



Insight

America's Role during the Arab Spring

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There is no handbook for dealing with the chaos unfolding in country after country around the Middle East. The best we can do is rely on a combination of improvisation, intelligence and interpreting the lessons of history. Each country facing turbulence has a different set of circumstances and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Yet as the days and weeks go by, certain lessons and principles should help guide our response.

1. It's not about us. So far, the revolutionary activity has had little if anything to do with the United States. Let's keep it that way. This doesn't mean we don't have a role to play and won't be looked to for leadership. Rather, we should not try to direct the outcome of events, or to be perceived as trying to impose our will. President Obama had it right when he stated, "the future of Egypt will be determined by the Egyptian people," and it's a theme he should reiterate.

Now we also need to be extremely careful not to make blunders that will wrap us up in the flurry of emotions. Revolutions often have shifting goals and leadership. We must be particularly cautious of statements or actions that appear to put us on the wrong side of the people. For example, Vice President Biden's remarks in defense of former Egyptian President Mubarak early in the crisis were repeated widely among Egyptian protesters, and required a good deal of damage control on our part.

2. Hold back - and maybe even roll back - the terrorists. The Middle East remains the crucible for international terrorism. It's impossible to know what will happen when the old guard is gone and the dust settles. The absolute worst-case scenario would be the emergence of a regime that actively sponsors terrorism, like Iran. Nearly as bad would be a failed state or lawless region where terrorist groups are able to operate freely, as

Afghanistan once was and as Yemen has been. Neither of these scenarios can be tolerated, and the U.S. must begin working with our allies now on a strategy to counter such a direct threat should it emerge.

The best-case scenario, however, could be the opposite outcome, a rolling back of the terrorists. For years, Al Qaeda and its affiliates have taken advantage of the sense of powerlessness among so many in the Middle East. But without heavy-handed dictators, radical groups may well lose out in their recruitment efforts.

The wonderful thing about democracy is that opponents of the government have a peaceful way to express themselves, and can pursue their objectives through constitutional means.

Bringing armed groups into the political mainstream is a risky bet, however. Some, such as El Salvador's FMLN or the IRA/Sinn Fein in Ireland, have laid down their weapons and reformed themselves into peaceful political parties. Others such as Hamas and Hezbollah have only been emboldened.

3. Don't let Iran come out ahead. Tehran, as usual, is eager to take advantage of the current changes to expand its influence. Already Iranian warships transited the Suez Canal for the first time since 1979. Behind closed doors, most Middle Eastern leaders will tell you that Iran is the single biggest destabilizing factor in the region. Will a new crop of leaders "get it?" Or will Iran find more enablers, as it has increasingly found in the populist Islamist government elected in Turkey?

Watch for Tehran to make mischief particularly in countries with Shia populations like Bahrain. We know from our experience in Iraq that Tehran will work to fan Sunni-Shia tensions, and will try to manipulate Shia leaders beyond its borders.

Moderate Middle Eastern leaders have long warned that an Iranian nuclear weapon, aside from the threat it would pose to Israel and the West, could lead to an arms race in the region. This was a scary enough proposition when we knew who was running these countries, let alone now. Now more than ever we need to work with likeminded countries to isolate Iran and prevent its development of a nuclear weapon.

4. Denounce violence strongly and immediately. Condemning violence against protesting citizens, as well as violence on the part of the protesters, is obviously the right thing to do morally. It puts the U.S. on the side of the free expression. In a more tactical sense, it tests the regimes' claims to legitimacy. Any government that feels so threatened by street protests that it has to massacre its own citizens doesn't deserve to be in charge.

Beyond rhetorical support, which is important, we can back up our words with actions. In Egypt, the U.S. made it clear that our sizeable assistance programs would be reviewed in

light of the government's response to the protests. In Libya, the Administration imposed sanctions - not to demand Qadhafi's resignation, but to object to his heavy-handed response. We should not hesitate to articulate consequences that will result from excessive use of force by the government.

5. Be a good friend but don't go down with the ship. As much as our hearts may be with the people on the streets, we cannot ignore our decades of cooperation with many of the authoritarian figures in the region. That doesn't mean giving them a blank check, but rather treading delicately. After all, many will survive the challenges. Yet some will not, and we need to be nimble enough to be able to have a good relationship with the winners if possible.

For instance, had the U.S. simply withdrawn our support from President Mubarak outright, we would have jeopardized other critical friendships and further called into question our reliability as an ally. However, as it became clear that President Mubarak's days in office were numbered, the U.S. positioned itself increasingly on the side of those who sought his ouster. Ultimately, neither side was fully satisfied by the U.S. response. Setting aside some of our blunders, that was probably the right balance to strike considering our relationship with the former president.

6. Don't blow the easy ones. As complicated as our position is when it comes to countries like Bahrain, Jordan, Yemen or Saudi Arabia, there are two states where virtually any change in leadership would be a net gain for regional stability and America's interests. There is absolutely no reason to be nuanced in our support for the protesters in Iran or Libya. President Obama was unacceptably late in piling on Muammar Qadhafi, and has never been vocal enough in his support for democracy in Iran. These are no-brainers.

