Bruce W. Jentleson

Beware the Duck Test

In explaining why the United States was scheming to overthrow the government of Guatemala—democratically elected but allegedly with communist leanings during the Cold War—the U.S. ambassador proposed the "duck test": "Many times it is impossible to prove legally that a certain individual is a communist; but for cases of this sort I recommend a practical method of detection—the 'duck test'....[If a] bird certainly looks like a duck. Also, he goes to the pond and you notice he swims like a duck. Well, by this time you've probably reached the conclusion that the bird is a duck, whether he's wearing a label or not."[1]

The duck test lumping together leaders, parties, and movements which in any way smacked of radicalism as part of the Soviet orbit was a key factor in many U.S. foreign policy failures during the Cold War in the then-Third World. As we focus on an Arab world undergoing unprecedented change and instability, posing threats but also presenting opportunities, we need to avoid making comparable mistakes with respect to political Islam and other forces. Blithe generalizations, binary thinking, and fear-mongering distort both the political dialogue and the analytic capacity needed to pursue policies differentiated according to the particular political dynamics of the various countries of the Arab world and the strategic challenges facing the United States.

Lessons Learned

There is no question that the Soviets were a threat in the Third World. They helped start the Korean War. They invaded Afghanistan. They took advantage

of Fidel Castro's fervent anti-Americanism. They supported subversion and sought out beachheads in various places at various times of the Cold War. But in many instances, the monolithic view of global communism and concomitant failure to make national differentiations inherent in the duck test and its three corollaries—"Anybody But a Communist," "Our SOB," and the Munich "appeasement" analogy—both undermined American ideals and damaged American strategic interests.

Just as the duck test determined whom we opposed, we supported "ABC": Anybody But a Communist. Unsavory alliances with dictators, support for military coups, covert actions, and other policies which hardly fit with democracy promotion were justified with the overriding strategic rationale that "he may be an SOB, but he's our SOB." Anything other than staunch support for those ABCs–SOBs was derided—indeed, delegitimized—as akin to British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's attempted appeasement of Adolf Hitler at Munich in 1938.[2]

Much of the failure of U.S. Vietnam policy traces back to these four strategic miscalculations. Hans Morgenthau, the iconic realist, opposed the Vietnam War as early as 1967, arguing in anti-duck test terms that even without converting Ho Chi Minh from communism, a relationship could be developed that would "prevent such a communist revolution from turning against the United States."[3] Instead, Ngo Dinh Diem was hailed as the Winston Churchill of Asia, that is until the United States colluded in his assassination and embraced one ABC– SOB after another while one president after another invoked the Munich analogy. "We learned from Hitler at Munich," President Lyndon B. Johnson stated in 1965 as a key part of the explanation for the initial major increase in U.S. troops, "that success only feeds the appetite of aggression. The battle would be renewed...bringing with it perhaps even larger and crueler conflict, as we learned from the lessons of history." Seven years later, President Richard Nixon made his case for escalating the war, including mining North Vietnamese harbors, in the Munich-like terms that "an American defeat in Viet-Nam would encourage this kind of aggression all over the world."[4]

A similar pattern pervaded Latin America. President John F. Kennedy proclaimed his oft-cited statement that "those who make peaceful change impossible make violent revolution inevitable" on the first anniversary of the Alliance for Progress, itself hailed by JFK on its founding as "an alliance of free governments [that] must work to eliminate tyranny from a hemisphere in which it has no rightful place."[5] But when put to the test, as Latin American elites and militaries resisted peaceful change and resorted to coups to protect their own interests, the United States fell back on duck tests and ABC definitions. In the 1964 Brazil coup, for example, U.S. "enthusiasm" for the coup "was so palpable that Washington sent its congratulations even before the new regime could be

installed."[6] Among the torture victims at the hands of the military regime over its two decades in power was Dilma Rousseff, the current president of Brazil.

