

# Follow the Leader?

## U.S. Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring

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### ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the U.S. response to the events of the Arab Spring. By conducting a content and discourse analysis of the Obama Administration's major speeches and texts, this paper uncovers the aims and factors shaping U.S. policy toward the MENA region. These aims include democracy promotion, but are tempered by the U.S. reluctance to work unilaterally. Multifaceted international collaboration appears to be an important prerequisite to U.S. intervention in the Arab Spring countries, especially illustrated by the case of Syria.

## **The Arab Spring and U.S. Foreign Policy (Contradictions?)**

The events of the Arab Spring have captivated the attention of the global community. All around the world, people look on anxiously to see whether the region's cries for democracy and justice are answered. As some of these protests have descended into violence, many have looked toward the world's superpower, the United States, for leadership or intervention.

Some assert that the U.S. has an obligation to intervene in the events, especially those that have turned violent, such as in Libya or Syria. Others blame or commend the U.S. as one of the main catalysts or causes behind the Arab Revolutions. However, a closer look at U.S. foreign policy toward the region reveals a more complex approach. To determine what influence the U.S. has actually had upon the Arab Spring; it is first necessary to analyze the formation of U.S. policy toward the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

This paper seeks to analyze the formation of U.S. foreign policy toward the Arab Spring. In particular, the paper will assess U.S. foreign policy towards specific MENA countries such as Egypt, Libya and Syria during the time of the Arab Spring uprisings. The purpose of analyzing U.S. foreign policy formation during the Arab Spring is to allow for a better understanding of the factors behind U.S. foreign policy decisions. In light of the varied U.S. response especially in the cases of Libya and Syria, further inspection is warranted. As the Arab Spring is still an ongoing process, this analysis is also useful in informing future predictions for U.S. policy towards the MENA region.

### **Literature review**

Experts in U.S. foreign policy assert differing interpretations on the impact of and factors behind U.S. policy toward the MENA region. John J. Mearsheimer, one of the preeminent theorists on international relations (University of Chicago), asserts that the United States foreign policy has played a very limited role in the events of the Arab Spring. In fact, the Arab Revolutions "happened in spite of American foreign policy, not because of it." Mearsheimer explains this inaction as a result of the United States' friendly relations with the region's dictators, such as Hosni Mubarak. Mearsheimer also attributes this apathy and even resistance to MENA regime change to the U.S. entanglement in prolonged wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. These factors have prevented the Obama administration from creating or implementing meaningful policies toward the changing region (Mearsheimer).

Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt further assert that the Israeli lobby largely dominates U.S. foreign policy to the MENA region. They contend that this not only inhibits U.S. ability to formulate positive policy toward the region, but also is

harmful to U.S. national security. In other words, the unwavering U.S. support towards Israel has led to harmful policies to the Arab states and has resulted in alienating the U.S. from the region (Mearsheimer & Walt). This alienation or distrust of the U.S. further limits their ability to influence the current changes in the region.

A different leading scholar, Noam Chomsky, agrees that the strong U.S.-Israeli alliance has led to deep distrust of the U.S. by the MENA region. This has accordingly limited the impact of U.S. foreign policy in the region. He cites a 2010 poll by the Brookings Institution of Arab who stated that they “regard the U.S. and Israel as the major threats (77%; 88%)” to the region (Chomsky).

Chomsky also addresses the common claim that U.S. policy toward the Arab world is driven by its fear of the spread of radical Islam. He instead claims that “the general threat has always been independence.” The U.S. has sought to maintain the status quo in the region, which often included supporting authoritarian regimes in countries like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Tunisia (Chomsky).

### **Methodological framework**

In order to analyze the factors behind U.S. policy formation towards the Arab Spring, this paper will utilize the methodology of discourse and content analysis. This includes evaluation of the Obama Administration key texts, declarations, press releases, speeches and so forth. The paper will also examine major media sources and their view of U.S. foreign policy toward the MENA region.

### **The Arab Revolutions and Obama’s Reactions: Discussion and Analysis**

President Barack Obama’s speech at Cairo University on June 4, 2009, is often described as Obama’ “most important statement” on U.S. foreign policy to the region (Doran). Many even point to the speech as one of the main catalysts in the launch of the Arab Revolutions (Celso p. 6). In his speech, Obama affirms his commitment “to governments that reflect the will of the people.” He states that all people possess certain human rights which the U.S. supports over the world, which include:

“The ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed;  
confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice;  
government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose” (White House, 2009).

These remarks in favor of democracy and human rights occurred in a region that was largely run by dictators. Obama’s speech was positively received in Cairo, even warranted calls of “We love you” from the crowd (White House). Many interpreted this speech as a “rejection of U.S. support for Arab autocracy” and expected that Obama would shift U.S. foreign policy in the direction of democracy promotion (Celso p. 7).

However, it is important to analyze how much of this speech's support for democracy was mere rhetoric. To do so, further analysis of the speech is necessary. While most political pundits focus on Obama's support of democracy, the speech contains 6 tensions between the Muslim world and the United States. Obama states that these issues must be overcome in order to forge a relationship built on "mutual interest and mutual respect." The 6 tensions are listed as violent (religious) extremism, the Israeli-Palestinian-Arab conflict, nuclear proliferation, democracy, religious freedom, and women's rights. Democracy promotion appears fourth in this list; it is less of a priority than its 3 antecedents. Though Obama states that democracy should be attained through organic processes with the help of global cultural and economic influences, he remains vague on how democratic movements will or should occur in the region (White House).

