

THE UNITED STATES AND THE ARAB SPRING: THE DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL ENGINEERING

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Abstract: This article purports to examine the role of the United States in the outbreak of the Arab Spring and the course of its subsequent paths. The main argument of this article is that the Arab Spring represented a major strategic surprise to the United States. It did not plan or facilitate the Arab Spring as the Tunisian, Egyptian, Yemeni and Bahraini regimes were performing to the best satisfaction of American interests in the Arab world. As the Arab Spring carried with it threats to American regional interests, the United States moved to secure its interests by steering Arab uprisings towards courses of action which best suit these interests.

Keywords: Arab Spring, the United States, strategic surprise, democracy-promotion, foreign aid, military intervention, containment, counter-revolution

Introduction

The Arab world is presently undergoing one of its most profound transformations in decades. This is articulated in the revolutionary wave of democracy uprisings which have dominated the region from late 2010 and onward. These uprisings, commonly termed the Arab Spring, have signaled the first manifestation of mass demand for greater democratic governance in the Arab world. Although Arabs had previously initiated revolutionary processes which toppled their leaders, the Arab Spring was the first time in which Arabs were able to bring about a revolutionary change which began at the mass level and put the people at the center of the political process.

This article seeks to assess the external dimension of the Arab Spring through an examination of the role of the United States in the outbreak of the uprisings and the direction of their subsequent paths. In accounting for the causes of the Arab Spring, some analysts argued that the uprisings were an outcome of a carefully-planned US strategy aimed at restructuring the political map of the Arab world in tandem with American interests in the region. Mark Glenn of the Crescent and Cross Solidarity Movement contended that the Arab Spring uprisings were an ultimate outcome of persistent US efforts from 2008 onwards to remove specific Arab regimes through various democratic movements funded by the US government.

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This was achieved in an attempt to maintain control over particular countries passing through difficult socioeconomic conditions, and accordingly to abort the outbreak of a “true grassroots revolution” as had happened in Iran in 1979 (Glenn, 2011). In the same vein, Tariq Ramadan, Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies at Oxford University, contended that it is “naïve” to relate the Arab uprisings to popular will in Arab countries. Rather, the United States pushed toward the outbreak of these uprisings in an attempt to restructure the Arab world in line with US regional interests (Ramadan, 2012). William Engdahl, an American analyst, put it bluntly by arguing that the United States orchestrated the Egyptian as well as other regime changes from Libya to Yemen and beyond, in a process referred to as “creative destruction.” This was achieved with a view to create the conditions conducive to the establishment of the Greater Middle East project advocated by the George W. Bush Administration (Engdahl, 2011. For similar accounts see Cartalucci, 2012; Afifi, 2012).

In assessing the role of the United States in the Arab Spring, the following questions require investigation: What role did the United States play in promoting democracy in the Arab world prior to the Arab Spring? To what extent did the United States facilitate or hinder the Arab Spring uprisings? Did the United States orchestrate the Arab Spring or was it caught off-guard by that Spring? How did the United States react to the uprisings? And, what were the main strategies pursued to influence the course of actions in the Arab Spring countries?

In addressing these questions, the article is divided into two sections. The first examines the role of the United States in the outbreak of the Arab uprisings. This is approached through an assessment of the US democratization agenda in the Arab world and its impact, if any, on domestic politics prior to the Arab Spring. The second analyzes the US reaction to the Arab Spring and the strategies adopted by the Obama Administration to deal with the uprisings.

The US Democratization Agenda Prior to the Arab Spring

The 9/11 attacks on the United States led to an unprecedented internationalization of the question of democracy and political reform in the Arab world. In the United States, the Bush Administration claimed that the attacks emanated from the Arab world, viewing them as the product of a widespread authoritarian culture whose environment fostered terrorism and extremism. This prompted the Administration to approach the question of democracy-promotion in the Arab world as an important element within an overall US strategy of countering terrorism, with arguments that the war against terrorism would require social, political, and economic changes in the region. This interest in Arab democratization manifested in the creation of a number of democracy-promotion projects in the region, including the 2002 Middle

East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) and the 2004 Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI). It also culminated in the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003 under the justification, among others, of establishing a democratic Iraq which would lead to the spread of democracy to the rest of the Arab world.

However, it became clear later on that the US democracy-promotion agenda did not reflect a genuine desire by the Bush Administration to democratize the Arab world. Rather, the democratization of the Arab world, while being given more emphasis in official rhetoric, remained a secondary item on US foreign policy, which continued to be centered on seeking avenues to preserve the stability of pro-American Arab authoritarian regimes.

