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The US Response to the Arab Uprising: Leadership Missing

Robert Springborg

The Barack Obama administration's response to upheavals in the Arab world that commenced in Tunisia in December 2010, has been remarkably cautious. What it has done is much less remarkable than what it has said, or what it might have done.

As is characteristic of this administration in general, and of its president in particular, words have been more forthcoming than actions. And those words have followed a pattern. As uprisings gathered steam, language supporting protesters and criticising incumbent regimes grew more pointed, but in almost all cases remained equivocal. Removals of the Tunisian, Egyptian and then Yemeni presidents were tacitly endorsed.¹ Wording of statements about the ruling al-Khalifa family and their draconian crackdown in Bahrain was yet more cautious.² The strongest statement by President Obama on Syria's President Bashar al-Assad prior to the intensification of the regime's crackdown in July was that "he can lead [the] transition or get out of the way," a statement described by former State Department spokesman, P.J. Crowley, as "curious," since Assad seemed to have no intent of reforming.³ When in May

¹ As President Ali Abdullah Saleh was evacuated from Sana to Saudi Arabia in June 2011 to receive medical treatment, the United States made no secret of its desire for him not to return.

² Obama's personal comment on Bahrain was included in his 19 May 2011 speech, in which he encouraged dialogue between the government and the opposition, which he said cannot be real "when parts of the peaceful opposition are in jail." He did not condemn the government's excessive use of force against protesters, nor the dispatch of troops to Bahrain by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

³ P.J. Crowley, "Obama Must Tell Assad to Go," *Washington Post*, 19 June 2011, <http://>

2011 President Obama signed an executive order approving sanctions against Assad and his inner circle, his stated, limited objective was to pressure Syria to “begin transitioning to a democratic system that ensures the universal rights of the Syrian people.”⁴ It was not until 18 August when the Syrian issue was on its way to the UN Security Council that the US government called for its president to step down. Only with regard to Libya has the language of regime change been strident, unequivocal, and accompanied with direct action to achieve that end. But even that direct action was limited primarily to the opening stages of establishing the No Fly Zone, itself a tightly confined operation.⁵ The Libyan engagement, moreover, resulted not from US urgings, but from diplomatic initiatives commenced by France and then supported by other European states.⁶ For the first time since World War II the United States took a back seat to Europe in laying the diplomatic groundwork for joint military action in the Middle East, and then in the actual conduct of the action itself.

Another feature of US rhetoric is that much of it has been pronounced by spokespersons for the president or the secretary of state, thereby distancing those officials from the message, reducing their responsibility for it, and implicitly devaluing its importance. So, for example, in reaction to Bashar al-Assad’s speech on 20 June, in which he pointedly refrained from announcing specific reform measures and continued to blame outside agitators, which he likened to “germs,” for the

www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/obama-tell-syrias-assad-he-has-to-go/2011/06/17/AGLZB3bH_story.html

⁴ Cited in *IPRIS Digest*, 4, 124, 23 June 2011.

⁵ By late June 2011, for example, NATO had launched only one-third of the air sorties over Libya that it did over Kosovo in 1999. Those sorties were conducted almost exclusively by European, not US aircraft. They were deemed by qualified western military experts to be insufficient to change the balance of power on the ground. See for example James Blitz, Michael Peel and Anna Fifield, “An Uncertain Mission,” *Financial Times*, 23 June 2011, p. 7.

⁶ In virtually his final public statement prior to retirement, Secretary of Defence Robert Gates attributed France’s forward posture toward Libya to President Nicolas Sarkozy’s “personal reasons”, thereby further underlying US scepticism toward this intervention. James Kantner, “Sarkozy Rebutts Gates’s Remarks on Libyan Strikes,” *The New York Times*, 25 June 2011, p. A8.

upheaval in his country, the French foreign minister, Alain Juppé, said that the Syrian president had reached “the point of no-return.” His German counterpart, Guido Westerwelle, said that the speech was that of a “hopeless person who seems not to have understood the signs of the times.” By contrast, the American response to what may have been the last chance for the Assad regime to come to terms with its opposition, was provided not by President Obama or Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, but by Victoria Nuland, spokeswoman of the Department of State, who simply characterised the speech as “mere words.”⁷

The net effect of its cautious, essentially verbal reactions has been to convey an impression that the Obama administration is anxious not to become sucked into the tumultuous events of the Arab Spring and is grappling with upheavals on a case by case basis. It has shunned formulation of an overall strategy that would force it to choose between security concerns and support for those pouring into Arab streets. It seems to be struggling to find words it hopes will appease protesters, but not commit the United States to specific outcomes or actions. In some cases, such as that of Saudi Arabia’s crackdown on women protesters violating the ban on their driving in the Kingdom in May 2011, the administration preferred complete silence, despite appeals by the protesters for words of encouragement.⁸ Obama’s second major speech on the Middle East since becoming president, delivered on 19 May 2011, sounded like a dusted off version brought down from the US diplomatic shelf. It laid out traditional US concerns with supporting Israel and the peace process, fighting terrorism, opposing nuclear proliferation, and ensuring the flow of oil. This litany of interests is the same as that enunciated by Obama’s predecessor, although President George W. Bush typically added a commitment to democratisation. The speech, billed as President Obama’s

⁷ “They Said in Response to al-Assad’s Speech,” *al Quds al Arabi*, 22 June 2011, as cited in *Middle Eastwire.com* 22 June 2011.

