



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
ARAB CENTER FOR RESEARCH & POLICY STUDIES

RESEARCH PAPERS (*SIYASAT ARABIA*, NO. 1: MARCH 2013)

US Goals and Strategies toward the Arab World*

Marwan Bishara | April, 2013

* This study was originally published in the first Edition of *Siyasat Arabia* (March, 2013, pp. 45-57). *Siyasat Arabia*, published by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, is a refereed bi-monthly journal focusing on public policy, international relations and the political sciences.

US Goals and Strategies toward the Arab World
Series: CASE ANALYSIS

Marwan Bishara |April, 2013

Copyright © 2012 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. All Rights Reserved.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

www.dohainstitute.org

Abstract

This essay tries to delineate US interests and goals in the Arab region by trying to answer two fundamental questions: First, in light of its promise for change and following the dramatic transformation taking hold of the Arab region, how is the Obama administration different from its predecessors? Second, how far does the administration's strategy mirror its public diplomacy regarding democracy, freedom, and justice in the region?¹

Obama has set the bar high when he promised to change US foreign policy and "end the mind-set" that gets Washington to war; however, this promise has remained largely just that: a promise. In spite of vowing to steer the US away from the reckless policy of the Bush administration that led, among others, to the "stupid war" in Iraq and the "under-equipped war" in Afghanistan, and despite its different style and methods, the new administration's macro goals and regional strategies remained in line with traditional US doctrines toward the region. Like its predecessors, the foreign policy of the Obama administration suffered from the same discrepancies between its public diplomacy versus the actual strategy toward the region and the Arab revolutions. While it is true Washington's methods changed under Obama, its strategy and core interests remained largely unchanged. The latter can be summarized in three core interests: securing free and privileged access to the region's energy supplies; maintaining a "number one" status for the United States over all other international and global powers, and containing all non-compliant Arab powers to ensure domination of the Arab region's strategic agenda. Added to these core interests is Israel's security.

¹ The politics behind the policies, including the role of the lobbies, is not within the domain of this essay.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Establishing a Pattern of Discrepancy: US Public Diplomacy vs. Strategy toward the Arab Region	2
A Short but Indispensable History	4
Proxy Wars and the Arab-Israeli Conflict	5
Regional Influences	6
Cold War Prisms: Moderates vs. Extremists	9
"Israelization" of the US Middle East Policy	10
Obama: The Promised Change	12
New Pragmatism	13
US Response to the Arab Revolutions	13
Results Dependent	14
"Case by case" Basis	15
Recalling NATO Spring: US Attempts to Cleanse its Sins in Iraq	16
The Next Four Years	18
Crisis management	18
Leading from Behind: Clients and Allies	18
Leading from Above	18
Shaping Post-Revolution Times	19
Finding Opportunity in Looming Danger	19
Conclusion	20

Introduction

At the outset of his first term, Obama's policy sharply contrasted with his predecessor's geostrategic orientations, particularly on the question of deploying ground troops and using firepower in the Greater Middle East to affect change through coercion and occupation in the Arab world.

Except for Israel, people and governments throughout the region, and the world, welcomed the promise of change in the foreign policy arena and the end to the Bush Doctrine, which stipulated that the US acts unilaterally when it can, multilaterally if it must. The Arabs were no exception. Many were eager to see the end of the Bush era and were impressed by Barack Obama's journey as a black man who rose from working as a community organizer in poor communities to becoming president of the world's only superpower.

President Obama's three major speeches directed at the Arab and Muslim world during his first year in office were viewed in Washington and elsewhere as a departure from the Bush era, as well as an affirmation of a new administration's readiness to open a new chapter with the Arab and Muslim world based on respect and mutual interests. These lofty words, however, didn't add up to anything specific or tangible. While Bush was known for his major policy blunders, President Obama came into office lacking any discernible policy and the needed clarity to articulate it.

By the end of 2010, the Arab world looked evermore stagnant, leaderless, polarized, and downtrodden, and Arab dictators continued to outdo one another in appeasing the United States, as the latter folded them into its chaotic regional order. Having long looked at the region through the prisms of oil, Israel, and the "war on terror," Washington was completely oblivious to changes on the ground. However, that did not prevent the Obama administration from audaciously claiming credit, in the beginning, for the peaceful Arab revolutions. When uprisings began to sweep through the Arab world, the Obama Administration even leaked to the Washington press corps that they were in the midst of putting the final touches on an official democracy agenda for the Arab world. Many influential pundits credited Obama's "non-interference strategy" and his "inspiring oratory skills" with the rise of youthful democratic movements.