In fact, the question of democracy-promotion was never among the original justifications for the US invasion of Iraq. In the lead-up to the invasion, the Bush Administration emphasized two principal justifications to sell its war plans to American and international public; namely (i) that Iraq's possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) presented an imminent threat to its neighbors, the United States, and the world community; and (ii) that Iraq was linked to al-Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks. Following the invasion, however, both justifications were falsified as no WMDs were ever found in Iraq, and no evidence was found to support claims that Saddam Hussein had linkages with al-Qaeda or the 9/11 attacks. It was later reported by the US Senate Intelligence Committee that Hussein denied all previous requests to provide material or operational support to al-Qaeda, and that the Bush Administration's claims were all false. With the falsification of its original claims, the Bush Administration shifted to secondary rationales for the war, including the goal of democracy-promotion in Iraq and the Arab world.

More importantly, actual policies demonstrated that the United States was unwilling to disengage from its Cold War tradition of supporting authoritarian regimes. This trend was observable at various levels. First, the US democracy-promotion aid to the Arab world represented only a small portion of total aid flow from the United States to friendly autocratic regimes. During the period of 2002-05, for example, the United States allocated about US\$592 million to the MEPI and other democracy-promotion programs in the Arab world (Wittes and Yerkes, 2006: 11). This is compared to a total US foreign aid of US\$13.3 billion to Arab autocratic regimes during the same timeframe (USAID, 2006). It was also revealing that the majority of the democracy-promotion aid was directed to projects having little effect on the authority of Arab regimes. In fact, these projects were quite cautious, modest and technical in nature, and were implemented within the comfort zone of autocratic Arab regimes. Accordingly, they steered away from addressing controversial issues, and focused instead on cosmetic reforms for the sake of alleviating pressures for more significant ones (Brown and Hawthorne, 2010: 19-20; Carothers, 2007: 6).

Second, soon after the initial US pressure on Arab countries to democratize in the wake of 9/11, the United States gradually abandoned its democracy-promotion policy in the Arab world from 2005 onwards. In fact, the United States continued to provide financial and military support to friendly autocratic regimes in Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states, not based on democratization benchmarks or developmental objectives, but rather to avoid the political rise of anti-Western groups as an outcome of democratization. This was the case of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt who gained 88 seats in the Egyptian parliament in 2005, and Hamas which came to power in Palestine in 2006, all via elections.

Third, the Bush Administration abandoned democracy-promotion in the Arab world in return for closer cooperation from Arab regimes on important regional issues, including the war on terror, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Iranian nuclear program. Under the banner of the US-led war on terror, the Bush Administration proceeded in the direction of establishing closer ties with Arab autocratic regimes in exchange for the latter's support in the field of counter-terrorism. In addition, most Arab regimes began to marginalize the Arab-Israeli conflict and to enter into normalization initiatives with Israel, even though their conflict with Israel has not been resolved. This was reflected in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, their participation in the 2007 Annapolis Conference, and their endorsement of the participation of the Arab League in the Union for the Mediterranean, in association with Israel. This was the first time the League took part in a regional arrangement in which Israel participated. Meanwhile, a number of Arab regimes began, under American supervision, to develop a tacit understanding with Israel against Iran and its nuclear program. As explained by Carothers, it was evident by 2007 that "the Bush push for Middle East democracy was effectively over...[as] US policy fell back into the old pattern of accepting or embracing useful autocratic friends" (Carothers, 2007: 7).

With the advent of the Obama Administration in January 2009, the US democracy-promotion agenda was further abandoned. In June 2009, President Obama delivered a speech to the Muslim world from Cairo University, praising his country's strategic relations with Egypt and promising to re-establish strong diplomatic ties with US allies in the region around the three dimensions of development, defense, and diplomacy. In his speech, the rhetoric of Arab democratization was almost absent. Meanwhile, the United States reduced total funding for democracy and governance programs in the Arab world. This was evident, for instance, in Egypt where the level of US funding for civil society initiatives was cut from US\$32 million in 2009 to only US\$7 million in 2010 (Mcinerney, 2010).