⁸ After a campaign directed against her by Saudi women, Secretary of State Clinton finally issued a statement on 21 June in which she declared that what “these women are doing is brave, and what they are seeking is right.” No criticism of the Saudi government was offered. Her spokesperson explained the dilatory response on the grounds that the secretary had been engaged in “quiet diplomacy.” Steven Lee Myers, “Clinton Praises Protest by Saudis,” *The New York Times*, 22 June 2011, p. A8.

reaction to the Arab Spring, was conspicuously not used to declare new departures in US policy toward the region.

In the meantime the absence of major policy reactions by the United States to the Arab Spring is notable. No US troops have been committed to Libya or any other country in the region since that Spring blossomed. Indeed, the draw-down of US forces has continued in Iraq and was announced for Afghanistan on 22 June as the upheavals were in progress. No substantial increase in foreign aid has been declared, even as regards traditional beneficiary Egypt. Despite its straightened circumstances, deemed by its Finance and International Cooperation Ministers to require 12-15 billion dollars in additional external funding in this financial year, it was promised by President Obama in his 19 May speech debt relief of only 1 billion dollars, and that on conditional terms, as well as an additional 1 billion dollars of new loan guarantees. Secretary of State Clinton, speaking in Cairo on 15 March, had announced a rather derisory 90 million dollars of emergency economic assistance. The United States thus committed itself to covering less than five percent of the funding required by Egypt for the coming fiscal year, a very modest amount indeed in comparison to the some 3 billion dollars annually Jimmy Carter committed to Cairo in support of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty back in 1979.⁹ In deeds then, if rather less so in words, responses by the Obama administration to Arab countries wracked by internal dissent and/or facing major economic challenges have been characterised by their discreetness, or by their complete absence. Indeed, one former administration insider boasted that this approach reflected the Obama strategy of "leading from behind."¹⁰ Whether that is explanation or justification is unclear, but the low key approach does raise questions as to what alternative responses were possible, why they were not preferred, and what the consequences of leading from the rear have been.

⁹ Total Egyptian public debt in 2011 is 183 billion dollars, of which some 3 billion dollars is owed to the United States. Because the debt to the United States is on concessional interest terms, it requires minimal debt servicing, so the 1 billion dollars of debt forgiveness provides Egypt annually an amount about equal to the pledge of additional US funding for 2011. But that amount in any case is required to be committed to a "debt swap" which will create funds for youth employment, not immediate relief from the looming fiscal crisis.

¹⁰ P.J. Crowley, *op. cit.*

WHAT THE UNITED STATES HAS NOT DONE

The Arab Spring is said to be the most momentous event in the Middle East since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.¹¹ Even by a lower, possibly more accurate standard, the US response seems remarkably timid. As the brief overview above indicates, the reaction has been primarily verbal and indirect. Washington has deliberately shunned a visible leadership role. While it may be “leading from behind” in that it has sought to coordinate moves from within NATO, the United Nations (UN) and the world financial institutions, that coordination has not resulted in unified, effective actions by the United States and its allies.¹² It is hard to imagine how it could be otherwise as long as Washington’s objectives remain unclear. So the lack of substantive, decisive reactions to the near collapse of the long standing post-Ottoman Arab order, begs the question of what has not been done, or put slightly differently, how Washington might have responded were the Obama administration’s reactions more like those of its predecessors.

First, the United States has conspicuously refrained from using the traditional levers of its power. Military deployment has been limited to the Libyan theatre and, even in that case, not of major significance. There have been no other special alerts, ship, troop or aircraft movements. Nor have there been any threats of military action, even for protection of US citizens or as possible reprisals for attacks on US interests. Gunboat diplomacy has been shunned, in part no doubt because it would be unclear what the targets would be or, if any potential ones were hit, such as Syria’s Fourth Armoured Division under Maher al-Assad’s command and responsible for much of the brutalisation of civi-

¹¹ Gordon Lubold, “Senator John McCain: US Must Sustain Momentum of Arab Spring,” *News Feature*, US Institute of Peace, 20 May 2011, <http://www.usip.org/publications/sen-john-mccain-us-must-sustain-momentum-arab-spring>.

¹² At a minimum, “leading from behind” is a “politically disastrous wording,” according to Daniel W. Drezner, who further notes that, “Unless and until the president and his advisers define explicitly the strategy that has been implicit for the last year, the president’s foreign policy critics will be eager to define it – badly – for him.” “Does Obama have a Grand Strategy?” *Foreign Policy*, 90, 4 (July/August 2011), pp. 57-64.

lians, what the consequences might be. For a while, the most coercive action taken by the United States, other than against Libya, was imposing sanctions on a dozen members of the Syrian political elite, several of whom in any case already were labouring under sanctions previously imposed.

As far as support for democratisation conducted by or with funding provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), there have been some attempts to reconfigure and upgrade existing programmes to provide more direct, substantial support to protest movements. The most notable attempts at such change have been in Egypt. Secretary of State Clinton announced in the wake of Hosni Mubarak's departure in February that some of the 250 million dollars annual economic assistance would be redirected to "support the transition and assist the economic recovery." In March 2011, USAID/Cairo launched a 65 million dollars programme for "democratic development" focused on elections, civic activism and human rights. Fayza Aboul Naga, long serving minister for planning and international cooperation, speaking on behalf of the government – which means the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) – immediately criticised this initiative and formally complained to the US embassy on the grounds that the action violated Egypt's sovereignty.¹³ USAID/Cairo delayed implementation of the programme until June, at which time the new US ambassador, Anne W. Patterson, reported to Congress that USAID was about to commence distribution of 40 million dollars for democracy assistance, implying that it had reduced the original commitment by 25 million dollars.¹⁴ In mid August the USAID mission director, James Bever, was recalled simultaneous with the announcement that it had been agreed that all future US funding to Egyptian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) would require the approval of a committee whose members would be appointed by the SCAF. Egyptian NGOs immediately protested what ap-

¹³ "Egypt Opposes US's Democracy Funding," *Expat Cairo*, 14 June 2011, <http://www.expatcairo.com/2011/06/egypt-opposes-u-s-s-democracy-funding/>.