Establishing a Pattern of Discrepancy: US Public Diplomacy vs. Strategy toward the Arab Region

There has long been a discrepancy between Washington's strategy and public diplomacy toward the Arab world. For the last half a century, the US has stood for and publically advocated anti-communism (Truman-Eisenhower-Nixon), human rights (Carter), liberty (Reagan), peace (Clinton) and freedom (W. Bush), while simultaneously instigating *coup d'états* against elected and nationalist leaders, supporting oppressive regimes and military occupation, and waging illegal covert operations and wars in the region. As President Bush's Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice admitted in her 2005 Cairo speech: "For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East, and we achieved neither."²

Ever since it took over from the European colonial powers more than half a century ago, the US has consistently deepened its strategic involvement in the region culminating in its first and second Gulf wars, in 1991 and 2003. Its goals remained consistent, even when it changed rhetoric, strategy or alliances. Its objectives were delineated in its pronounced doctrines and focus on advancing its geopolitical interests. Their implementations required maintaining its fleet, bases, and troop deployment to the region so that they could keep the United States in, keep the Soviet Union and other powers out, and Pan-Arab nationalism (later Pan-Islamism) down. In the process, Washington advanced its economic interests substantially, ensuring a privileged and uninhibited access to the region's energy sources. In the words of President Obama's May 19, 2011 speech:

"For decades, the United States has pursued a set of core interests in the region: countering terrorism and stopping the spread of nuclear weapons; securing the free flow of commerce and safe-guarding the security of the region; standing up for Israel's security and pursuing Arab-Israeli peace."³

² Helen Cooper, "With Egypt, diplomatic words often fail," *New York Times*, January 11, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/30/weekinreview/30cooper.html?pagewanted=all&r=1&>.

³ *Ibid.*

Since the middle of the 20th century, the US nurtured countless battlefields in the Arab world under the pretext of Cold War anti-Communism, and then turned against pan-Arab nationalism to protect its allies and clients and deny other global and regional powers the same access. Every decade or so, it demanded that the Arabs take sides between Washington and a designated regional "villain." They divided according to who supported Egypt's Nasser in the early 1960s, Palestine's Arafat in the early 70s, Iran's Ayatollah in early 80s, Iraq's Saddam Hussein in the 90s, and, finally, Afghanistan's Bin Laden in 2001.

Paradoxically, the US has never had an official Arab policy per se despite its relatively long-term involvement in the region and the presence of so called Arabists in the State Department. Indeed, the US pursued a classical imperial strategy of "divide and rule" in the Arab world with the help of regional clients, Arabs and non-Arabs. Washington has traditionally dismissed Arab unity as a threatening fantasy and Pan Arab nationalism as dangerous ideology. It also viewed political Islam as a threat and a fertile ground for anti-Western ideas. Successive administrations spoke in slogans and clichés about democracy and Islam, but have always been indifferent to the people of the region, as have their dictators, while obsessing over US economic interests and "Israeli security," leaving the Arabs at the receiving end of their power.

When advocated, democracy was promoted as a public diplomacy that reinforced US soft power. It marketed democracy *prêt à porter* from the shelves of the US State Department, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and its attendant NGOs; in other words, a democracy to be built on the ashes of national sovereignty.

Likewise, the use of hard power, prosecuted through war to bring US-style democracy, soon proved to be a farce as seen after the invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. In between their use of soft and hard power, the Americans were bewildered by the election results in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, just as in the past they ignored the election victories of the Islamic Front in Algeria, Hamas in Palestine, and the Hezbollah-led coalition government in Lebanon. Eventually, they were also displeased by the results in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Such an approach made it hard for Arabs to trust US rhetoric on democracy, knowing all too well that representative Arab governments would be less prone to accept US dictates and more prone to opposing the US-Israel axis. Consistently, polls have underlined Arab antagonism to Washington's designs on their region. Almost 80 percent of the Arabs

polled believed US military intervention increased terrorism and decreased the chances for peace, while almost 70 percent doubted its sincerity in spreading democracy and reckoned it was motivated by an ambition for regional domination. If a coalition of Muslim nations were to invade and occupy Canada and Mexico, Americans, in all likelihood, would also be furious.⁴

A Short but Indispensable History

Since it first became heavily involved in the Arab world, the American strategy toward the Arab region was initially based on two pillars: containing Soviet expansion and securing cheap oil flows. Former US president Truman recognized the importance of Gulf oil in his May 24, 1951 address to Congress, in which he declared that in the Middle East, "lie half of the oil reserves of the world"; he also warned against Soviet pressure in this volatile region.

In the first half of the 1950s, America's bet was on so called "moderate" Arab states. Truman recommended two levels of regional military alliances—the British inspired Middle East Command and the Middle East Defense Organization, otherwise referred to as the Baghdad Pact. This alliance included Turkey, royalist Iraq (which broke from the Arab ranks), and Pakistan. Iran joined later, in 1955. Egypt rejected the pact and Israeli raids on Egypt further exacerbated the situation during the 1955 attack on Gaza, then under Egyptian control.

President Eisenhower followed in Truman's footsteps and further cemented American's relations with Arab clients. This was done with less dependence on Britain, but with the same hostility toward nationalist pan-Arab Egypt and an expanded role for the American military to interfere in the region and confront hostile threats from the outside. Eisenhower and Truman doctrines envisioned a major role for Arab clients in protecting American interest in the region and against the Soviet Union, with little or no role of significance for Israel. Indeed, following the trilateral attack on Egypt in 1956 (led by Israel, France, and Britain), General Eisenhower was joined by the Soviet Union in insisting that all occupied territories be returned to Egypt, forcing Israel to withdraw to the international borders.

⁴ University of Maryland, "Iranians favor diplomatic relations with US, but have little trust in Obama," University of Maryland poll, *World Public Opinion*, September 19, 2009, <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafricara/639.php>.