It was obvious then that the United States did not pursue a genuine democratization agenda in the Arab world. In fact, one can argue that American support of autocratic Arab regimes, in addition to the apparent subordination of those regimes to US

dictates and Israel's regional hegemony represented one of the major factors leading to the discontent of Arab masses against their ruling elites. This was particularly true in the case of Egypt where the Mubarak regime fully acknowledged the American-Israeli approach to regional politics. This took the form of (i) supporting the US invasion of Iraq; (ii) supporting the US policy to isolate Iran; and (iii) working in close coordination with Israel against the Palestinians, including taking part in the Israeli siege on the Gaza Strip, endorsing the Israeli military assault on Lebanon and Gaza in 2006 and 2008 respectively, and selling Egyptian natural gas to Israel at prices much lower than market prices.

US Reactions to the Arab Spring

The Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings caught the United States and other Western powers by surprise. Until the last minute, the United States was expressing support and providing aid to the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes. It seems plausible to argue that if the United States were working to topple these regimes, it would not have publically endorsed them. These regimes were working with the United States to maintain its interests in the region, and the Mubarak regime in Egypt was providing the best services to Israel in all accounts. It is highly unlikely that the United States would venture to topple a regime which Israel considered a "strategic treasure" (Heilbrunn, 2011). This explains the White House and Congress's harsh criticism of the intelligence community for its failure to predict the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings (New York Times, 2011a). Indeed, the US failure to anticipate the Arab Spring could be viewed as another classical example of "strategic surprise" in international politics. This is equivalent to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the German invasion of the Soviet Union during the Second World War, the Arab attack on Israel in 1973, the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the September 11 attacks on the United States.

In explaining why the United States was surprised by the Arab Spring, one could single out three main pathologies which have plagued US foreign policy since September 11, 2001. These include the over-evaluation of past successes, over-confidence in present policies, and insensitivity to warnings critical of existing policies (Parker and Stern, 2002: 606-609). As far as US foreign policy in the Middle East is concerned, it was clear that the United States was quite content with the success it had achieved since the invasion of Iraq. The Obama Administration seemed to be convinced that it had succeeded in forging a Middle Eastern strategic understanding between US Arab allies and Israel against Iran. It also tended to take seriously the macro-economic indicators that these allies were achieving reasonable progress. As a result, the United States did not consider the signals coming from the region that there was growing mass discontent with the ruling regimes. The

self-congratulatory image of the achievements of friendly Arab regimes, which they themselves became part of a comfortable strategic arrangement securing US interests in the region, blocked the ability of American policy makers to process information emanating from these countries that mass discontent was on the rise. This was especially the case in Tunisia where the economy seemed to be flourishing, and in Egypt where the regime was claiming a 7 percent annual growth rate. As Israel also was quite satisfied with the performance of these regimes, the United States found itself in a situation in which it had to defend these regimes and ignore information contradicting its image of the situation in Tunisia and Egypt. This generated a sort of wishful thinking that the regimes were stable and capable of dealing with local discontent, if any.

In this context, the United States viewed the Arab Spring, which saw in its first wave the fall of two pro-American Arab regimes, as a direct threat to its strategic interests in the region. It worried about losing its Arab client regimes in the Middle East and the damage revolutionary regimes could do to American strategic interests in the region, including possible setbacks for the US-led war on terror, potential volatility in energy markets, and endangering the security of Israel. Michael Scheuer, a former officer in the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), expressed some of these concerns when he admitted that the Arab Spring represented “an intelligence disaster” for the United States and other Western powers. “The help we were getting from the Egyptian intelligence service, less so from the Tunisians but certainly from the Libyans and Lebanese, has dried up... and the result is blindness in our ability to watch what’s going on among militants,” he said (Guardian, 2011a).

In response to these challenges, the United States moved quickly in the direction of containing the Arab uprisings through different strategies. In Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, the United States openly supported the Ben Ali, Mubarak, and Saleh regimes before and during the mass protests. However, when it became clear the dictators were collapsing, the United States changed tactics by siding with the revolutionary forces while working, especially in the Egyptian and Yemeni cases, to maintain the main power structures which would serve American interests. In Libya, the United States managed to re-orient the revolutionary process from being one of non-violent resistance to an all-out war launched by the local opposition and Western powers, which resulted in the destruction of the main structures of the state and its power. In other Arab countries (mainly Bahrain), the United States assisted the regimes in aborting the uprisings and crushing the nascent democratic movements before they could reach critical mass, thus reinforcing existing political orders.

This calls for a review of the US strategies enacted to contain the Arab Spring and orient it in the direction of preserving American interests, even though this would be at the expense of democratic transformation in the Arab world. This review will focus on the cases of Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain where US strategic interests

were at stake. The exclusion of Tunisia from this review is justified on the ground that except for supporting the Ben Ali regime in the initial phase of the Tunisian revolution, the United States did not make serious attempts to influence the course of events in post-Ben Ali Tunisia. The passive US approach in the Tunisian case was understandable given the fact that (i) the United States had no strategic interests in Tunisia, and (ii) the United States had long considered Tunisia as falling within the French sphere of influence.