Examination of subsequent Obama speeches and policy moves is also necessary to determine the extent of the United States' alleged commitment to democracy in the region. As the Arab Revolutions ignited across the region, the U.S. displayed mixed reactions to intervening in or encouraging the revolts. In the case of Egypt, the Obama Administration produced muted criticism of pervasive election fraud committed in Egypt's parliamentary elections. The Administration initially failed to question Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak's run for a fourth presidential term (Celso p. 7). However, as overwhelming numbers of protestors took to Tahrir Square in Egypt to protest Mubarak, Obama displayed growing support for the movement.

This altered stance culminated in Obama calling upon Mubarak to immediately begin "an orderly transition that must be meaningful" and peaceful. Obama's speech on Egypt affirmed U.S. support and assistance for a democratic transition, calling the Egypt protests an affirmation of "the inevitability of human freedom" (White House, Feb. 2011). Ten days later, Mubarak stepped down after 30 years of rule (Kirkpatrick).

As protests turned deadly in Libya, Obama stated that he was "naturally reluctant to use force to solve the world's many challenges" (White House, Mar. 2011). However, faced with calls for international action from the Arab League, Libya opposition, the UN, France and Britain, Obama committed the U.S. to military action in Libya (Celso p. 8). In his speech on the matter, Obama highlights Qaddafi's "brutal repression and a looming humanitarian crisis," as well as the importance of an international coalition. His statement affirms his opposition to further U.S. involvement that would involve regime change, citing the example of Iraq and stating "that is not something we can afford to repeat in Libya" (White House).

In the cases of Egypt and Libya, Obama exhibited increasing support for the revolutions in each country, with initial trepidation for U.S. involvement. In the case of Egypt, the initial reluctance was a result of the two countries' long relationship. The U.S. had provided "billions in economic assistance over the years to build up the country's infrastructure, agricultural technology, and public health programs." In exchange, Mubarak kept the Suez Canal open and "maintained peace with Israel" (Cook p. 87).

In Libya, the U.S. had so such relations to discourage intervention. Indeed, Ronald Reagan had long since called Qaddafi a "mad dog" (Boot). Still, the prolonged and increasingly negatively perceived conflict in Iraq made the U.S. reluctant to intervene militarily in Libya. It was only at the multi-dimensional urging of the international community that the U.S. finally committed its forces (White House).

The next country under analysis is of course Syria. With the U.S. humanitarian intervention in Libya, many wonder why the Obama Administration has not already committed forces to stop the atrocities in Syria. The UN Human Rights Center estimates that 70,000 Syrians have died as of mid-February since the conflict began in March 2011. This is over twice as much as the 30,000 deaths in Libya's 8-month civil war (CNN). In addition to the death toll, the Syrian crisis has produced over a million refugees, as well as millions more internally displaced, according to the UN Refugee Agency (CBC News).

With these staggering numbers, many question why the U.S. has not yet intervened. This non-intervention is especially problematic given Obama's words regarding the Libyan intervention:

"There will be times, though, when our safety is not directly threatened, but our interests and our values are. Sometimes, the course of history poses challenges that threaten our common humanity ... These may not be America's problems alone, but they are important to us. They're problems worth solving. And in these circumstances, we know that the United States, as the world's most powerful nation, will often be called upon to help" (White House, May 2011).

The violence in Syria seems to clearly fit these criteria as a threat to "our common humanity." However, the next part of Obama's speech appears to answer why the U.S. has not yet intervened in Syria. He states that though action is important "the burden of action should not be America's alone." The Bush days of unilateral American action appear to be gone, as Obama affirms the U.S. role to be that of mobilizing collective action in the international community (White House).

Obama's desire to "work with allies and partners so that they bear their share of the burden and pay their share of the costs" is significant in the case of Syria (White

House). The international community remains divided on what actions to take within Syria; who to support, arm, or aid. In particular, Russia and China retain interests at stake in Syria that they are reluctant to part with, which thus explains their opposition to military intervention. With Russia “blocking sanctions against Syria in the UN Security Council,” the U.S. remains reluctant to intervene militarily (Buckley p. 82).

### **Promoting Democracy...If Everyone Else Does: Findings and Conclusions**

Obama has repeatedly commended the protestors of the Arab Spring. He praised the spark that ignited the revolts: the Tunisian vendor who lit himself on fire, stating “America values the dignity of the street vendor in Tunisia more than the raw power of the dictator.” He remarks that “the status quo is not sustainable” and that the U.S. has “a stake not just in the stability of nations, but in the self-determination of individuals.” Finally he clearly affirms U.S. policy “to promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy” (White House, May 2011).

The Obama Administration has upheld this policy in some of the Arab Spring countries, as evidenced through continued financial, transitional and other assistance to countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. However, it is important to keep in mind Obama’s reluctance to intervene without full international support in countries like Syria. The U.S. is still recovering from the messy and unpopular war in Iraq, and remains unwilling to embroil itself in what appears to be another prolonged conflict, especially in a region where the U.S. has not always been warmly welcomed or perceived.

Whether this hesitance is wise remains to be seen, but until global consensus is reached upon the appropriate action to take in Syria, it appears unlikely that the U.S. will commit itself to an intervention, especially a military one. The U.S. remains divided between its idealistic goals as a global promoter and defender of democracy and its more pragmatic goals of international cooperation and non-unilateral intervention. No more is there a call to “follow the leader” of the “free world” without guaranteed cooperation from the other global leaders.

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