The Eisenhower Doctrine's demand for "special powers" to confront Soviet expansion in the region became law in March 1957. It strengthened ties with Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq in order to stand up to Syria, Egypt, and the latter's intervention in Yemen. It began to pay special attention to the countries involved, by intervening directly in Lebanon on behalf of President Camille Chamoun against what he referred to as Syrian supported insurgency in 1958. The US also helped destabilize the Syrian-Egyptian alliance and their rapprochement with Soviet Union. Jordan, on the other hand, was allocated new aid as part of the Eisenhower doctrine after King Hussein disrupted the democratic process in his kingdom and cancelled the election results of 1957.

Proxy Wars and the Arab-Israeli Conflict

By the early 1960s, unsuccessful attempts at containing the pan-Arab camp, including failed rapprochement with Egypt's Nasser, prompted Washington to forge closer ties with Israel. From the 1950s onwards, America had stepped in to take over the region from the declining European allies in order to contain the rising power of Arab nationalists and Soviet influence, and Israel obliged. The Eshkol government recognized the US as the emerging superpower and as a potential strategic patron to compensate for the declining power of its colonial patrons, Britain and France.

This was best articulated a year before the 1967 war, by an Israeli foreign ministry that defined the geopolitical basis of what became the most important patron-client relationship in second part of the 20th century Middle East. Its spokesman told the *New York Times*: "The United states has come to the conclusion that it can no longer respond to every incident around the world, that it must rely on local power, the deterrent of a friendly power as a first line to stave off American's direct involvement. Israel feels that it fits this definition."⁵

From then on, American doctrines have by and large served to strengthen Israel, Iran, and, later, Saudi Arabia at the expense of the Arab world and expand both its geographic and economic frontiers. Two strategic considerations enforced the surge of its interest in a new (client-patron) relationship with Israel. First, Israel enjoyed military superiority over all its neighbors well before 1967. Second, it was possible to exploit

⁵ *New York Times*, June 12, 1966.

Israel's strength to disrupt the USSR in the Middle East by destroying its allies and client armies and their Soviet hardware.⁶

Following the 1967 war, President Johnson was impressed with Israel's success in defeating two "Soviet clients," Syria and Egypt, in just six days using American armaments, among others. After the war, Washington granted Israel unprecedented political, economic, and military support and the Arab world came to be seen through the prisms of Israel and the Arab- Israeli conflict. It also became evident that US policy towards the Arab world would be hostage to Washington's Cold War calculus.

Nixon wasn't particularly fixated on strategic relations with Israel. According to his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, he even saw the 1967 victory as a gain for the Soviets, who "became the Arabs' friend and the US their enemy". In an address on January 27, 1969, Nixon said the Middle East is a "powder keg, very explosive" because the "next explosion in the Mideast, I believe, could involve a confrontation between the nuclear powers." If that had to happen, America needed to prepare itself to confront whatever strategic challenges could emerge from the region. Neither Kissinger, nor later Nixon, supported William Rogers' diplomatic plan for a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict based on UN Resolution 242, even though Rogers was their Secretary of State. In fact, they privately told Israeli leaders not to preoccupy themselves with it even if Nasser accepted it.⁷

Regional Influences

Washington embraced and ensured Israel and Iran's military superiority, turning them into "regional cops" or "regional influences" to further weaken the nationalist Arab regime and the Soviet-Arab alliance.

America ignored Egyptian president Sadat's 1971 peace overtures through the implementation of UNSC Resolution 242, and insisted there be no positive Israeli response until Egypt breaks away from the Soviet orbit. The so-called "Nixon-Kissinger Doctrine," while mainly pertaining to Vietnam, underlined the *Vietnamization* strategy of arming and supporting regional clients to implement its policy, safeguard its interests,

⁶ Stephen Green, *Taking Sides*, 1984. pp. 168-169, 174.

⁷ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, (Boston: Little Brown, 1979), pg. 564; *Department of State Bulletin* 2/17/69:142-143.

and fight its wars. This became the cornerstone of America's policy toward the Arab region.

Kissinger claimed that Nixon only wanted Israel's "edge" because "he did not want the United States to have to fight Israel's battles." When the Soviets got more involved (in Egypt's "war of attrition"), Kissinger felt that "we now had first to face down the Soviets and the Arab radicals. Otherwise, Israeli concessions would be perceived as resulting from the introduction of Soviet military personnel."⁸

Israel deterrence of Syrian intervention or Palestinian victory during the Jordanian crisis of 1970 portrays the "model of strategic services that [Israel] can render to the United States." This was the final proof that Israel could play the regional role the US expected from it. Kissinger tried to minimize the possibility of the harmful character of Israeli actions and instead translated his belief in Israel's strategic importance by recommending the following: "guaranteeing Israel's deterrence, supplying weapons on a long term basis, promising not to force Israel into a settlement process that did not meet with the Israelis' approval, making 'futile' Roger's continuing efforts and reducing them to the pursuit of partial arrangements."⁹

The implication of Israel as a client was dramatized in the 1973 war. Kissinger was convinced by October 9 that "Israel has suffered a strategic defeat no matter what happens," and that it would become ever more dependent on Washington protection and assistance in order to make its bid on behalf of America. Along with Israel's strategic defeat was that of the United States. At the time, Kissinger called for a "fundamental reassessment of strategy" noting, "a defeat of Israel by Soviet arms would be a geopolitical disaster for the United States."¹⁰

During the 1973 war, the US government took the necessary measures to be on a nuclear alert to support its client. Washington supplied Israel with great amounts of new armaments through an urgently set up air bridge connecting America with Israel, while the fighting was on-going and Egypt was making its advances in the south, and Israeli forces were occupied on the Syrian front. During the last days of the war, the

⁸ Kissinger, *op. cit.*, p. 371; pp. 570-571.