And in Iran, "our SOB" support for the Shah ended up as lose–lose for both U.S. ideals and interests. In Washington, it "inhibited intelligence collection, dampened policymakers' appetite for analysis of the Shah's position, and deafened policymakers to the warning implicit in the available current intelligence."[7] The Carter administration did put some pressure on the Shah to liberalize, but so little that as late as November 1978, policy options other than support for the Shah were "inadmissible." Even as the crisis heightened, Carter still "directed that we get the Shah's approval before talking to moderate opposition leaders." Carter wouldn't go so far as to support a military coup or other "iron fist" responses, but he also didn't get out from under "the catastrophic illusion that, because we support a foreign country, our vital interests are in every way congruent with the interest of that country as perceived by the government in power."[8] Instead, U.S. policy stuck to the Munich-like rationale that "other rulers in the region, friendly to the United States, were watching us closely. How we responded to the crisis was a guide to them for how we might react if they were threatened."[9]

As we strategize for the challenges posed by the Arab Spring, the past need not be prologue. While learning the right lessons from the Cold War won't assure success, not learning them makes failure more likely.

The Arab World Today

Let's start with the one certainty about where the Arab world is going: we don't know. Nobody knows. Where the *ancien regimes* have fallen, as in Tunisia and Egypt, the unifying effect of a shared objective has given way to mixes of electoral contestation, behind-the-scenes maneuvering, waves of repression against some of those who led the revolutions, and outbreaks of sectarian violence such as between Muslims and Coptic Christians in Egypt. Where old regimes are struggling to hang on, it's not clear whether they can and what it will take to do so, or if they can't what would come next. Even best-case scenarios must bear in mind that democracy does not spring forth like Athena from Zeus' head. At best it takes years, even decades, to institutionalize. "It's an entire country that needs to be remade," a Tunisian mayor observed. "It's not going to be one year, or two years, or three years. It's going to be an entire generation."[10]

> There is one certainty about where the Arab world is going: we don't know.

Nor is this just about politics. Sufficient progress must be made on the pervasive economic problems and social injustices which feed the unrest. Sources of instability and building blocks for prosperity go back to the "triple deficits"—education, women's empowerment, and political freedom—highlighted in the 2002 *Arab Human Development Report*.[11] Closing or at least narrowing these deficits requires not just higher GDP growth rates and foreign investment flows, but also greater equity and benefits extending beyond elites into broader societies. Yet the gap between the rich and poor had been widening in recent years, and made all the more grating as with the spate of gated communities built in and around Cairo. "The ominous dynamics of marginalization" was the warning sounded in the 2009 *Arab Human Development Report*.[12] All too exemplary was the Yemeni village left so destitute that it turned to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to provide teachers for its schools.

The Arab–Israeli conflict, in particular the Israeli–Palestinian dimension, also continues to be a factor—not as much as some claim, but not as little as others do. With many in Israel now even warier of peace agreements and Arab regimes potentially resorting even more frequently to the diversionary script of invoking the Zionist enemy, progress on peace may now be that much harder. Yet it is that much more essential. Then there is Iran, discussed below, and post-bin Laden al-Qaeda. Navigating these and other uncertainties is an enormous challenge. Four lessons from the past can help.

> F our lessons from the past can help navigate the uncertainties ahead.

No Duck Test for Political Islam

Political Islam is neither inherently incompatible with democracy nor automatically antagonistic toward the United States. There are "many faces of political Islam," as the scholar Mohammed Ayoob put it even before the Arab Spring.[13] While transnational links to al-Qaeda, Iran, or such others need to be taken into account, they must not automatically subsume national differentiations. Within those national differentiations, further assessments must be made of the goals, strategies, visions, and leadership of the respective parties and movements. Policies need to be tailored to oppose those inimical to our values and threatening our interests, while remaining open to those with which coexistence and cooperation may be possible, even though we have differences.

In Egypt, for example, this means getting beyond the essentialist view of the Muslim Brotherhood as a singular organic entity driven by an absolutist ideology unchanging over time. This is "a caricature that exaggerates certain features of the Brotherhood while ignoring others, and underestimates the extent to which the group has changed over time."[14] Islamist dispositions do persist, but there are divisions within the current leadership. These cut a number of ways based on relative emphases on political engagement and social work, conservative versus progressive interpretations of Islam, and generational factors. How these play out is not endogenous to the Brotherhood, but also affected by the broader political dynamics of the new Egyptian system in which it must compete. The amount of political space available depends in part on how appealing other political parties or leaders are and how strong the political institutions are to sustain the rules of the game and keep the Brotherhood to its approach of "participation not domination."[15]

> The Muslim Brotherhood is not a singular organic entity.