¹⁴ Emad el Din Shahin, "The Arab Spring and Western Policy Choices," *Peace Policy*, 6 July 2011 <http://peacepolicy.nd.edu/2011/07/06/the-arab-spring-western-policy-choices/#more-1179>.

peared to be the US embassy knuckling under to the SCAF at the expense of civil society.¹⁵ The government of Egypt also continued its ban on the two major organisations that receive democracy funding from the US government – the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute – so they have been unable to operate on the ground in Egypt. Possibly most telling, USAID and the US Office of Military Cooperation in Cairo refused to address the critically important issue of civil-military relations. Various existing sources of funding were available for this purpose, whether from USAID’s budget or the Department of Defence’s International Military Education and Training Programme (IMET). Unwillingness to seek to enhance civilian capacities to oversee the military was a decision reflecting the administration’s fear of antagonising the Egyptian junta.¹⁶ While this reticence could change when the outlines of a new political order are clarified, what remains significant is that at the critical moment when the United States might have signalled its interest in supporting civilians against officers, hence democracy over continued military rule, it chose not to do so.¹⁷ In sum,

¹⁵ Yaroslav Trofimov, “Egypt Opposes US’s Democracy Funding,” *The Wall Street Journal* 14 June 2011, http://online.wsj.com/article_email/SB10001424052702304665904576383123301579668-1MyQjAxMTAxMDEwNTEwNDUyWj.html; Abddel-Rahman Hussein, “Foreign Funding of Egyptian Rights Groups Causes Stir in Political Debate,” *al Masry al Youm* 22 July 2011, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/479422>.

¹⁶ Tamara Cofman Wittes, recently appointed deputy assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs, is a long standing opponent of efforts to reduce US assistance to the Egyptian military or to try to use that assistance to upgrade civilian control over it. In a 2008 publication, for example, she defended continued support for the military and opposed conditionality on assistance to it on the grounds that assistance underpinned “high-value cooperation with American strategic goals.” See Tamara Cofman Wittes, *Freedom’s Unsteady March: America’s Role in Building Arab Democracy*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008, p. 119.

¹⁷ In June 2011, two prominent US senators weighed into the growing dispute between the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and the popular protest movement. They sided with the former. Senators John Kerry and John McCain, on a visit to Cairo, stated that they were confident that the military rulers wanted to transfer powers to an elected government “as soon as possible,” and that they were going to recommend back in Washington that there should be “further assistance to Egypt’s military.” Dina Salah Amer, “Egyptian Leaders Assures McCain and Kerry on Transition,” *The New York Times*, 27 June 2011, p. A7.

the United States sought to make its USAID governance and democracy programmes more robust, but backed away when it met resistance. It studiously avoided addressing the most critical issue, which is that of civil-military relations. The Obama administration, unlike its predecessor, chose not to highlight rebuffs of its efforts to promote democracy, preferring instead to delay USAID disbursements to non-governmental organisations and then to grant the SCAF more control over them than the Bush administration had to Mubarak's government.

The carrot has been used as sparingly as the stick. The paltry addition to US financial assistance to Tunisia and Egypt has already been noted. The so-called "Middle East Marshall Plan," long called for by those worried by the parlous economic condition of the region, received not a mention from the administration.¹⁸ Washington further distanced itself from efforts to come to the aid of struggling Tunisia and Egypt by not hosting a donors' conference. In the event, it was convened in Paris, where it necessarily received less attention. Its physical distance from Washington implied the Obama administration's reticence to assume the role of principal banker of the Arab Spring. And without its direct, benevolent engagement, terms offered by the international financial institutions were likely to be much less favourable than newly energised Arab populations anticipated, or their fragile governments could thus easily accept.¹⁹

Conspicuous efforts to utilise Arab upheavals to gain leverage for the United States within the region or in its broader foreign relations constituted a third notable absence from the Obama administration's res-

¹⁸ Glenn Hubbard and Bill Duggan, "A Marshall Plan for the Middle East?" *Huffington Post*, 28 February 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/glenn-hubbard/marshall_plan_mid_east_b_829411.html.

¹⁹ Finance minister Samir Radwan announced on 25 June that Egypt "had dropped plans to seek loans from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank." He explained this move on the basis that the fiscal deficit would be only 8.6 percent of GDP in the coming year, not over 11 percent as originally thought. Commentators suggested the real reason for not taking up the loans at this stage was due to popular reaction against the international financial institutions and the limited conditionality they attached to the loan offers. See "Egypt Drops Plans for IMF Loan Amid Popular Distrust," *BBC News*, 25 June 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13914410>.

ponses. The president's speech on 19 May, in which he referred to a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict based on the 1967 border, appeared to suggest that he was hoping to use the momentum of Arab democratisation to engage Israel in a more serious peace process. But two days later, after a storm of protest from pro-Israeli circles directed at this utterance, President Obama in a speech to the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) backtracked, saying apologetically, "There was nothing particularly original in my proposal." The trial balloon, if indeed it was that, was thus quickly deflated by he who had launched it. Any hope that whatever democracy the Arab Spring was able to bring might provide a new base upon which the US administration could reinvigorate the peace process, was dashed.