⁹ Camille Mansour, *Beyond Alliance*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 99, pp. 104-105.

¹⁰ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, (Boston: Little Brown, 1982), pp. 493-494.

Nixon-Kissinger administration put its US forces, notably the 82 airborne, on alert and directed them to move its carriers to the east of the Mediterranean. This scared the Soviets into almost thinking that the American leader had gone crazy. Although this was later explained by the local calculation Nixon had made in facing the Watergate crisis, there is no doubt that it symbolized American commitment to ensure Israel strengthened its position in comparison with its pre-war conditions, making it impossible for Arabs to declare victory and ensuring a need for American diplomacy after the war.¹¹

The idea of "step-by-step" diplomacy facilitated by Kissinger between Israel and Egypt was attractive because, according to Camille Mansour in *Beyond Alliance*, "[...] it made it possible to keep the Arabs in the position of petitioner for the longest time possible vis-à-vis the country that held the key to the settlement, the United States; (b) it forced the Arabs to pay Washington the highest possible price in exchange for the recovery of a few acres of land...; and (d) it allowed Israel to recover little by little from the shock of war and to gauge the precise consequences of each of Kissinger's 'steps' in order to better react to the next one." By the mid-1970s, it became clear that behind Washington's diplomacy and mediation efforts lay a fundamental strategic calculation that went beyond resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict that wasn't about peace, but about interests.¹²

The US strengthened its network of patronage, supporting and arming undemocratic Arab clients in return for strategic security, intelligence, diplomatic, and economic services. These were called "moderate" regimes regardless of their autocratic system of government and abuse of human and political rights. But expediency remained a fixture in US foreign policy because "autocrats offer a form of one-stop shopping that makes them vastly easier to deal with than parliaments and an unbuttoned media".¹³ Those who rejected US overtures or domination, were deemed "extremists" and were either attacked, boycotted, or removed regardless of their philosophy or popularity. The list of moderates and extremists changed from time to time depending on their foreign policy

¹¹ Janice Gross Stein, in David Welch (ed.) *The Middle East and the United States*, (Westview, CO, 1999), pp. 213-216.

¹² Mansour, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

¹³ James Traub, "The Myth of a Useful Dictator," *Foreign Policy*, March 18, 2011,

http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/03/18/the_myth_of_the_useful_dictator1.

“reforms”. For example, Egypt was seen as a foe from the 1950s to the 1970s, but became a client soon after the Camp David Accords of 1979.

Cold War Prisms: Moderates vs. Extremists

In the 1980s, Washington divided the Arab world into two types of regimes, “totalitarian” and “authoritarian,” as delineated by Jeane Kirpatrick, who became Reagan’s advisor and later ambassador to the United Nations. The Reagan Administration forged closer relations with the authoritarians in order to undermine totalitarian regimes.

It also upgraded Israel to a “strategic asset” despite, or arguably because of, its unilateral aggressive actions in the region including the bombing of the Iraqi nuclear sites in 1981, the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the terrible crackdown in the occupied Palestinian territories. Paul Wolfowitz, one of the intellectuals of the neoconservative pillars in the Reagan administration made this clear when he stated,

“I’ve heard a lot of nonsense over the last few months about how this crisis demonstrates that with the end of the Cold War, with the Soviet Union gone as a significant threat, that we no longer need strategic cooperation with Israel. [...] There have been regional crises in the past in which the Soviet Union had no role to play where Israel played a crucial role in preserving stability; there may be some in the future.”¹⁴

The end of the Cold War opened the door wide open for Washington to impose a new “Pax Americana” in the region. It acted swiftly to deploy almost half a million soldiers to the Gulf region and dislodge the Iraq forces from Kuwait following the 1990 invasion of the country. The Arab world found itself once again divided over Iraq and Kuwait, with the Arab League split right down the middle among those supporting military action against Iraq. The war underlined the role of the US as the world’s only policeman and clearly demonstrated US power—a major blow to Arab unity and order.

Soon after, the division of the Arab regimes into moderate authoritarians and extremist totalitarians mutated in the 1990s into for or against the US-sponsored “peace process,” a regional initiative that became the de facto post-Cold War Middle East order. The predictable US failure to create a “New Middle East” according to its wishes, and one

¹⁴ Karen Puschel, *U.S.-Israeli Strategic Cooperation in the Post-Cold War Era: An American Perspective*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), p. 105.

that is subservient to the Israel powerhouse, rendered the American sustained peace process a divisive issue. Washington maintained the appearance of a process, and along with Israel, judged each and every independent Arab move as undermining their 'peaceful' efforts. After seven years and seven interim agreements, it became clear that the diplomatic peace was short on peace and long on process, leading to its demise following the failure of the 2000 Camp David Summit and the breakout of the second Intifada soon after.

Meanwhile, in the Arab world, the collapse of communism and defeat/failure of the political representation of secular Arab nationalism paved the way for the ascendance of political Islam. The latter embraced many of the popular and populist agendas of secular pan-Arab nationalism, particularly anti-imperialism and anti-Israeli occupation and domination in the region. The defeat of Nasser's agenda from 1967 onwards opened the way for the Muslim Brotherhood, just as the humiliation of Fatah paved the way for Hamas, and the retreat of the Lebanese National Front allowed for coincided with the rise of Hezbollah.