Even many of those within the U.S. foreign policy debate most concerned about the Muslim Brotherhood stress engaging it rather than seeking to isolate it. Engagement includes applying pressure, setting conditions, and articulating redlines. But it is quite different than duck-test antagonism. It recognizes that U.S. policy is not just affected *by* the Brotherhood, but also affects *it*. In social science parlance, U.S. policy is not just the dependent variable responding, but also an independent variable affecting what the Muslim Brotherhood is and does. This cautions against assuming that the Brotherhood "would automatically become pragmatic should it take power," [16] as Daniel Byman prudently advises. It also checks against just erring on the side of supposed caution with a hedging strategy which risks making the worst case more rather than less likely. Among the ways to strike this balance are focusing on whether elections are free and fair, not on who wins, and adherence to the commitment to peace with Israel consistent with the Camp David Treaty while at least tacitly accepting that, as we already have started to see, a new Egyptian regime will take a different overall approach to the peace process.

Comparable differentiations hold for other Arab countries. In most countries where the Muslim Brotherhood operates, "it seeks only peaceful political change; it rejects violence as a way of securing its goals; and the rejection of violence is not a mere tactical adjustment but a deep strategic commitment."[17] In Tunisia, while secular Tunisians express some anxiety about the political strength the Ennahda movement is showing, they also acknowledge that "political parties

influenced by Islam are inevitable in their prospective democracy." With that as a baseline, the worry is about more extremist Islamic groups, but the calculation is that those groups are more likely to *gain* traction if the system is perceived as inimical to any and all political Islam.[18]

In Bahrain, Shiite groups such as al-Haq and al-Wafa do appear to have links to and be receiving assistance from Iran. In Yemen, while AQAP has not been driving the unrest, it is opportunistically seeking to exploit it. In Libya, the activities of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other extremists have gone from what the top NATO commander initially called "flickers" to what an Algerian official termed an "increasingly noticeable presence."[19] Yet, there are other and larger Shiite groups in Bahrain such as the al-Wefaq movement that do not have Iranian links and have much more of a Bahraini–Arab identity and agenda; in Yemen, the array of groups aligned against President Ali Abdullah Saleh is very diverse, including former top government and military officials whose democratic credentials are not exactly pristine but are hardly jihadist; and in Libya, the National Transitional Council is largely secular and includes political Islamists not linked to AQIM or other extremists.

> The United States cannot credibly push for political change if it excludes all political Islam.

In sum, political Islam is likely to be a part of the political mix more often than not. Some versions are ducks, some are not. They have to be differentiated. The United States cannot credibly push for political change if it excludes all political Islam.

Don't Go from "ABC" to "ABT"

U.S. national security will continue to require counterterrorism cooperation from Arab governments. But we have to stop substituting "ABT" (Anybody But Terrorists) for the Cold War Anybody but Communists. That approach has, in part, trapped the United States in the regional box it is now trying to escape— trying to avoid supporting unpopular, corrupt regimes whose principal claim to leadership is that terrorists will take over if they do not rule. For years, we looked the other way regarding Hosni Mubarak's increasingly autocratic rule in exchange for his cooperation on counterterrorism. No wonder he tried to play the terrorist threat card during the Tahrir Square demonstrations. With President Saleh in Yemen, we've had even more active collaboration, including permission to conduct drone attacks and other operations inside Yemen in exchange for substantial U.S. support in his battles with the Houthis and various other rivals. Even Muammar Qaddafi had been providing some

enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend cooperation against AQIM. And to go a bit afield to Pakistan, for all the aid and blind eye we've provided under the ABT rationale, even before the capture and killing of Osama bin Laden, the Obama administration could only say it was "vexing" why the Pakistani government and military continued to lack the will for "defeating the insurgency in Pakistan."[20]

The point is not democracy purism. We may hope for a world in which our relationships are "OWD" (Only With Democracies), but we have to live in and strategize for a world when that is sometimes not an option. But for all the realpolitik claims the ABC policy pushed during the Cold War and the ABT policy has made post-9/11, such a rationale reverses the leverage in relationships, giving it to leaders who think the United States can be spooked into giving them blank checks. Mubarak could continue to be all the more autocratic, corrupt, and able to rebuff U.S. "suggestions" for reform by invoking the terrorist threat. When Saleh needed Yemeni troops and intelligence operations to try to keep himself in power, he diverted them from counterterrorism locales and missions. Even before the current crisis, there were indications that he was keeping AQAP alive just enough to buttress his leverage over us, yet not too much to lose his claim to counterterrorism cooperation.[21] In Libya, Qaddafi's propagandizing the rebellion as AQIM-led is belied by little such evidence, including the statement by the Libyan Interim Transitional National Council pledging "commitment to the implementation of the relevant Security Council resolutions on Counter-Terrorism, including the resolutions on the sanctions concerning al-Qaeda and Taliban."[22]