Just as the US administration showed little interest in trying to mediate between its friends in the region, including the Palestine Authority and the government of Binyamin Netanyahu, so too did it abjure efforts to punish its enemies. As the Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah axis came under ever greater pressure as a result of the upheaval in Syria, the increasingly bitter conflict between President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in Iran, and the reaction by the 14 March movement against the new Miqati government in Beirut backed by the 8 March political alliance, so did the Obama administration appear to become ever more cautious. A wait and see attitude was adopted toward the Hezbollah influenced Miqati government. Allegations of Iranian meddling in Syria, originally made not by the president or secretary of state, but by UN ambassador Susan Rice in late April, although in the absence of any details, were reiterated some weeks later by Secretary of State Clinton, but again without specific information.²⁰ In the meantime Syrians fleeing into Turkey provided eyewitness accounts of what appeared to be direct Iranian involvement, including its distinctive securi-

²⁰ Bill Varner, "Iran Actively Aiding Syrian Repression of Protests, US Says," *Bloomberg*, 26 April 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-04-26/iran-actively-aiding-syria-s-repression-of-protests-u-s-says.html>; and *Secretary Clinton on Repression in Iran and Syria*, US Policy, Embassy of the US, Brussels, Belgium, 14 June 2011, <http://www.uspolicy.be/headline/secretary-clinton-repression-iran-and-syria>.

ty personnel allegedly firing on protesters.²¹ Obviously the Obama administration was leery of ratcheting up the pressure on Damascus and Tehran and on their satellite in Lebanon, Hezbollah.²²

At the strategic level, the US administration apparently decided not to use opportunities the Arab Spring provided to enhance transatlantic relations and reinforce the US position at the heart of the NATO alliance. Washington preferred to sit back and let Paris and London take the lead, not only vis-à-vis Libya, but also in trying to cobble together a Security Council resolution on the Syrian situation. When the air campaign faltered over Libya, Secretary of Defence Robert Gates chastised America's European allies for insufficient spending on defence. The impression conveyed was that the United States would look after its own key interests in Egypt and Bahrain, while allowing the Europeans to try to pick up the pieces in less strategic Tunisia and Libya and also to try to organise some sort of international pressure on Damascus. Whether this was leading from the rear, or deserting the field, must have seemed ambiguous in European capitals.

Finally and most importantly, the Arab Spring elicited no overall statement of strategy by the president. The last presidential "doctrine" for the region was declared by President Jimmy Carter in 1980 in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It was a classic statement of US Cold War strategy, drawing a line in the sand beyond which the Soviets could not go without an American military response. The Soviet Union is no more, the Cold War is thankfully over, and drawing lines in sand has little effect on the elusive enemies and asymmetric threats currently faced by the United States and the West in general in the Middle East. The range of current challenges and opportunities is entirely different, while the US capacity to "contain" the region single-handedly, which it more or less accomplished in the first two decades after the So-

²¹ "Iran Accused of Role in Syrian Repression," *The Peninsula*, 10 June 2011, <http://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/middle-east/155220-iran-accused-of-role-in-syrian-repression.html>.

²² A common belief in the Arab world is that the United States is seeking to weaken the Assad regime, not to remove it, so that it can be pressured into reaching a peace agreement with Israel. See for example Ali Younes, "Obama's Winning Formula for Syria," *al Ahram Weekly*, 7-13 July 2011, <http://weekly.Ahram.org.eg/print/2011/1055/rel142.htm>.

viet collapse, is much diminished. The Arab Spring exploded the existing Arab order, based as it was primarily on authoritarian regimes propped up by the United States.

So from every perspective a new Middle East has to be built. Since the United States is the primary external actor for the foreseeable future, but one with reduced capacities and confronted now with regimes that may not be so easily managed, it would seem logical and necessary for the United States to take the lead in articulating a vision of the Middle East and specifying what the United States will contribute to assist its realisation. By not declaring a new doctrine for the region, President Obama has foregone an agenda setting opportunity and left all stakeholders wondering where this vital region is headed and how the United States will respond. At the more prosaic level of the day to day management of US interests in and toward the region, whether by CENTCOM, the Department of State, or by USAID, it has become clear over the past few months that the lack of policy directives is rendering the task of such management difficult. Absent explicit policy set against clear objectives, bureaucrats hunker down, fearful of taking initiatives that might prove to run counter to Washington's tactical manoeuvring. Being the weakest actor, USAID is particularly impacted by policy ambiguity, just at the time when US assistance for democratisation could have the greatest effect.²³

So what Washington has not done in response to upheavals in the Arab world has at least opportunity costs. This begs the question of why the Obama administration has been willing to bear them.

WHY HAS IT DONE SO LITTLE?

The Middle East is a region where fools rush in, but wise men fear to tread, as Leon Carl Brown noted so elegantly almost thirty years ago.²⁴

²³ That the Cairo USAID mission director either resigned in protest against the Department of State caving into demands from the SCAF for control over democratisation funding, or was removed from his post so as to serve as the scapegoat for the US administration, would in either case send a clear and chilling message to his USAID colleagues.

²⁴ Leon Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East: Old Rules, Dangerous Game*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1984.