Egypt

In Egypt, the United States sought to secure the Mubarak regime during the January 25 mass uprising. In the early days of the protests, the Obama Administration supported the official position of the Mubarak regime by making lukewarm statements about the need for reform from within the regime, and by calling for the need to give the government an opportunity to deal with the revolt. However, after it became clear that the revolution was gaining momentum, the United States changed sides and openly endorsed regime change in Egypt. It also began implementing a new strategy to influence the course of events in post-Mubarak Egypt, which was centered on creating an alternative client regime.

In this context, the United States threw its support behind the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) which assumed power in Egypt following the resignation of Mubarak. The United States worked through the SCAF to ensure that Egypt remained compliant with US interests in the region. The US support for Egypt's ruling military junta was understandable given that the majority of aid sent to the country has gone directly to the armed forces, including US\$1.3 billion in 2011 alone. Indeed, the Obama Administration was keen to maintain this level of funding despite America's own financial troubles. This gave the United States substantial leverage over the SCAF and the power to influence its policies.

The US influence over the SCAF was most evident in the area of foreign policy, with the ruling military junta conforming to the legacy of Mubarak, which was excessively conciliatory to the United States and lenient towards Israel. This continuity with "Mubarakism," as one Egyptian activist described it, was manifested on several fronts (Shama, 2012). The first came immediately following the resignation of Mubarak when the SCAF issued a statement assuring the United States and Israel that the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty would remain intact despite the downfall of Mubarak. In addition, the SCAF backtracked on what appeared to be an orientation towards the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Iran. It also backtracked on its initial announcement that Egypt's Rafah border crossing into the Gaza Strip would remain open on a permanent basis. The SCAF even retained Mubarak's widely-criticized policy of exporting natural gas to Israel at prices much lower than the world market prices. In roundtable discussions held

on July 27, 2011 at the US Institute for Peace in Washington, Major General Said Elassar, a member of the SCAF, frankly acknowledged the US influence over SCAF. "We have strong strategic relations with the United States since the 1979 Camp David Accords. In military to military relations, the US is our pillar. We have been supported by the United States, and we are proud to protect United States interests," Elassar said (Omestad, 2011).

Indeed, America's support for the SCAF was detrimental to Egypt's revolutionary aspirations as the SCAF was keen to block a transition toward a genuine democracy which could bring into power an anti-Western government. We have argued elsewhere that the army generals who seized control following Mubarak's resignation were quite close to the ousted president, having worked with him for years. Through that process, they developed major economic interests in the country, but were tacitly dissatisfied with Mubarak's efforts to pass the presidency to his son, Gamal. This last point was the only area of agreement between them and the revolutionaries of January 25. However, they were keen to preserve the main contours of the Mubarak regime and to steer the revolution towards a path that would ultimately maintain the fundamental structure of power in Egypt (Selim and Selim, 2012: 85-89).

As the SCAF became the target of huge pro-democracy demonstrations, the United States sought to establish linkages with the conservative Muslim Brotherhood as a potential ally in Egypt after Mubarak, and to forge an understanding between the SCAF and the Brotherhood on the main elements of the transition period and the nature of the future regime. The US-Brotherhood understanding was evident at many fronts; the most noticeable was the role the Brotherhood played in releasing leaders of the American civil society groups who were arrested and charged with violating the law by working in Egypt and receiving foreign funds without government permission. On March 1, 2012, US Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham, John Hoeven, and Richard Blumenthal issued a statement in which they openly thanked the Brotherhood for their role in releasing them, although such a release represented an open violation of Egyptian law.¹

In the lead up to the June 2012 presidential elections, the Obama Administration threw its support behind the Brotherhood's candidate Mohammad Morsi after receiving assurances from the Brotherhood that they would maintain US interests in the event they reached power in Egypt (Washington Times, 2012). This support was clearly evident in the runoff elections between Mohammad Morsi and ex-General Ahmad Shafiq. Immediately following the end of the vote-casting process, the Brotherhood compiled preliminary election returns from nearly all polling centers and unilaterally declared Morsi as the winner with almost 52 percent of the vote. Although the Brotherhood's move was illegal, the Obama Administration demanded the SCAF to declare the election results without investigating the hundreds of appeals presented by Shafiq to the Election Commission. On June 20, 2012, US