No question there are terrorism risks amidst instability as well as regarding the shape successor regimes take. But what we've been seeing these past months is the risks of ABT strategies. And now potential opportunities are being opened up for alternative paths toward societal changes that help to counter jihadism more organically than any U.S. policy mix of counterterrorism and public diplomacy can. It's telling that Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's long-time number two, railed against the Arab Spring as misguided since "justice, freedom and independence" can only be achieved through "jihad and resistance until the Islamic regime rises."[23] A higher bar for U.S. support than just ABT thus has a strategic basis, not just a normative one; it's about interests not just ideals.

"Our SOB" OBE

The "our SOB" option has not only shown flaws over the years, changes in the 21st-century world have left it OBE (Overtaken By Events). For one thing, states are now less convinced that being "ours" is in their own security interests, unlike during the Cold War. While they still want U.S. security assistance and protection to the extent that it serves their needs and interests, they also want to

be free to pursue their own policies and initiatives not subject to Washington's approval, and the United States no longer has the leverage of the Soviet threat to play against them.

The Saudis, for example, have made that very clear amidst the Arab Spring. King Abdullah was widely reported to have expressed his indignation, and more, in a call to President Obama during the Egyptian crisis. They intervened along with the United Arab Emirates in fellow Gulf Cooperation Council member Bahrain in March 2011 over the objection of the United States in the name of GCC "common responsibility" and "common destiny." King Abdullah then rebuffed a visit from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. When a few weeks later Secretary Gates was received, Bahrain was said to be off limits for discussion. Although Iran has remained on the U.S.– Saudi shared agenda, the differences over Bahrain indicate differences over how best to counter Iranian influence.

While fueled by some factors particular to the Middle East, this strategic shift actually is part of a broader global trend toward what Steve Weber and I elsewhere call a transition from a Ptolemaic world to a Copernican one. [24] Just as Ptolemy held the Earth to be at the center with all the other planets, indeed the whole solar system, revolving around it, so was the United States seen as at the center of the Cold War world—the wielder of power, the economic engine, the bastion of free-world ideology. When the Cold War ended with the United States as the sole surviving superpower, the U.S. economy driving globalization, and democracy sweeping the planet, the world seemed even more Ptolemaic.

But broad global forces such as the diffusion of power, pluralization of diplomacy, eastward and southward shifts in economic dynamism, and the intensification of national identities have been making this 21st-century world much more of a Copernican one. The Earth (a.k.a. the United States) is not at the center. Other planets/states have their own orbits in which they define their foreign policies more in terms of their own national interests and less in pro- or anti-U.S. terms of reference. Thus, the Indian national security adviser stressed on the eve of President Obama's November 2010 visit that although India seeks better relations with the United States, its foreign policy remains one of "genuine non-alignment."[25] The debate about whether Turkey has become anti-Western and pro-Islamism misses the ways in which nationalist logic has become important, as expressed by a Turkish foreign ministry official: "We have [historically] waited for the big powers to make up their minds on big issues and we just follow them. For the past several years, we have made up our own minds."[26] With Brazil, while some anti-Americanism is sprinkled in, the drive is much more about its own national narrative of greatness going back to its founding.[27] While the United States still has some gravitational pull/leverage

over others, it tends to be well short of making a country "ours" even in policy terms, whether in the Middle East or elsewhere.

Another aspect of being OBE is how much harder it now is for regimes to sustain SOB-ness at home. What started in Tunisia and spread to Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, and beyond is what might be called the "Wizard of Oz" effect. Recall the scene when Dorothy pulls back the curtain and reveals that the great and powerful Oz was nothing more than a small unimposing man. The fall of the first Arab dictator punctured the aura of leader invincibility and countered the sense of popular powerlessness, and did so with a transnational demonstration effect. "Generations believed we could do nothing," one protester affirmed, "and now, in a matter of weeks, we know that we can."[28] This sense of empowerment is coming to the "youth bulge" generation—about 60 percent of the population in the Arab world is under 30, the median age around 26—who already didn't buy as much into the heroic narrative of anti-colonialism which palliated the demands of their parents and grandparents.