And it is a region where the United States is already overextended. Even after the withdrawal from Iraq, troops in the region account to more than 100,000. It has erected a security umbrella over the Arab states of the Gulf, as part of which it maintains military facilities in five of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. It is the primary military partner of numerous other Arab countries, including Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, and Jordan, not to mention Israel. The Middle East has for some thirty years consumed about half of all US foreign assistance. The returns from these US investments have been mixed, for the Middle East continues to breed terrorism and political violence like no other, while its publics are markedly less pro-American than those in other emerging regions.²⁵ In addition to provoking yet more terrorism, new US intervention could have other negative, unforeseen consequences. Sudan is the first, but maybe not the last Arab state to fragment, giving rise to new rounds of inter-state warfare. Fears of Libya and Syria splitting are not entirely fanciful, and Iraq's future as a unitary state is not yet secured. Palestine has already virtually split in half, or in fact into three parts if we include Israel as part of the historic mandate area. So while the Middle East has an unenviable record of turmoil and violence, there is nothing to prevent the situation from further deteriorating, including states dissolving into warring fragments. The Arab upheavals of 2011 are themselves signs of chronic and dangerous political and economic malaise. In no country have they yet led to a resolution of the underlying problem of authoritarianism, a pre-requisite for the good governance required for rapid, sustainable economic growth.

Only a fool would anticipate roses being strewn at the feet of a new interventionist force. President Obama is assuredly no such fool. He has learned from the missteps of his predecessor who rushed almost blindly into this difficult region. But is the lesson of caution still the correct one

²⁵ A Zogby poll released in July 2011, for example, revealed that a sample of respondents in six Arab countries viewed the US even less favourably than a similar sample had at the end of the Bush administration. Farah Stockman, "Obama, US Viewed less Favourably in Arab World," *The Boston Globe*, 13 July 2011 <http://www.boston.com/Boston/politicalintelligence/2011/07/obama-viewed-less-favorably-arab-world-poll-shows/ylVn6f6PueWbdhZutghoj/index.html>.

for the new circumstances created by the Arab Spring? Under President Bush the United States sought to impose itself on the region. Now the people of the region are themselves initiating changes to established political orders. Many are hoping that the United States will revise its approach to their particular country and to the region as a whole. So might the United States now be out of step with these new realities, standing back, hesitating to engage, when it is being urged and indeed invited to do so? Surely the Obama administration must have been tempted to place itself more unequivocally on “the right side of history” by providing more tangible support for those protesting against and, in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, at least partially removing authoritarian governments. What then has held President Obama back?

The factors just mentioned of potential terrorist backlashes and state fragmentation, are but two of several concerns with this volatile region that probably serve as deterrents to bold, innovative US action. Possibly at the top of the list of worries is that Islamism could ride to power on the back of protest movements. The effervescence of that movement in the wake of departures by Presidents Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak is clearly of concern, despite signs of its increasing division into multiple organisations and political parties, particularly in Egypt, hence its weakening in the face of competitive secular political movements. Of still greater concern is radical Islamism in Yemen, in some cases linked to al-Qaeda, which appears to have gained control in Abyan and other southern areas more or less abandoned by Ali Abdullah Saleh’s regime under siege in Sana. Suspicions that the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood provides much of the stiffening for ongoing protests in that country probably constitute a deterrent to the more open embrace of that upheaval by the Obama administration. Worries about Islamism shade into thoughts of Iranian fifth column activities, especially in Bahrain. In a region deemed to be polarised – rightly or wrongly – between Shi’a and Sunni, with US strategic weight exclusively on the latter, any gains by the former would be deemed to be major setbacks. The primordial strategic interest in Israel also gives rise to apprehension about Arab upheavals. While protesters have focused on domestic issues, the potential for them to begin to challenge existing accommodations with Israel brokered by the United States and enforced by Arab authoritarian

regimes, is worrisome. Finally, the price of oil is seen as the single greatest impact on the pace and extent of US economic recovery, as witnessed by the Obama administration's support in late June for tapping into the International Energy Agency's strategic petroleum reserve. Any disruptions to supply that would further aggravate the loss of most of Libya's normal exports of some 1.6 million barrels per day would be most unwelcome. If the upheavals were to spread to the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, the consequences could be globally catastrophic. Any one of these many threats is sufficient to give pause to a US administration already inclined to a cautious posture toward the Middle East.

Were the downside risks less threatening, domestic constraints might still be sufficient to cause the American president to forswear dramatic reactions to Arab upheavals. Mention has already been made of the overstretched US military. According to then Secretary of Defence Gates, speaking to the Military Academy at West Point, any US president seeking to send an army to Asia, the Middle East or Africa "should have his head examined."²⁶ Four months later President Obama announced the beginning of troop withdrawals from Afghanistan, with many leading Republican politicians not only supporting the draw-down, but urging that it be hastened. The announced withdrawal from Iraq was finalised by the end 2011. So there is next to no US political appetite for new military actions in the Middle East. America's uncharacteristic gun shyness results from straightened economic circumstance. Meeting in June, the Conference of Mayors passed a resolution calling on Congress to hasten the end of US involvement in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, arguing that building bridges in Baghdad and Kandahar made little sense when there were no funds to build them in Baltimore or Kansas City.²⁷ Possibly the only points of consensus in contemporary American politics are that the US economy is woefully weak and that the United States

²⁶ Cited in Richard McGregor, "US Loses its Appetite for Job as the World's Policeman," *Financial Times*, 3 March 2011, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/b0e2de0c-45d7-11e0-acd8-00144feab49a.html#axzz1QUtx5Byv>

²⁷ "US Mayors Gather in Baltimore," *The Washington Post*, 17 June 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/us-mayors-gather-in-baltimore-topics-include-redirecting-military-spending-to-home-front/2011/06/17/AGTm94YH_story.html.

cannot afford further military expeditions. Any president who ignored the shared awareness of limits on US capacities and need for them to be redirected to the home front would do so at enormous political peril.