Secretary of State Clinton stated that Washington insisted that the SCAF must turn power over to the “legitimate winner” of the country’s first post-Mubarak presidential elections, and not subvert the constitutional authority.² In fact, if the SCAF-appointed Election Commission had investigated the appeals, this would have reversed the preliminary results due to the forging of about a million ballots. However, on June 24 and under intense US pressure, the Commission declared Moursi as the winner. According to Tharwat Al-Kharabawy, a lawyer and former member of the Brotherhood, America’s political support of the Brotherhood is a clear evidence that the foundations of a new US-Brotherhood alliance are being laid. Al-Kharabawy admitted that the United States played a decisive role in the election of Moursi, arguing that the rise of the Brotherhood to power in Egypt would have been largely unthinkable without US backing (Al-Kharabawy, 2012).

In return, the newly elected president showed no intention of breaking away from the legacy of Egypt’s foreign policy under Mubarak. Following his election, Moursi announced that Egypt would remain committed to all international obligations and treaties, including the peace treaty with Israel. The Brotherhood went even further than Mubarak by invoking the Quran to stress a religious obligation to adhere to the treaty. It was also revealing that Moursi did not consider the issue of the Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZ), one of the main manifestations of US-sponsored economic normalization between Egypt and Israel, or the question of Israel’s nuclear program to be worth raising on his foreign policy platform. Indeed, these issues have been totally abandoned in the official rhetoric of the new Egyptian regime, which moved instead in the direction of upgrading the level of security cooperation with Israel. In another significant triumph for the US strategy in Egypt, the Moursi regime pledged to continue with the neo-liberal economic policies of Mubarak for the benefit of Egyptian business élite and Western capital, and to the detriment of the vulnerable majority of Egyptian people.

Libya

In the case of Libya, the United States moved quickly to act and to seize the moment which it had seemed about to miss in Egypt, as it had long-standing bitter memories with Qaddafi. It took advantage of the Libyan uprising, which erupted on February 17, 2011, and strove to position itself at the heart of the crisis in an attempt to secure its interests in the oil-rich country, and to divert and block the revolutionary mass movements that only weeks earlier had toppled the US-backed regimes in Tunisia and Egypt.

The United States intervened in the Libyan crisis at two main levels. First, the United States sought influence over Libya’s Transitional National Council (TNC), established on February 27, 2011. The TNC, which consisted of army generals, ex-members of Qaddafi’s government, and other longtime elite opposition figures,

was to lead armed opposition against the Qaddafi regime. Although not elected, the TNC declared itself to be the only legitimate body representing the people of Libya, and canvassed the West for support against the Qaddafi regime. In response, the United States and other Western powers recognized the TNC as the legitimate government of Libya. Further, they viewed the Council as a pliant government through which they could control the country's economic and geo-strategic resources in a post-Qaddafi political order. In fact, many of the TNC leaders were reported to have close connections with the United States. Perhaps the most obvious examples here are (i) Mahmoud Jibril, who acted as the interim prime minister in the TNC, and formerly as the head of the National Planning Council and the National Economic Development Board,³ and (ii) Khalifa Belqasim Haftar, a long-time CIA collaborator who was appointed the commander of ground forces in the Libyan rebel army.⁴

Second, the United States instigated a military intervention in Libya under the pretext of "humanitarian intervention." This began with US attempts to internationalize the Libyan crisis by referring it, through the help of Qatar and other US allies in the region, to the UN Security Council. On March 17, 2011, the UN Security Council issued Resolution 1973 on the Libyan crisis. The Resolution called for imposition of no-fly zones in Libya and authorized "all necessary measures to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, including Benghazi, while excluding a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory."⁵ On March 19, 2011 the United States and its Western allies, working under the umbrella of NATO, initiated a campaign of air strikes under justification of protecting civilians from attack by Qaddafi's forces. However, NATO went beyond the terms mandated by the UN resolution. Instead of preventing civilian casualties through "the immediate establishment of a cease-fire and a complete end to violence," NATO intervened on the side of rebel forces and unilaterally shifted the mission in the direction of regime change by force. This led Amr Moussa, the then Secretary-General of the Arab League, to accuse the United States of violating the UN resolution, stressing that "What is happening in Libya differs from the aim of imposing a no-fly zone, and what we want is the protection of civilians and not the bombardment of more civilians" (Washington Post, 2011a).