The 1990s were defined primarily by the Clinton Administration's sponsored "peace process". Despite the hoopla about its prospects to transform the region and introduce a "New Middle East," the process failed to produce peace. Even when there were no negotiations, the idea of a Peace Process survived unabated as a UN-sponsored regional forum. Those who supported the US peace process would be designated as moderates and those who rejected it as a farce were castigated as extremists.

"Israelization" of the US Middle East Policy

After the September 11 attacks on New York in 2001, Arab order was fractured once again into those "with us or against us" in the US global "war on terror". The Bush Doctrine was outlined in a landmark speech that claimed liberty in America is dependent on freedom abroad. The new doctrine was to be applied through two major wars that involved heavy US military deployment in the region, reaching a new peak in 2003. The implementation of the "democracy agenda" on the backs of tanks and aircraft carriers destroyed Iraq, tore up its national fabric, inflamed hatred, and ultimately exacerbated anti-Americanism, while weakening the secular, liberal trend in the region and causing the death of at least 100,000 Iraqis.

The Bush administration also tried to impose elections that could bring about more political openings or "liberty" in Arab and Muslim lands, as if mere elections culminate in

democracy. It rested on Egypt to hold more open elections and to talk Israel into letting Hamas contest Palestinian elections in the occupied territories. However, they looked the other way when the Egyptian elections of 2005 and 2006 were rigged, the majority of the elected Hamas parliament members ended up in jail, and its government was toppled with the complicity of the Bush administration. Likewise, Bush nudged Saudi Arabia to hold elections, but these were merely municipal and totally apolitical. It mattered for Bush's democratic credentials that during a 2004 visit by Ben Ali to the White House, Bush praised his guest as an ally on the war on terrorism, and praised Tunisia's reforms on "press freedom" and for holding "free and competitive elections".

Duplicitous Arab leaders expressed their loyalty and provided implicit and explicit support for Bush's policies in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine in the context of its global "war on terror" in return for the United States not pressuring those countries to democratize. The failure of the "freedom agenda" to bring about freedom through war, empowered the region's autocrats, who exploited the carte blanche offered by the US's war to crack down on their own political opposition. The Bush administration's post-9/11 strategy of "taking the war to the enemy" plunged the region into awful bloodshed and, as aptly put by the neoconservatives, a "constructive chaos," whose victims have been liberal and secular democrats, first and foremost.

Under the guise of combating terrorism, Israel took the lead in becoming the champion of the crusade against what is known in the West as Islamic fundamentalism. Of course, when one factored in that Bush sincerely believed that Sharon was a "man of peace," it all started to make sense. The Bush administration might have spoken of democratization, but, in reality, the US supported autocrats from Tunisia to Saudi Arabia under the pretense of the same "national security" agenda.

By the end of his eight years of war, Bush and his neoconservative lieutenants¹⁵ had deepened regional divisions under the de facto strategy of "constructive chaos," in the

¹⁵ It was striking how some pundits credited President George W. Bush's "democracy agenda," which his supporters claimed planted the seeds of change after he made the cause of democracy in the Middle East a US national security priority, and vowed that the US would do what it takes for the cause of liberty. Elliott Abrahams, Bush's former national security aide to the Middle East, wrote in the Washington Post, "The revolt in Tunisia, the gigantic wave of demonstrations in Egypt and the more recent marches in Yemen all make clear that Bush had it right." Fellow neoconservative columnist Charles Krauthammer argued: "Today, everyone and his cousin support the 'freedom agenda.' Of course, yesterday it was just George W. Bush, Tony Blair, and a band of neocons with unusual hypnotic powers who dared challenge the received wisdom of Arab exceptionalism." (Charles Krauthammer, "From Freedom Agenda to

words of Secretary of State Condi Rice. This threatened further breakup of the Arab world not only regionally, but also nationally, starting with Iraq and later Sudan, Palestine, Lebanon, and Somalia. During this period, Washington toppled regimes, made destabilizing alliances with the worst human rights offenders, monopolized regional diplomatic processes, intervened in the domestic affairs of sovereign states, and invaded unfriendly nations.

Obama: The Promised Change

The contradiction between rhetoric and strategy became clear from the outset of the Obama Presidency. His commitment to a draw down in the greater Middle East met its first test in Afghanistan. After much consideration and hesitation, the White House expanded the Afghan strategy to Pakistan, and escalated conflict with a surge of 50,000 troops supplemented by a more aggressive military strategy, termed Counter Insurgency or COIN by General David Petraeus, that involved wide deployment of troops, as well as both incentives and threats to those refusing to cooperate with the US occupation. He also began a new drone campaign, deemed illegal by most, throughout the region, extending from Afghanistan to Somalia and Yemen.

In the Middle East, President Obama spoke of a relationship based on “mutual interest and mutual respect,” most notably with Iran, but by 2010 began to issue ultimatums to Tehran. He advocated a more pragmatic and less interventionist approach to the region, and made it clear that the US would not try to impose or influence political change through force on its friends and foes alike. At the same time, however, he committed to expanding US covert operations in the Middle East (as revealed in the *New York Times* in May 2010). He pleaded with, and later scolded, the unrepentant Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to freeze Jewish settlement building, but continued to support

Freedom Doctrine,” *Washington Post*, February 10, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/10/AR2011021005339.html>.