Intrusions from the Middle East into US domestic politics must also give pause to those in the administration when considering the range of possible alternative responses to Arab upheavals. Israel's apprehensions about the consequences of the upheavals for its own security translate directly into political pressure in Washington. It does not want to see all vestiges of the security states in Egypt and, until the late summer of 2011, even in Syria, with which it has maintained peace for almost forty years, swept away and be replaced by unknown political actors, some or possibly many being Islamists. While democratic Arab states, including Palestine, may ultimately be more willing and able to make peace and conduct normal relations with Israel, that proposition will remain theoretical in the eyes of most Israelis until the character and intentions of any new Arab orders that emerge become clear and irrevocable. In the meantime, the pro-Israel lobby in the United States will continue to urge caution and preservation of the status quo of overwhelming Israeli supremacy, which thereby places limits on US reactions to the Arab Spring.

Saudi influence, less visible in the corridors of power in Washington, is nonetheless substantial and, like Israel's, pushing back against open embrace of the Arab Spring. Saudi displeasure with the turn of events in 2011 was evidenced by its acceptance in exile of Tunisia's Ben Ali, by its criticism of the United States "abandoning" Mubarak in his time of need, by its dispatching of troops to Bahrain, by its invitation to Jordan and Morocco to join the GCC, and by its own crackdown at home. Strain in the US-Saudi relationship, clearly manifest as Ben Ali and Mubarak were chased from power and President Obama spoke about the need for other Arab leaders to take note and be "on the right side of history," caused Washington to become more solicitous of a Riyadh whose importance was steadily magnified by rising oil prices and the deteriorating US economy. By June the administration had foresworn statements that could be deemed even indirectly critical of the Saudis. It was rewarded by the Saudi position in OPEC, which endorsed an increase in produc-

tion at the fractious meeting in early June, although it was uncharacteristically outmaneuvered by Iran, Venezuela and Libya.²⁸ The Saudis then cooperated behind the scenes with the United States to maximise the price impact of the release of oil from the International Energy Agency's (IEA) strategic reserve, signaling that the negative impact of the Arab Spring on US-Saudi relations had been contained. But it was contained as a result of the United States reassuring the Saudis that American support for the Arab Spring had limits and that the Saudis and their monarchical allies were beyond those limits.

Intrusions from the Middle East into Washington's considerations of policies for the region are thus supportive of the status quo. So, too, is the bureaucratic political process by which those policies are made. The persisting securitisation of US relations with the region even after the end of the Cold War results in part from the continuing, indeed growing relative importance of the Department of Defence (DOD). Defence spending underpins and reflects the DOD's power. From a high in the mid 1980s, it declined until the end of the millennium, at which time it commenced a rapid and continuing ascent. For 2011 the military was appropriated 671 billion dollars, as compared to 47 billion dollars for the Department of State and USAID combined. This profound and growing disproportion in support for the military as opposed to that for diplomacy and foreign assistance caused secretary of Defence Gates himself to note "the creeping militarisation" of American foreign policy and to plead that, "Diplomatic leaders – be they in ambassadors' suites or on the seventh floor of the State Department – must have the resources and political support needed to fully exercise their statutory responsibilities in leading American foreign policy."²⁹ Gates has been far and away the most important cabinet secretary in the Obama administration, as he was when he served under President Bush. Possibly because power is

²⁸ Terry Macalister and Heather Stewart, "Oil Prices Rise Sharply after OPEC Meeting Ends in Disarray," *The Guardian*, 8 June 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2011/jun/08/oil-price-rises-after-opec-meeting-collapses-in-disarray>.

²⁹ Kate Brannen, "Budget Woes Poised to hit State Department Hard," *Federal Times*, 2 June 2011, <http://www.federaltimes.com/article/20110602/DEPARTMENTS08/106020302>.

concentrated in his person and his Department, Secretary of State Clinton has allied herself and her department with Gates and the DOD, thereby forswearing the traditional competition between these two roles and agencies. Since USAID has been incorporated into State, its one time independent voice has been all but snuffed out. Its director, who played a visible, independent role in foreign policy as recently as the Clinton administration, is now all but unknown even in Washington. So it is the view and voice of the secretary of defence and his department that predominate. Their business is security, so it should not be surprising if they see the insecure Middle East as a primary threat, hence shape policy to counter threats, i.e., to securitise the US approach to the region.