In the course of NATO's military campaign, the United States and its allies repeatedly rejected any ceasefire proposals to end the conflict. On April 10, 2011 the Libyan government accepted a proposal by the African Union (AU) for an immediate ceasefire. The AU proposal also called for the unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid, protection of foreign nationals, a dialogue between the government and rebels on a political settlement and the suspension of NATO air strikes (BBC News, 2011a). However, the United States rejected the AU proposal, and the bombing campaign continued in full swing. On April 15, the leaders of the United States, Britain and France issued a joint statement in which they stated that "while our duty and mandate

under UN Security Council Resolution 1973 is to protect civilians, and...is not to remove Qaddafi by force,” it was nevertheless “unthinkable that someone who has tried to massacre his own people can play a part in their future government.” The three leaders also rejected demands for an immediate ceasefire and a negotiated exit for Qaddafi (BBC News, 2011b). This exposed the false claims that the United States intervened in Libya for humanitarian purposes.

The assassination of Qaddafi further underscored the hidden character of the US intervention in Libya. While details of the assassination have not yet been documented, photographs and videos released by the rebel forces clearly showed a wounded Qaddafi struggling with his captors. Other subsequent photographs showed the body of Qaddafi shot in the head. It was clear that Qaddafi was captured alive and then summarily executed. It is revealing that two days before Qaddafi’s assassination, US Secretary of State Clinton made an unannounced visit to the Libyan capital where she made it clear that Qaddafi must be captured dead or alive (Washington Post, 2011b). This strongly indicates that the United States stood behind the assassination of Qaddafi. Had Qaddafi faced a trial, he would have exposed all his past dealings with the United States, including the handing over of allegedly “terrorist suspects” to his regime who were subsequently tortured.

The US-led military intervention in Libya was a determinant factor in asserting America’s influence and undermining the revolutionary movements, thus steering an initially popular uprising toward the direction of a US-engineered regime change. On October 7, 2011 US Republican senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham, Mark Kirk and Marco Rubio coauthored an op-ed for the *Wall Street Journal*, following their visit to Libya, in which they predicted post-Qaddafi Libya to become an important ally to the United States in the region. “It is time to expand our economic ties with Libya and help the Libyan people take part in a more open regional economic order,” the Republican senators wrote. “There is an enormous opportunity for the U.S. to build a partnership with a democratic and pro-American Libya that contributes to the expansion of security, prosperity and freedom across a pivotal region at a time of revolutionary change,” they added (McCain et al., 2011). Indeed, the assertion of US influence over Libya led some analysts to draw a line of similarity between post-Qaddafi Libya and post-Saddam Iraq, with arguments that the US military intervention in Libya under the pretext of establishing security and peace, thereby justifying US long-term presence in the oil-rich country, is tantamount to the emergence of another Iraq in Libya and the expropriation of its natural resources (Salami, 2011; Howaidy, 2011).

Yemen

In Yemen, the United States worked closely with Saudi Arabia to abort the mass uprising which broke out in February 2011 demanding the ouster of President Ali

Abdullah Saleh, a close ally of the United States in the war on terror. In April 2011 and following a series of government massacres against the revolutionary forces, the Saudi-influenced Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) negotiated a power-sharing deal between the Saleh regime and the opposition forces, represented by the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP). The American-backed GCC initiative aimed to preserve Saleh's military and security apparatuses, which had developed close ties with the United States over the past decade, and to end the mass anti-government protests. It stipulated that Saleh hand over his powers to his deputy Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi and form a unity government chaired by the opposition for formulating a new constitution and conducting elections. The initiative also granted Saleh and his family immunity from years of corruption charges and human rights abuses (Al-Ahram Weekly, 2011).

The GCC initiative was negatively received by the revolutionary youth movements, represented by Yemen's Coordinating Council of Yemeni Revolution for Change (CCYRC). The CCYRC viewed the initiative as falling short of the comprehensive change protesters had been demanding for almost ten months. According to the CCYRC, the initiative failed to restructure the military, granted Saleh immunity instead of serving justice, provided for elections that allowed only one pre-determined winner, and ignored a large segment of the population. In addition, the initiative addressed the formal political parties, while disregarding the youth movements which ignited the revolution. It also overlooked the powerful political groups with wide grassroots support, such as the Houthis and the southern secessionists. This was obvious with the inclusion of the JMP, widely viewed as self-interested old politics, as the formal representative of the revolutionary forces in the negotiation process. Indeed, the CCYRC described the initiative as "the best legal and political package, which any dictator has ever gotten" (Yemen Times, 2012).

