all these changes had the uncertainties created in the process not shaken their confidence. Within the space of two months, Mubarak, Israel's key partner, was gone, and another friend, King Abdullah of Jordan, was under pressure. By May, Syria's Assad was facing the worst-ever challenge to his regime, a development that could have major implications for Israeli security interests in Lebanon and the Golan Heights, where Assad had scrupulously maintained the 1974 U.S.-brokered disengagement agreement. For Israel's tough-minded and suspicious prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, these developments only reinforced his caution about making a deal with the Palestinians. Whatever hopes the long arc of history held out for democratic change in the Arab world and Arab-Israeli peace,



Still standing: The Arab monarchies, particularly those in the Persian Gulf, have survived without serious challenges. Here the Saudi (right) and United Arab Emirates (left) finance ministers meet during the Arab Spring.

the immediate future was fraught with uncertainty.

For Palestinians, the political changes sweeping the Arab world were a painful reminder of how little their own situation had changed. Even before the events in Tunisia and Egypt, Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas had concluded that Palestinians needed to break out on their own and not count on Israel or the Obama administration. Toward this end, he and his prime minister, Salam Fayyad, had begun to develop institutions on the ground and a diplomatic initiative for recognition of Palestinian statehood at the United Nations in the fall.

Turmoil in the Arab world only seemed to validate this strategy. Regimes that couldn't deliver what their publics wanted were swept away or faced intense opposition. And to say the least, neither Abbas in Ramallah nor the Hamas leadership in Gaza had delivered. The two sides had been talking unity ever since their bloody split in 2007. To preempt discontent and to broaden their legitimacy, both Hamas and Abbas now seemed more open to reconciliation.

For Hamas, whose base of material support in Syria was increasingly tenuous as a result of Assad's repression and whose Islamist trope seemed out of step with the non-ideo-

logical, youthful, secular character of much of the opposition in the Arab street, unity seemed even more urgent. It was also important for Hamas to keep Egypt, the broker of the unity accord, happy, partly because Cairo controlled the border crossing at Rafah, a lifeline for Gaza. Abbas too saw unity as a chance to ally with Egypt and gain a better position for his UN statehood recognition campaign. After all, it would be easier to argue for statehood in front of the international community with Palestinians at peace rather than at war with one another.

For a U.S. administration that had yet to find an effective strategy to promote Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Israeli wariness and Palestinian unity

made an already complex situation trickier. If Hamas were to abandon struggle and recognize Israel, there might be a real chance for substantive talks, but that's not what the unity effort was about. What unity did do—in the short term—was raise the threat of a congressional cutoff of U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority and give Israelis who didn't want to negotiate with Abbas a perfect excuse not to do so.

Worried about drift and the approaching debate over the UN initiative in September, the administration looked for a way to respond. In May, as part of his Arab Spring speech—largely in an effort to demonstrate that he was still committed to a solution and to persuade key European countries not to support the Palestinian initiative—Obama laid out a U.S. position on borders based on those in place before the 1967 Arab-Israeli war with mutually agreed land swaps. The speech sparked an intensely negative reaction from the Israelis, and not much of a positive one from the Palestinians, and reflected the reality that the administration really didn't have the strategy, capacity, or opportunity to translate any of its ideas into serious negotiations, let alone an agreement.

By early summer, there appeared to be no way out of this

conundrum. Neither Abbas nor Netanyahu was willing or able to get into serious negotiations. And the United States seemed powerless to affect matters. The default scenario seemed to be drift as the Palestinians geared up for their UN statehood initiative in September, leaving the United States isolated in opposing them. Even if the administration manages to relaunch the talks, the odds against an agreement appeared overwhelming.

Charles de Gaulle, paraphrasing Sophocles, once reflected that one must wait until the evening to see how splendid the day was. Time will indeed be the ultimate arbiter of what the changes unleashed this year will mean for the future of the Arab world. It's a long movie that will take years to play out, and the story will develop in fundamentally different ways in each country depending on local circumstances. Some popular uprisings have changed regimes; some haven't; others have produced civil war and state repression. The lesson of history is that you never quite end up where you thought you would. We can hope with some confidence that the future holds the prospect of better governance, more accountability, gender equality, and respect for individual rights. But in the summer of 2011, who can make authoritative predictions about where Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria, or those countries yet untouched (Jordan and Saudi Arabia) will be in the summer of 2012?

We can, however, say with greater confidence how America will fare. It will be wise as we deal with the region's changes to keep both our hopes and our fears under control. When it comes to this part of the world, Americans (me included) indulge too much in each. Several trend lines seem clear.

First, the gap between America's values and its policies in the region may narrow but will remain. In Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria, the United States will be constrained by its interests from pushing too hard for reform and is likely to be cautious in its support for the opposition. In Egypt, as it becomes clear that a powerful military functioning independently of civilian authority isn't really compatible with democratic values, the United States (because of its close ties to the military) will find itself in a dilemma. Similarly, it will be reluctant to embrace groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood whose views on democracy, gender equality, and Israel are fundamentally different from our own.

Second, as public opinion becomes more influential in shaping domestic and foreign policies in the Arab countries, the space available for U.S. policies and influence may contract. The acquiescent autocrats have acquiesced, albeit often grudgingly, in our approach to Iran, Gaza, Israel, and counterterrorism. The new regimes won't, or at least not as easily. Since most of our policies won't change quickly, or at all, the United States will likely be in for a rough ride, with both emerging governments and old ones.

Indeed, our traditional friends and adversaries are already worried about our reliability. The Saudis were stunned at how quickly we acquiesced in and aided Mubarak's fall, and they were also angered by our support for reforms in Bahrain. The Israelis probably are concerned as well that we plan to squeeze them on the peace process to accommodate the new Arab democrats and carve out greater space for our interests. And in traditionally pro-American monarchies such as Jordan and Morocco that have been spared disruptive change, the kings may wonder how America will react if they too are pressed hard by their publics.

Events in the Arab world may also complicate U.S. policy toward Iran. There are new pariahs now—Syria and Libya—to divert the international community. Egypt will continue to fear Iranian influence, but will likely improve ties and shed the personal animus that influenced Mubarak's approach to the mullahs. And while the Arab Spring has been a setback for Iran's model for change and governance in the Middle East, Iran will be a beneficiary if reforms falter, particularly in Bahrain and Yemen.

Finally, if the tumultuous changes in the Arab world reveal anything, they should be a painful—or happy—reminder that America doesn't run the world. Reinhold Niebuhr said it best decades ago: America can't manage history. This doesn't mean the United States is a potted plant or is in decline, or even that it lacks influence in this region.

The Arab uprisings have important consequences for American interests to be sure, but they are not our story. We can support change through economic and technical aid and by looking for opportunities to defuse political tensions and work toward solutions (when real ones exist), particularly in the Arab-Israeli arena. But there are real limits to our power and influence, particularly in a region where our values and interests will continue to collide and where our policies may by definition be at odds with the rising currents of public opinion. But such is the fate of a great power engaged in a region it cannot remake and from which it cannot retreat. ■