



## Can America Cope with the Middle East in Upheaval?

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As violence rages in Egypt, unpacking the domestic and international forces influencing American foreign policy in the Middle East is vital. Despite attempts by U.S. foreign policymakers to "pivot" toward Asia, the Middle East remains a focus of both opportunity and frustration in Washington. "Arab Spring" – implying a new dawn of democratic stability – has proved to be a misnomer. The United States now faces unprecedented challenges in balancing practical possibilities with democratic and humanitarian ideals in its dealings with clashing regimes and movements. Although the Obama administration has pulled back from grievous missteps under the previous president, it has yet to devise fully effective strategies for managing change.

### A Region in Turmoil

The Middle East encompasses a diverse collection of monarchies, republics, theocracies and democracies, with complex national identities and varied histories of religious fervor, corruption, and tenuous civil cultures. Complexities have escalated as new conflicts and movements spread regionally amid widespread demographic and technological shifts.

- Since 2011, Middle East political leaders of various backgrounds have struggled to stay in power, using means ranging from constitutional changes to crude demonstrations of force, from cabinet shake-ups to the deployment of troops across borders.
- When faced with popular uprisings, threatened local leaders (as in Syria) routinely blame "foreigners." This often backfires, paving the way for precisely what they have said they wished to avoid: the de facto splitting of their territory into hostile geographical enclaves.
- Young people and their Internet enabled social networks are at the forefront of democratic and populist movements – and they are often condemned as unwelcome sources of change by regime leaders hoping to cling to an ever more fragile status quo.
- Longtime U.S. allies – such as Egypt under both President Hosni Mubarak and President Mohammed Morsi, and now again under the reinstated military rulers – aim to retain American military assistance and foreign aid, even as they kill their own citizens or use other repressive means against domestic movements.

### New Dilemmas for U.S. Foreign Policy

Are traditional American policy instruments of military aid, occasional forceful interventions, diplomacy and targeted sanctions enough to maintain stable alliances and ensure progress toward democracy and respect for human rights? Can Obama administration policymakers satisfy Congressional leaders and influential interest groups at home, while also finding new ways to deal with popular protests and non-territorial actors like Al Qaeda and its regional franchises?

U.S. officials have tried to fashion a vision of an "Arab model" of democracy to bring coherence to chaos. Turkey once seemed to be a model, yet that country is also now experiencing unrest. Searching for other models (such as multi-ethnic Northern Ireland emerging from its civil war) merely underscores that leaders in the Middle East, wedded to their own domestic priorities and often calcified institutions, are writing their own histories according to their own rules.

The Obama administration has attempted difficult tradeoffs – between supporting regimes for the sake of stability and urging changes in response to protests against tyranny. Very often, Obama administration proposals have failed to win backing, either in the Middle East or in the Congress. American officials have lurched between confusion and caution – for example, in their uncertain responses when the Egyptian military ousted President Mohammed Morsi (who had been elected after long-time dictator Hosni Mubarak was

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removed amid popular protests). Despite many private and public American pleas for the generals to exercise restraint and reach out to Morsi supporters, the Egyptians have largely gone their own traditional way, leaving Obama to grapple with whether to continue longstanding flows of military and economic aid.

Middle East leaders have learned how to manipulate the inner workings of the U.S. executive and legislative branches. The key example is Israel, with its influential American supporters supremely adept at Congressional lobbying. But Egyptian and other Middle East leaders have also learned to take advantage of U.S. over-dependence on established relationships. They know how to play on desires for stability of both Republican and Democratic presidents, in order to get new or continued aid plus acquiescence in repressive steps they take domestically.

## What Next?

New directions for U.S. Middle East policy depend on a delicate rebalancing of reformulated goals with means suitable for dealing with varied regimes less open to outside influence. Results of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have weakened U.S. credibility, especially in countries with explosive ethnic divides. Policymakers would do better to issue clear public statements and back-channel signals about expectations for good governance in all Middle East countries, as well as in Asia and Latin America. Ideally, Congress and presidents will learn to back up stated expectations with appropriate decisions about military and economic assistance. U.S. leaders must avoid repeating the recent muddled and often counter-productive initiatives. They must devise better ways to pursue American ideals and requisites in countries and movements embroiled in inexorable yet unpredictable political and social transformations.

**Read more in Linda B. Miller, *The U.S. and the Arab Spring: Now and Then in the Middle East*," in *Obama and The World: New Directions in U.S. Foreign Policy, 2nd Edition*, edited by Mark Ledwidge, Linda B. Miller, and Inderjeet Parmar (Routledge, 2014).**