After eight months of stalling and under American and Saudi pressures, the GCC initiative was signed on November 23, 2011. In line with the plan, Yemen held a presidential referendum in February 2012 which confirmed acting president Hadi as Yemen's new president with a considerable majority. In the meantime, former President Saleh, who received medical treatment in the United States following an assassination attempt, returned to Yemen for part of a 90-day transition period between November 2011 and February 2012 as stipulated by the initiative. He remained ensconced as president of the General People's Congress party, the former ruling party now sharing power with the former opposition JMP. As a result, the youth-led movements that initiated the pro-democracy demonstrations were marginalized and displaced by forces from the pro-American old regime.

Since then, the United States has closely supported the Hadi regime. In 2012, the Obama Administration provided Yemen a total of US\$346 million in military and economic assistance, which is the largest in the history of US foreign aid

to Yemen (US Government Assistance to Yemen, 2012). Another sign of close US-Yemeni cooperation manifested in the Obama Administration's decision to expand US military operations in Yemen through stepped-up drone attacks and special operations forces on the ground. On May 16, 2012 the *Los Angeles Times* reported that "the Obama administration's direct military role in Yemen is more extensive than previously reported and represents a deepening involvement in the nation's growing conflict" (Los Angeles Times, 2012). A month later, President Obama acknowledged that the US military was actively engaged inside Yemen (The White House, 2012).

In a March 7, 2012 interview with the Riyadh-based *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, President Hadi affirmed that "Yemen would proceed with its war on the Al-Qaeda organization in the country," a clear sign of continuity in Yemen's role as an important partner in the US-led war on terror. Hadi also described his country's relations with Saudi Arabia and other pro-American Arab Gulf monarchies as "strategic and exceptional," adding that "Yemen represents the strategic depth of these countries that are tied to Yemen with bonds of common religion, culture, good neighborliness, and mutual interests" (*Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 2012). In September 2012 and in another sign of the remarkably increasing level of US influence in post-Saleh Yemen, the United States deployed a Marine anti-terrorism unit to the capital Sanaa to protect the US embassy amid violent protests at the embassy over depiction of the Prophet Muhammad in an American-made film (Telegraph, 2012). This led Jamal Jubran, a Yemeni analyst, to describe the US Ambassador to Yemen as "The New Dictator of Yemen," arguing that his country has fallen under effective US trusteeship (Jubran, 2012).

Bahrain

In Bahrain, home of the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, the United States launched a covert counter-revolution to crush the pro-democracy uprisings which erupted in February 2011. Despite the apparently democratic, non-sectarian intentions of the protesters, the United States and Saudi Arabia were quick to play the sectarian card and frame the conflict as one between Sunni and Shi'a groups, rather than between an oppressive regime and disillusioned mass. They used the claims of Iranian meddling and sectarian politics to justify a military intervention in Bahrain (Guardian, 2011b). In this context, Saudi Arabia, in close coordination with the United States, used a shared defense clause in the GCC charter as a pretext for intervention in the small Gulf monarchy. On March 14, 2011 the Saudis moved hundreds of troops into Bahrain under the umbrella of the Peninsula Shield Force, a 10,000-man military unit founded in 1984 and comprised of troops from the GCC states, to crush a rapidly escalating democratic uprising. This was the first time the Force was deployed against a domestic population. Over the next several days, the Bahraini government declared a three-month state of emergency and authorized the

military to take necessary steps to restore national security. The government also staged a violent crackdown against protesters in the capital, Manama, with tanks and helicopters, and destroyed the Pearl Monument which became the Tahrir Square of the Bahraini revolution, resulting in the death, injuring and arrest of hundreds of demonstrators. Within a few weeks, the peaceful protests at the heart of Bahrain's democracy movement were shattered.

Despite these oppressive measures, the United States maintained its support for the monarchy, while limiting itself to advocating some improvements of human rights conditions. It was revealing that the Saudi military campaign began two days following a visit by US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to Bahrain where he reassured King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa that the US government stood with the Bahraini monarchy (Wall Street Journal, 2011). On March 13, 2011 the White House issued a soft-language statement in which it urged the government of Bahrain "to pursue a peaceful and meaningful dialogue with the opposition rather than resorting to the use of force." It also urged "GCC partners to show restraint and respect the rights of the people of Bahrain, and to act in a way that supports dialogue instead of undermining it" (The White House, 2011). Using the same rhetoric and in an indirect acknowledgment of the Saudi intervention, US Secretary of State Clinton urged both the Bahraini and Saudi regimes to begin negotiating a resolution of the conflict with the protestors, but other than dispatching an Assistant Secretary of State to facilitate talks, nothing further was done. US Senator John Kerry was more blunt when he claimed that the Saudi force "was not looking for violence in the streets." Rather, "They would like to encourage the king and others to engage in reforms and a dialogue," he said (New York Times, 2011b).