More of the same was expressed by commentators such as CNN’s Fareed Zakariya, who said: “But give President George W. Bush his due. He saw the problem, and he believed that Arabs were not genetically incapable of democracy, and he put America’s moral might behind the great cause of Arab reform.” (Fareed Zakaria, “Interview with Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski,” CNN Transcripts, January 23, 2011, <http://www.cnnstudentnews.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1101/23/fzgps.01.html>).

This was echoed by the *Economist* in an article titled “Was George Bush right? As Egypt erupts, his Arab ‘freedom agenda’ is suddenly looking a little cleverer”.

Israel in a variety of ways that rendered him in reality one of Israel's staunchest friends in recent memory.

New Pragmatism

The Obama administration has engaged in pragmatic policies toward Arab autocrats in the hope of ensuring more regional cooperation. The president's visit to Egypt, just a year and a half before the revolution erupted, was seen as an endorsement of President Hosni Mubarak, the ailing 81-year-old dictator who, in the words of one Egyptian blogger: "[...] ruled with martial law, secret police, and torture chambers. No words that Mr. Obama will say can change this perception that Americans are supporting a dictator with their more than \$1 billion in annual aid."¹⁶

During his first visit to the region, the pragmatic president hoped for better relations with Arab autocrats, free from the imposition of any demands or conditions in the realm of human rights and democracy. Obama visited Riyadh before Cairo, depicted Mubarak as a "stalwart ally" and commended the "wisdom and graciousness" of the Saudi monarch. This wasn't lost on the Arab world. The Obama administration had, in fact, decided to reduce budgets marked for NGOs in the Arab world, foregoing even the appearance of supporting democracy in the region. Obama's overtures to the Arab world came at a time when he was expanding the war in Afghanistan into Pakistan, and extending the use of drone attacks on the likes of Yemen, while failing to pressure Israel into freezing its creeping settlements into the occupied Palestinian territories. By the time the Arab Spring began, Obama's popularity was at its lowest among people in the region who had seen him as a promising statesman. At the outbreak of the Arab revolutions, his administration made pathetic efforts to appear to be on the side of the Arab masses by selectively leaking reports to the media that were said to be a blueprint for democratization in the Arab world.

US Response to the Arab Revolutions

The dramatic developments in Tunisia and Egypt forced the Obama administration to rethink its policies and alliances throughout the region. After the initial shock,

¹⁶ Hossam el-Hamalawy, "Right Time, Wrong Place," *New York Times*, June 2, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/03/opinion/03alHamalawy.html>.

uncertainty, and loss of direction, the White House tried to hold onto its autocratic partners by advocating reform or peaceful transition. When people across the world marveled at the Tunisian revolution that toppled Ben Ali's authoritarian regime, Western governments remained conspicuously indifferent, or, at best, confused.

The same procrastination was evident as change gripped Egypt. What a dramatic contrast this was with their swift and enthusiastic support of the Iranian "uprising" two years earlier. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's observation that the US didn't take sides during the nationwide confrontations in Tunisia and Egypt was illustrative of habitual Western hypocrisy, in comparison with its sharp statements on Iran. US and other Western leaders began to take clearer positions and make coherent statements in favor of the orderly and peaceful transfer of power only after it became clear that their allies were on their way out.

When it became clear that the uprisings were revolutions that signaled a clean break with the past, the United States dithered. Rather than seeing these uprisings as opportunities to be grabbed, defended, and nourished, the US saw multiple risks. President Obama stuttered: "The United States has a close partnership with Egypt. President Mubarak has been very helpful. We cooperate on many issues (and) those on the streets have a responsibility to protest peacefully." Vice President Joe Biden insisted, "Mubarak is not a dictator."¹⁷ White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs remarked, "We are not picking between those on the streets and those in the government," as he created a moral equivalence between the dictators and the dictated.¹⁸ When the US government finally caught on with the uprisings that were sweeping through the Arab States, the Obama administration decided to cherry pick, supporting change in Libya and Syria, but staying quiet on Bahrain and Yemen.

Results Dependent

When the Obama administration finally realized the seriousness and scope of change sweeping through the region, from Tunisia to Yemen, through Egypt, Bahrain, Libya and Syria, it began to underline a rhetoric of democratic change in response to what came to

¹⁷ "Biden: Mubarak Is not a dictator, but people have a right to protest," PBS *Newshour*, January 27, 2011, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics/jan-june11/biden_01-27.html.

¹⁸ Brian Montopoli, "White House: We're not taking sides in Egypt," CBS News *Political Hotsheet*, January 31, 2011, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20030108-503544.html.

be known as the Arab Spring. It then resorted to speaking positively and enthusiastically of the pursuit of democracy, a major departure from its early pragmatism and complicity.

However, its public diplomacy has obfuscated a far more complex and calculated strategy that has contrasted sharply with, and even contradicted, its preaching. While the new strategy differs sharply with that of the Bush administration—in terms of its approach, means, and scope—the Obama administration has nonetheless maintained the same fundamental imperial approach toward the Arabs. In this, the US quickly refocused its strategy around its long held doctrinal fundamentals towards the Middle East region through strengthening its system of patronage built around regional clients, old and new, that maximize its geopolitical influence and economic interests in West Asia and beyond. The results of the revolutions would be judged not by how representative and democratic the political process is, but according to how friendly to US interests they were.