While too much sometimes gets made of this as the "Facebook–Twitter" revolution, technology clearly was a major driver of this empowerment. Information and communication always are key to reform and revolution. During the Cold War, Soviet dissidents like Andrei Sakharov, Alexsandr Solzhenitsyn, and Soviet Jews improvised their *samizdat*, reproducing documents with carbon paper, Xeroxing, or whatever other methods were available. Facebook–Twitter are samizdat on steroids, so much faster and with such wider reach. This has been especially influential for young women in traditional villages, allowing them "to bypass the men—fathers, brothers, husbands—who circumscribed their worlds and their ability to communicate. They cannot go to the park unaccompanied and meet friends, but they can join a chat room or send instant messages."[29]

It is important to stress that it is harder for governments to go the repressive route, but not impossible. The Assad dictatorship's heavy hand may quiet things down. The GCC intervention in Bahrain may buttress their fellow monarchy. Economic concessions such as the $128 billion package the Saudi regime suddenly bestowed on its people, and political tactics such as the Bahraini palace launching its own "We are all Hamad" (the King) Facebook page and the Foreign Minister tweeting "Yes we can!" may assuage the public.[30] But they may not. Neither scenario should be dismissed from U.S. strategizing, nor should they be assumed. Those curtains that have been pulled can never be fully closed again, the technologies not closed out.

The 1979 Iran analogy is today's Munich equivalent.

Flaws in the Munich/Iran Analogy

The 1979 Iran analogy is today's Munich equivalent. Sometimes it is explicitly articulated. Other times it's implicit in questions like "do we know who the opposition is" and leery "what if..." formulations. Islamism was the main driver of the Iranian revolution: it has not been the main driver of any of the Arab Spring revolutions and opposition movements thus far. If Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, or any other country were to go extremist Islamist, it would be more through its own dynamics than ones analogous to Iran. There also are democratic examples from Turkey and Indonesia of indigenous political Islamist parties coming to power. This is not to say that these necessarily apply any better to current cases, only that they demonstrate that no single analogy inherently pertains.

Furthermore, today we have not seen the anti-Americanism that so fueled the Iranian revolution. This was particularly striking in Egypt, where the U.S. relationship with Mubarak was akin to that with the Shah. Yet, even with some of the Obama administration's equivocations, Tahrir Square stayed anti-regime but not anti-American. A recent poll showed 58 percent of Egyptians favoring close or closer relations with the United States.[31] The Bahraini protesters have not been demanding removal of the U.S. Fifth Fleet base. These dynamics may change. If they do, though, it will be because of policies pursued and events that transpire over time, not Iran-like roots in the revolution.

Roots or no roots, a variation of Iran as Munich warns of Iranian opportunistic meddling in the instability, and urges taking a stand against any such possibility. This was the rationale for the GCC intervention in Bahrain against "an external threat on the whole Gulf." In mid-April, with the Saudis in the lead, the GCC protested to the UN Security Council "flagrant Iranian interference and provocations." They even used the language "take the necessary measures," stopping just short of "all," which had been the phrasing in Security Council resolutions authorizing the use of force against Libya the month before and against Iraq back in 1990 following the invasion of Kuwait.[32]

While there is an Iranian element that has to be strategized against, making it the dominant element would be yet another past-as-prologue path to policy failure. In trying to strike a balance, the Obama administration not only has to navigate Gulf diplomacy, it also has to protect its right flank in politics at home. That Obama got Osama clearly helps. But with Iran still such a hot button issue politically, any inkling that Iran may be making gains—actual, potential, or even

grossly exaggerated—will feed Munich analogizing, especially in an election year.

Broader Regional Restrategizing

Even before the Arab Spring, U.S. policy in the Middle East was not in great shape. The Arab–Israeli peace process was moribund. U.S. relations with Israel were severely strained. Iran was still pursuing nuclear weapons and cracking down further on the Green Movement. Syria had neither been effectively isolated nor constructively engaged. Hezbollah had increased its governing stake in Lebanon. With the added mix of risks and opportunities of the Arab Spring, broad strategic rethinking is essential. Avoiding duck tests and their ABT, our SOB, and historical mis-analogy corollaries isn't all that is needed in such a process. But it sure would help.

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