Another manifestation of the US counter-revolution in Bahrain was the Obama Administration's decision in May 2012 to resume a US\$53 million arms sale to Bahrain. The arms deal, which included armored anti-riot vehicles and teargas, was resumed despite the Bahraini regime's systematic suppression of activist groups (Christian Science Monitor, 2012). In fact, the Bahraini arms deal followed the conclusion in December 2011 of another, even bigger, arms deal with Saudi Arabia. Under the terms of the US\$30 billion agreement, Saudi Arabia would get eighty-four new F-15 jets and upgrades to another seventy F-15s in the Saudi fleet with new munitions and spare parts. Andrew J. Shapiro, US Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs, described the agreement as further evidence of America's determination to project its political and military influence in the Gulf region. "This sale will send a strong message to countries in the region that the United States is committed to stability in the Gulf and the broader Middle East... It will enhance Saudi Arabia's ability to deter and defend against external threats to its sovereignty," he said (New York Times, 2011c).

Conclusion

The short-lived US democracy-promotion agenda following 9/11 did not result in any meaningful democratization in the Arab world. As the United States abandoned this agenda and did not incur any major risks as a result, it seemed content with its policy of endorsing the Arab autocrats. That explains the fact that the United States was surprised by the outbreak of mass uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. The United States did not plan the Arab Spring as claimed by some analysts, as the local autocrats were doing everything possible to secure American and Israeli interests in the region.

Following the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the United States embarked upon a process of political engineering under which it was able to reverse a revolutionary trend which could have jeopardized American interests in the Arab world. Today, the revolutionaries who initiated the change did not assume the leading positions in dismantling the old authoritarian regimes and building new democratic ones. Ironically, elements of the old pro-American regimes assumed these tasks in Egypt and Yemen. For the first time, we have democratic projects designed and implemented by elements who were main actors in the old dictatorships. In the case of Libya, a complete reshuffling process took place where the revolutionary movements were marginalized and a new pro-American regime was installed, thus replacing the insubordinate, highly unpredictable regime of Qaddafi. In the case of Bahrain, the United States was able to suppress revolutionary changes through covert military intervention.

It is important to note, however, that these strategies did not resolve the main problems which produced the revolutionary discontent in the Arab world. Rather, they prolonged them and opened new horizons for further upheavals in the Arab world. Perhaps the most noticeable among these problems are (i) the continuity with the neo-liberal economic policies, which had created a tremendous gap between the rich and the poor unprecedented in recent Arab history, and (ii) the US full endorsement of Israeli policies in the region. These policies are bound to generate more anti-American resentment in the region and lead to more future surprises. In other words, the United States has not grasped yet the social and historical underpinnings of the Arab Spring. The United States may have won in the short-term; however, in the long-term, more violent developments are bound to occur.

Notes

1. The statement is available at: http://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=PressOffice.PressReleases&ContentRecord_id=CF34DE54-D3B5-651D-C3EE-505C71941FF2 (accessed September 25, 2012).

2. "Conversations on Diplomacy Moderated by Charlie Rose," June 20, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/06/193554.htm> (accessed September 27, 2012).
3. A leaked US diplomatic cable from November 2009 written by the US ambassador to Libya, Gene Cretz, described Mr Jibril as a man who helped pave the way for the privatization of Libya's economy and welcomed American companies. "With a PhD in strategic planning from the University of Pittsburgh, Jibril is a serious interlocutor who gets the US perspective," ambassador Cretz wrote. "Head of Libyan 'think tank' outlines human development strategy," *Telegraph*, January 31, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/wikileaks-files/libya-wikileaks/8294558/HEAD-OF-LIBYAN-THINK-TANK-OUTLINES-HUMAN-DEVELOPMENT-STRATEGY.html> (accessed October 5, 2012).
4. "Taking Charge of Libya's Rebels: An In-Depth Portrait of Colonel Khalifa Haftar," *The Jamestown Foundation* 2:3 (March 31, 2011), [http://mlm.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=37724&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=567&no_cache=1](http://mlm.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=37724&tx_ttnews[backPid]=567&no_cache=1) (accessed October 10, 2012).
5. See the text of UN Resolution 1973 at: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/sc10200.doc.htm> (accessed September 10, 2012).

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