

Acting and Reacting in the Middle East

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When mass protests broke out in the Arab world in 2011, the Obama administration saw opportunity. The president helped push long-time U.S. ally Hosni Mubarak to step down from the Egyptian presidency, noting, “I think history will end up recording that at every juncture in the situation in Egypt that we were on the right side of history.”

Almost four years later, “people power” has not taken hold in the Middle East. Some countries, such as Libya and Syria, hemorrhage from civil wars that started as peaceful protests. In Egypt, elections produced a government so exclusionary that after a year in power, much of the public supported a return to military rule. Three and a half years after the death of Osama bin Laden, jihadis are resurgent in the region. Meanwhile, the United States finds itself fighting battles in the Middle East with strained alliances and diminished influence. What went wrong?

Where one stands depends on where one sits. For some, the problem is that the United States swiftly abandoned principles for expediency. Speaking at the State Department a week after bin Laden’s death, the president raised idealists’ hopes, favorably comparing protests in the Middle East to the American Revolution and the U.S. struggle for civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s. “After decades of accepting the world as it is in the region,” he said, “we have a chance to pursue the world as it should be.” And yet, the rise of violence and disorder in the Middle East pushed the United States to work more closely with the militaries, intelligence services, and authoritarian leaders who only months before seemed anachronistic.

The tension between ideals and interests has been starkly clear in Bahrain, where the U.S. Fifth Fleet has its headquarters, and where a Sunni-led government, with support from Saudi Arabia and other neighbors, has been suppressing an uprising by the Shi’a majority. Naval base operations have not been affected, and the United States resumed sales of some military equipment only months after the unrest began. For others, however, the United States has remained not only idealistic but naïve in the face of real and persistent threats in the Middle East.





Gulf Arab allies continue to complain that the Obama administration “threw Hosni Mubarak under the bus,” yielding to chaos. Conservative regional governments express puzzlement that the United States has remained blind to the menace of the Muslim Brotherhood, seeing democrats where these governments saw power-hungry theocrats. These governments not only wonder about U.S. support should they face internal challenges, but even if the United States would provide aid and comfort to their enemies out of a misplaced belief in the enemies’ good intentions. Realists in the United States complain that the disorder that accompanies rapid political change is both predictable and profound, and

the eagerness with which the United States embraced such change reflects a lack of historical awareness or strategic thinking.

Perhaps most surprising in recent months, in the arenas where the United States has been putting forth the greatest effort—in Iraq, for example—the U.S. government has put the emphasis squarely on government-to-government relationships. In so doing, the president is relying on often-ineffective or corrupt officials to reach the large and dissatisfied populations in whom the president had seen such promise a few years before.

While some rush to ascribe incompetence or even malice to U.S. government actions, the lack of effectiveness is instead a product of sustained U.S. uncertainty. Tumultuous politics in the Middle East have pushed the United States toward a more circumspect attitude toward the permanence of its allies. Put simply, it is not willing to bet on their success. The speed with which the United States moved to establish a working relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was chilling to many regional leaders, as was the slow reluctance with which the United States accepted the Egyptian army's seizing power. For the United States, the episode was a principled expression of concentrating on process rather than outcome. For Arab allies, it was an opportunistic embrace of victors over friends.

Distrust of U.S. intentions colors Arab leaders' assessment of U.S.-led negotiations over the Iranian nuclear program. Arab governments fear that the United States will try too hard to accommodate Iran in the negotiations and react too passively to subsequent Iranian violations of its agreements, leaving them enveloped by Iranian hegemonic ambitions. The fears of Gulf leaders in particular are abetted by the prospect of U.S. energy independence, which they see as diminishing U.S. interest in their partnership, and in their security.

While there is widespread agreement that U.S. policy in the Middle East should be responsive to conditions on the ground, there is widespread concern that it has become wholly reactive—crisis-driven, unprincipled, and uncoordinated. The perception that it is reactive elicits complaints that it is not reactive enough to an individual petitioner's complaints. That makes it appear feckless as well.

Whether one considers the "Transformational Diplomacy" of Condoleezza Rice or the "21st-Century Statecraft" of Hillary Clinton, the United States continues to lack a strategy it needs for an increasingly complex world—and increasingly complex Middle East—in which non-state actors are stronger, communications are more robust, and priorities harder to sustain. Equally importantly, foreign policy complexity has helped create a world in which U.S. strategic priorities are increasingly hard to discern. This is especially so given a strong bureaucratic impulse toward the inclusion of priorities in strategic documents rather than choosing between them.

A clearer strategy would look like this: global energy security—broadly defined—is certainly in the strategic interest of the United States, as is containing transnational terrorism. So too is preserving the security of key allies against hostile states, and enhancing the resilience of friendly governments. Working with friendly states in the region, in Europe, and in Asia, those should be the strategic goals. In order to pursue them, the United States should not only work with friendly governments, but also push to empower a range of like-minded non-state actors, in the United States and abroad. Through it all, the United States must keep in mind that some of its greatest successes have come not from what it has done directly, but through creating institutions and incentives that encourage people and governments to act in desirable ways. The United States still needs to react, but those reactions need to be a smaller share of its actions in the Middle East and beyond. ►

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