There are no other significant counterbalances to this concentration of power in the military establishment. The intelligence community has been vastly expanded since 9/11, but like State, it allies with and thereby reinforces the centrality of Defence and its security concerns, rather than compete institutionally or conceptually. Moreover, the proliferation of intelligence agencies and bodies has had the impact of reducing the prominence and power of any particular one, including the CIA. The National Security Council (NSC) and its director have similarly lost power during the Obama administration. As regards the Middle East, the last NSC directors who were major architects of US Middle East policies were probably Henry Kissinger and Brent Scowcroft, the former having served under Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford and the latter as his successor under Ford and then George Bush Sr. A key function of the NSC traditionally was strategy formulation, so both have declined in tandem. No other agency has the specific responsibility or capacity to engage in long term policy planning, other than the DOD. Strategic thinkers in policy roles are thus now conspicuous in their absence. Figures such as John Foster Dulles, Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and James Baker were products of WWII and then the Cold War, contexts that by their nature required strategic thinking. The combination of an expanding bureaucracy that requires and rewards specialists; a nominally peace-time setting that requires management rather than bold initiatives; and the increasing politicisation of the foreign policy establishment such that foreign policy expertise is subordinated to political calculations – especially those deemed by his advisors to impact presi-

dential power – has undermined the strategic dimension in foreign policy decision making. Neither institutionally, personally, nor conceptually then are there any significant counterbalances to the dominance of the DOD, its secretary and the security perspective they necessarily adopt in the making of US policy toward the Middle East. In the bureaucratic political world in Washington relevant to this vital region, soft power gives way to hard, strategic thinking to tactical, and national interest falls victim to the political calculations of incumbents, shaped in turn by powerful countries and forces from the region itself. It should not come as any surprise, therefore, that even though the Arab World has witnessed what may be the most cataclysmic event since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the United States has, in policy terms, hardly noticed.³⁰

WHAT COULD THE US RESPONSE BE?

President Bush tarnished the silver of the magic bullet of democracy. The invasion of Iraq and overblown claims for US democracy promotion discredited these means of achieving democracy and, until the Arab Spring, it appeared that even the concept itself had limited appeal among Arabs. The uprisings that swept across North Africa, into the Levant and on to the Arabian Peninsula should have removed such doubts. Indeed, they seem to have in the Arab world, where remaining autocrats are clearly frightened of being inundated by the democratic wave. Paradoxically, it is in Washington where most doubts seem to remain. As mentioned above, the negative learning experience of the Bush administration contributed to its successor's wariness of both democracy promotion and embrace of upheavals that appear to be the beginnings of democratic transitions. The Obama administration has thus been unwill-

³⁰ Daniel W. Drezner identifies two "kinds of events" which call for articulation of grand strategies: a major disruption such as a war, revolution or depression that "re-jiggers countries' interests across the globe;" or a power transition from a "fading hegemonic power" to a "rising challenger." The Arab Spring, and the decline of US power which it has brought into stark relief, would seem to qualify then as circumstances calling out for formulation of grand strategy. Drezner, *cit.*

ling to try to fire the silver bullet of democracy at the region's two major enemies—economic stagnation and inadequate security.

This reluctance ignores two fundamental propositions of development long embraced by scholars and practitioners. As regards economic growth in the Middle East, a near universal consensus has been reached that the primary cause of its weakness is poor governance, which in turn reflects the lack of “voice and accountability,” as the World Bank labels democracy. So now, for the first time in their modern history, Arab states can at least envision the prospect of dramatic improvements in governance, hence of economic growth. The other relevant, fundamental proposition of development is that democracy militates against both intra and inter-state violence, hence promotes the security necessary for stability, peace and development. The Middle East, suffering more from such violence than any other region, thus would reap huge ancillary benefits from an improvement in the security context. While the hypothesised links between democracy and these two components of development are oversimplified and overstated, they are about as well established as most such propositions in social science and the development industry. As guides to policy they could serve as self-fulfilling prophecies.

The opportunity costs of US hesitancy in supporting Arab democratic transitions are especially high at this particular juncture. The United States is overextended militarily and economically. The Middle East is the region to which it has committed proportionately the greatest share of resources. Securitisation of the region is increasingly counterproductive, not only for the development of the region itself, but for the primary provider of that security, whose capacities to do so are wearing ever thinner. So the region's need for securitisation should and maybe now can be reduced, while the provision of what security remains necessary is shared among more stakeholders. Were democracy to spread and take root in much of the region, relations between states within it and between those states and the outside world could become much more normal, focused on trade and development as they are in most other emerging world contexts.³¹ As for spreading the security load more

³¹ Or, as Dalia Dassa Kaye and Frederic Wehrey describe it, “a strategy of relying solely on security relationships with the region's elites will lead the United States to

broadly and evenly, the Middle East is the most vital region for the United States to pursue that objective. It is not only the one in which it is most needed, but the one in which success would have the most profound, beneficial consequences for US security burdens globally.

Appropriate US policies in support of Arab democratisation have already been alluded to. Founded on the open embrace of the Arab Spring, US initiatives should seek to mobilise global political and economic support for democratic transitions. Such initiatives can only be convincing though if they are coupled with indications of US willingness to forswear its previous, security based approach to the region. One measure of that is more balance in US support between military and security institutions, on the one hand, and civilian ones on the other. Unless and until the United States is seen to value civilian control of armed forces more than it values its privileged security relationships with those armed forces, its democracy promotion will appear hypocritical. Closely related to the need to de-securitise its approach and relationships with “friendly” Arab countries, is the requirement for it to do everything possible to secure a solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Its continuation reinforces securitisation in the region, undermines US credibility in the Arab world, and provides leverage for hostile actors, including Iran, Hezbollah and various *jihadi* factions.