“Case by case” Basis

President Obama decided to treat each and every situation separately, refusing to consider and support the ensemble of the Arab Spring with one yardstick. Egypt was the most important asset among the Arab Spring states, and the US wasn't about to allow change to go on unchecked. There was too much at risk, particularly after investing tens of billions of dollars in the country since the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1979. Egypt's size and regional role made it one of the two most important Arab clients aside from Saudi Arabia.

Washington, therefore, moved swiftly to partner with the Egyptian military to ensure slow and predictable change. The Egyptian top brass happened to be in Washington for its bi-annual coordination meetings when the revolution began, and it became clear what the agenda was: the military control over the pace of change beyond Mubarak.

The Obama administration has conditioned its support of the revolution in each and every country according to their support of Washington's goals in the region. It supported Yemen's new president (and former vice president) Abdul Rab Mansur al-Hadi, after he enlisted in an illegal drone war in his country, and voiced his public support for the US to continue its violation of Yemen's sovereignty under the guise of fighting al-Qaeda. In return, al-Hadi received the direct endorsement of President Obama on several occasions. President Obama maintained that its alliance with Egypt depended on the performance of its newly elected leaders, and made it clear he doesn't

consider the Muslim Brotherhood allies until they've demonstrated their stance. The November 2012 Israeli assault on Gaza provided the new Egyptian president an opportunity to demonstrate his credentials. After quick condemnation and procrastination, Morsi went on to successfully broker a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas after close consultations with Washington and in close coordination with President Obama.

Washington has also supported the post-Qaddafi leaders in Libya when they opened up the country's energy and reconstruction market and regionally embraced "friendly" positions to the US. The Obama administration also approached the Algerian regime to enlist it in its war against what it deems an al-Qaeda franchise in Mali, and continued to support the cooperative Jordanian monarchy against the public upheaval against its government.

Recalling NATO Spring: US Attempts to Cleanse its Sins in Iraq

Following its sluggish response to Tunisia and Egypt and the exposure of its close ties with Arab dictators, the US and its European allies saw a great opportunity in Libya. Like a beast flailing, the Qaddafi regime was desperate to stop the revolution from succeeding. Here was a relatively rich, oil-producing nation conveniently located on Europe's southern flanks between Egypt and Tunisia and ripe for regime change. It didn't have the regional complications that characterized Yemen, or its poverty. In short, this was the easiest location for NATO to wriggle its way into the Arab Spring. The NATO alliance members obtained UN Security Council sanctions against the Qaddafi regime with Resolution 1970, and later obtained a more potent and loosely formulated Resolution 1973 that allowed them to act militarily with little restraint, short of troops on the ground. Within hours, NATO powers intervened under the pretext of protecting civilians from Qaddafi's wrath "by all means necessary".

Predictably, both liberal and conservative Western media cheered French and British courage, as well as US leadership for preventing "genocide". The massive sacrifice of the Libyan resistance mattered little for those promoting Sarkozy, UK Prime Minister David Cameron, and Obama. This was the West "prepared to fight for its values against barbarism," according to the *New York Times*, "the best hope for a 21st century less

cruel than the 20th century.”¹⁹ It was amazing how short the media’s memory was and how easily people selectively recalled history.

It soon turned out that most of the pretexts for war were either exaggerated or invented in order to justify the Western military intervention. The UN resolution and the subsequent NATO bombardment were based on an exaggerated urgency of saving Benghazi from “genocide” following Qaddafi’s menace. Arguably, Qaddafi had always been theatrical with his statements. When his forces did capture other cities, they carried out no such atrocities. There was also disinformation regarding mass rape and the use of African mercenaries. The controversial and emotive notion of “the right to protect” was exploited to justify Western military intervention on a humanitarian basis. Libya looked increasingly like Iraq—the sensation of *déjà vu* was hard to miss.²⁰

The militarization of the Arab Spring in Libya didn’t bode well for it or other Arab nations such as Syria and Yemen. Western exploitation of the Libyan escalation had also tarnished the Arab revolution with more of the same foreign intervention that had long been rejected by the Arabs for being selective and motivated by cynicism. Indeed, the intervention in Libya was on the side of the people, but this was not the case in Bahrain or Syria. The intervention also encouraged a reinvigorated NATO to speak of the Libyan operation as a prototype of operations to come in Africa and elsewhere in the south.

There’s been a bizarre twist to the NATO intervention, and if it sounds like a conspiracy, it is not. In late 2010, France and Britain decided to stage a war game titled Operation Southern Mistral. It would involve thousands of military personnel and hardware from both countries. The scenario envisioned the two longtime military rivals joining forces for a bombing campaign against an imaginary southern dictator. The simulated war was condoned by a fictitious UN Security Council resolution and was scheduled to begin on March 21, 2011. The actual bombing of Libya began on March 19. This is surely a coincidence, but it does highlight the French and British mindsets, and why no serious diplomatic effort got off the ground. The bombers were already on the runway.

¹⁹ Roger Cohen, “Score One for Interventionism,” *New York Times*, August 29, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/30/opinion/30iht-edcohen30.html>.

²⁰ See Maximilian C. Forte’s excellent expose in “The Top Ten Myths in the War Against Libya,” *Counterpunch*, August 31, 2011, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2011/08/31/the-top-ten-myths-in-the-war-against-libya/>.