7. Think the Unthinkable. The 1979 Iranian revolution caught Washington policymakers and intelligence agencies by surprise. No one had even considered the possibility that the Shah might not survive, let alone study our options in the event of his fall. In November 1978, U.S. Ambassador to Tehran William Sullivan penned an insightful cable entitled "Thinking the Unthinkable" in which he challenged these assumptions and proposed some new courses of action. Unfortunately, the cable had little to no impact, and the U.S. was caught flatfooted.

We must not make the same mistake. The January 2011 revolution in Tunisia should have been a sign that change was possible, yet it was after the fall of Ben-Ali that Secretary Clinton assured the world that the Egyptian regime was "stable." Events are unfolding rapidly, and long-held assumptions need to be challenged. U.S. policymakers need to be thinking and planning for the unthinkable today.

8. Don't make public predictions. No matter how U.S. government leaders might expect events to turn out, it is difficult to see what is accomplished by making predictions. In the first place, these are events beyond our control, constantly changing, and even the most seasoned experts may not be able to make accurate assessments. Moreover, such comments will be dissected for any hint of bias.

When CIA Chief Leon Panetta stated that he had read reports that Mubarak was about to depart, the world took note. Mubarak did not leave on that day, calling U.S. intelligence into question. It made us look amateurish, and gave the appearance of our being closer to Mubarak's decision-making than was actually the case. The fact that Panetta later clarified he had been referring to press reports didn't help. Similarly, Secretary Clinton's January 25th assessment that the Egyptian government was "stable" made the U.S. look either uninformed or on the side of the government. American leaders should also demur when it comes to predictions about how groups like the Muslim Brotherhood might behave down the road.

9. Keep Israel on the map. No country in the Middle East is watching events with more trepidation than our democratic ally Israel. Its peace with Egypt and Jordan may fall apart. Egypt's moderating influence with the Palestinians and other Arabs may be lost. Iran may sense an opportunity to instigate and fund more terrorist attacks. Regional anti-Israel populism could even result in all-out warfare.

While U.S. and Israeli interests may not always coincide perfectly, we certainly have an interest in protecting the existence of Israel. As new governments take office in the Middle East, we will strive to maintain good, mutually respectful relationships, knowing that we won't agree on everything. At the same time, we can make it clear that electing a government that seeks the destruction of Israel will fundamentally impair a country's relationship with the U.S. Israel's rivals need to understand that despite some present tensions, the U.S. is firmly committed to our alliance with Israel. We should also urge any new government to abide by its treaty obligations.

10. Work with the militaries. Some of our strongest relationships in the region are military-to-military, and some of our best-spent aid dollars are on programs to improve military professionalism. The U.S.-Egyptian military relationship was, and remains, one of our closest. Even as the police forces allegedly attacked protesters, the Egyptian military conducted itself with great professionalism and restraint. The fact that a temporary government takeover by the military leadership is being celebrated by so many in the democracy movement speaks volumes of the esteem in which the Egyptian Armed Forces

are held.

American investments in such military-to-military relationships, particularly through the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, are extremely worthwhile. These programs teach professionalism, human rights, and civilian control, and forge personal relationships that reap big dividends down the road. At a time of increasing pressure on our foreign assistance accounts, IMET is one of the best investments we can make.

11. Help build new democracies, as asked. The work doesn't end once the authoritarian figure is toppled; it really just begins. Building democratic institutions from scratch is not easy. Egypt is in no position to hold free and fair elections. Political parties need to get organized, leaders need time to emerge. New election rules need to be written. Poll watchers - both domestic and international (if invited) - need time to get ready.

Unfortunately, the expertise to pull off a fair election in six months simply does not exist in Egypt. The United States has numerous independent, non-governmental organizations that specialize in helping countries develop democratic institutions, as well as thousands of Americans who have experience in small "d" democratic politics. While Egypt must determine the kind of elections and political parties it is going to have, technical advice may need to come from elsewhere. A disputed election six months from now would only throw the nation into more turmoil.

Beyond Egypt, we should be more deliberate in our efforts to help moderate civil society grow over the long term. Even if other imperiled regimes make it through this crisis, sooner or later the dictators will fall. We have an interest in making sure that the reformers are prepared to step into any vacuum, because in oppressive societies the radicals tend to be better organized. Our embassies should do more outreach too - we need to know the people who could be running these countries someday.

12. Help friends get ahead of the curve. Authoritarian and semi-authoritarian leaders around the world are watching to see which strategies are most effective for retaining control. The Libyan approach has been brutal force, with poor results. Morocco (at the risk of making predictions) appears likely to weather the storm because of political reforms undertaken well before the unrest began. Top-down reform is not always enough, but it's better than nothing.

Our long-term strategy must remain the same as the Bush Administration undertook, however imperfectly. We need to encourage friendly countries to get out in front of the

democracy movement by opening up their governments. And we do that by appealing to their own self-interest in survival. As President Obama said, “you have a young, vibrant generation within the Middle East that is looking for greater opportunity ... if you are governing these countries, you’ve got to get out ahead of change. You can’t be behind the curve.”

Clearly the equilibrium of the Middle East is being upset. The U.S. can’t control events, but we will be affected by them. We must do what we can to protect our interests, our relationships, and our reputation.