The economic dimension is also vitally important. Africa and the Middle East are the two global regions most endangered by poor economic performance coupled with rapid population growth. Nascent Arab democracies will fail if their economies do not grow more rapidly. Such failure would intensify migration pressure, which in turn would stimulate yet louder calls in Europe and elsewhere for relations with sending countries and possibly the entire region, to be even more heavily securitised. Democracy alone is not a sufficient condition for rapid economic growth. The Arab states desperately need to expand and diversify their miniscule industrial bases, which they can only do with foreign investment coupled with technology provided by multi-national corporations.

miss out on important opportunities to develop broader relationships with Arab societies.” “Arab Spring, Persian Winter: Will Iran Emerge the Winner from the Arab Revolt?” *Foreign Policy*, 90, 4 (July/August 2011), pp. 183-186.

Democracy and improved governance will go some of the way to attracting more such investment, but free trade agreements, concessional financing, and other mechanisms will need to be provided by governments if private capital is to be induced to make major commitments to industrial growth in the region. The East Asian experience of Japan as the so-called “lead goose” in the “flying goose model,” whereby Japanese investment and technology drove development elsewhere in the region, cannot be replicated exactly, but something like it might be possible. Turkey is already playing a mini-Japanese role in many Arab countries. If Israel were brought in from the cold as a result of settling its conflicts with the Palestinians and Syrians, it could become a yet higher flying goose attracting a formation behind it.

But democracy and rapid economic development, even if they are ultimately established, are not going to obviate the need for security, especially in the precarious transition stage. The Obama administration’s approach of “leading from behind” in response to the Arab Spring has been too subtle an effort to lay foundations for multilateral security provision. To be effective, multilateralism will have to be a clearly stated objective, not the side effect of the United States choosing the issues which it wants to handle, leaving others to be dealt with by allies. Moreover, if multilateralism is to replace unilateralism as the standard American approach, the change will have to be justified to an American public imbued of their own country’s exceptionalism, its burden of moral leadership, etc.³² The public would have to be told bluntly that the United States simply cannot afford such unilateralism, and that it is in the United States’s and the world’s interest for the transition to multilateral responsibilities for regional and global security to be facilitated. International organisations, including the United Nations and the International Criminal Court, pushed beyond the pale for many domestic audiences by

³² The political magnitude of that task is suggested by former Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty’s remarks to the New York Council on Foreign Relations. Campaigning for the Republican nomination for the presidency, he said: “America already has one political party devoted to decline, retrenchment, and withdrawal. It does not need a second one.” Presumably the “second one” is a reference to his own Republicans. Daniel Dombey and Anna Fifield, “Senators Back Obama over Libya,” *Financial Times*, 29 June 2011, p. 3.

chauvinist, right-wing US politicians and commentators, need to be rehabilitated in the eyes of Americans. The International Criminal Court's indictment of the then Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi is a good example of the useful role it can play. It brings credit to the Obama administration that it lauded that step. With active US support such indictments can serve as major deterrents to the rulers of other Arab countries, thereby broadening the scope for peaceful oppositions.³³ Secretary Gates' blunt message to Europe on the need for burden sharing, especially in their vital Mediterranean neighbourhood, needs to be reiterated and connected with both planned reductions in US defence spending and efforts to cut expenses through greater cooperation, particularly in procurement. NATO's role in general, but especially vis-à-vis the Mediterranean littoral states, needs to be made the focus of such efforts. The inevitable review of the Libyan engagement may provide an opportunity to assess shortcomings and lay out ways forward.³⁴

CONCLUSION

In sum, leading from behind will not produce the shared leadership that is required to succeed America's "moment in the Middle East." The Arab Spring has provided unique opportunities for the transformation of the region's politics, economies, and security architecture, hence to reduce America's unilateral security approach to the region. To realise these po-

³³ A former US secretary of state, writing with a retired Jordanian diplomat, has called for Bashar al Assad to be indicted by the ICC, noting that "the international criminal justice system is the best available way of confronting Syria." The writers further argue that "the ICC has already shown the ability to influence official behaviour... Initiating an ICC investigation in Syria now would create a powerful incentive for Mr Assad to choose reform over further repression." See Madeleine Albright and Marwan Muasher, "Assad deserves a swift trip to The Hague," *Financial Times*, 29 June 2011, p. 9, cited by Carnegie Endowment Middle East Programme, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/06/28/assad-deserves-swift-trip-to-hague/b53>.

³⁴ NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen in fact sought to do just this, calling for a "smart defence" approach in "NATO After Libya: The Atlantic Alliance in Austere Times," *Foreign Affairs* 90, 4 (July/August 2011), pp. 2-6.

tential gains presidential leadership must be visible, so from the front, not from the rear. The world is not yet accustomed to such American modesty and continues to look to Washington for cues, so they must be given clearly, even if the message is that ultimately they will not be forthcoming. President Obama should employ his eloquence in making the case that the United States endorses reforms in the polities of the region and US relations with them because the status quo in the Middle East is unsustainable and dangerous, both to those living there and to others. The Arab Spring should be welcomed as providing the first and possibly the last real opportunity for that region to escape the tragic history of its post-independence period. Rejecting old formulae and taking new risks should be defended as being a wiser course than conducting business as usual in defence of an unsustainable status quo. And it should be explained that de-securitisation of the Middle East would provide opportunity for the de-emphasis of security in the United States itself, both in the form of reducing its oversized share of the federal budget and by diminishing the institutional power of those who speak and act in its name. Finally, explicit recognition of the “end of empire,” akin to Prime Minister Wilson’s 1968 declaration of intent to withdraw from “East of Suez,” but differing from it in that it would lay out new coordinating, balancing roles for US forces, would prod the United States and others to move with haste to internationalise security responsibilities.