However, the Libya mission, as NATO concluded in the aftermath, couldn't have been accomplished without the vast and sophisticated US military role.

Judging from the results in Libya and Syria thus far, it's clear the militarization of the revolution and Western enthusiasm to use firepower, albeit supported by a significant segment of the population, meant change comes at a terrible cost to state, society, and citizens.

The Next Four Years

Crisis management

It seems, from the early pronouncements of the Obama administration, that there will be no radical change in the next four years from the last four. Domestically, the administration will continue to be preoccupied by its economic crisis and recovery, while globally it will continue with its "Asia pivot," adding strategic emphasis on Asia rather than the Arab world and Europe. It will also maintain the sanctions on Iran and most probably tighten them until Tehran becomes more responsive to Washington's demands. It will remain supportive of Israel in the international arena while maintaining its military edge over its Arab neighbors regardless of its excesses in the occupied territories as has been seen with the UN General Assembly vote on Palestine and Israel's response translated in the increase of settlement activities.

Leading from Behind: Clients and Allies

Having burnt its fingers in Afghanistan and Pakistan, one should not expect the US to become isolationist in any shape of form. Nor will it attempt any major deployment of troops on the ground. Instead, it will continue to interfere from behind the scenes in the Arab region and in certain Arab states when it deems it necessary. It will also continue to lead its allies and clients from behind instead of taking explicit unilateral steps. This includes supporting autocrats that put their regimes at the service of US policies.

Leading from Above

The Obama administration seems set to expand its military intervention from above by expanding its satellite surveillance and Drone campaign in Arab and Muslim countries whenever necessary. Having set the first Africa command center and set a special

security arm specialized in cyber warfare with the appointment of a four star general to lead it, the administration will also rely on the latest Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) to maximize its influence and minimize its physical intervention in the Arab region. Thus far, this has been the case in Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as Yemen, Somalia, and Libya.

Shaping Post-Revolution Times

Regarding the Arab revolutions, it's clear that the US will try to closely monitor and influence the course, scope and pace of change in each and every Arab Spring nation through all means available to it, especially through diplomatic pressure, arms, and economic incentives. Its attempts to influence the post-Mubarak Egypt, post-Saleh Yemen, and post-Qaddafi Libya will be expanded to each and every country in order to contain any potential resistance to Western dictates or emerging commonalities that reinforce Arab unity.

Finding Opportunity in Looming Danger

There is a growing perception that Washington could benefit from the mounting sectarian tensions across the region, just as it did from Iraq's sectarian conflict, regardless of the consequences for the Arab world and its long-term stability. According to the *New York Times*, the rise of the new Sunni Axis could present an opportunity to the US and Israel against Iran and its satellite clients and allies. While cross-regional sectarianism could prove to be the most dangerous threat facing the region in the next decades, Obama's administration seems ready to enforce it. This is certainly in line with Obama's prediction in his March 2011 speech of the Middle East, "There will be times when our short-term interests do not align perfectly with our long term vision of the region." Needless to say, Washington has long supported Saudi Arabia against Iran, realizing the sectarian overtones to their regional conflict.

The United States and perhaps Russia could be content to see Sunni and Shiite extremists fighting among themselves, as long as oil prices drop, arms sales mount and Arabs are weakened. Sectarian violence has long proven to be the ugliest and the most scarring form of political violence. Considering most Middle Eastern countries are home to diverse religious sects and ethnicities, the gathering sectarian storm will blow away any sense of communal coexistence. Washington knows that all too well.

Conclusion

One could conclude that the Obama administration is in fact not so different from its predecessors when it comes to defending the same core strategic interests in the Arab region. Like its predecessors, it suffers from major discrepancy between its public diplomacy and strategy or to act according to its core values instead of short-term interests. Contrary to his initial commitment to “end the mind-set” that took the US to war, his administration expanded the war in Afghanistan into Pakistan, and remained involved militarily on few fronts.

Like its predecessors, the Obama administration behaves less republican and more imperial in the Arab region, and mostly divisive whether by design or by default. Washington also remains in denial over its de facto empire status and prefers instead to designate a guiding, moral role for itself as the guardian of security, stability, peace, and human rights.

Some differences are, nonetheless, evident with the Obama administration in comparison to its predecessor. Over the last four years it has demonstrated that a superpower is better managed and is more effective when it acts implicitly, less bombastically, less aggressively, and less violently, all while maintaining more of the same military deterrence and core interests. As a matter of fact, the American empire has also proven, in the post-Cold War era at least, to be more, not less, effective and more durable when it downsizes its military role and scope in the Arab region. However, avoiding major regional chaos caused by the expansion or contraction of US military presence in the region shouldn't be only Washington's prerogative.

As the US becomes overextended militarily, relative to its economic challenges, as well as more self-sufficient energy-wise with the discovery of new domestic gas sources, the tendency to become less involved increases. However, embracing multilateralism and steering away from reckless unilateralism should not be confused with isolationism. Obama's greatest challenge over the next four years is to manage US military withdrawal from Afghanistan without re-deploying them in the Gulf or elsewhere in the region.

Despite the resemblance between the current Obama administration and its predecessors on the core American interests in the region today, Obama's multilateralism and pragmatism leaves a wider window of opportunity to influence US policy than before. The Arabs can and must seize the moment.