

The United States and the Arab Spring:  
Implications and the Case Studies of  
Libya and Syria

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## Abstract

Throughout the Cold War and the past few decades, the United States has perceived the Middle East mostly through a “traditional lens of political power.” It was the regional regimes that were of importance and the largest threat was seen as interstate conflict. Since the United States has maintained relations with states that benefitted from the existing geopolitical situation, Americans saw the status quo as extremely advantageous and any danger to the status quo as problematic (Pollack 316-317). However the Arab Spring has changed this form of thinking. On May 19, 2011, President Obama indicated his support of the idea that the Arab Spring symbolized an essential transformation in the Middle East that would eventually help both the people in the region and the United States. He rebuffed any proposal that a simple “return to the old status quo would be possible or even desirable.” The President explicitly asserted that backing for “political reform and democratic transitions would be a top priority of his administration.” However according to Marc Lynch, “That sweeping declaration almost immediately ran into complicated realities of conflicting American interests and its limited capabilities” (Lynch 193-194). No American administration could possibly disregard Israeli security, the military bases that comprise the U.S. security structure in the Gulf, access to oil, the ongoing battle against al-Qaeda, or the Iranian problem. (Lynch 195-196). Using the case studies of Libya and Syria, this paper will analyze the implications of the Arab Spring for the United States and answer the question of “Why did the United States intervene in Libya, but not Syria?”

## I. Introduction

In 2005, in an interview with Jeffrey Goldberg of the *New Yorker*, former national security advisor, Brent Scowcroft, made a case, according to Wittes, that “protecting the political status quo in the Arab world had been and remained the correct policy for the United States” (Wittes 30). He was wrong. Moreover, Gregory Gause III, admits in his article, “Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability” that in 2005 he wrote an article for the *Council on Foreign Relations* titled “Can Democracy Stop Democracy,” in which he made a case that the “United States should not encourage democracy in the Arab World because Washington’s authoritarian Arab allies represented stable bets for the future.” He indicates that he was “spectacularly wrong” (Gause 1-2). On the contrary, in 2005, Condoleezza Rice stated at the American University in Cairo, “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” (BBC). She was right. By this time it was evident that stability had not been achieved and now the primary threat to regional stability was coming from internal aspects. In fact, a

mixture of demographic transformation, economic stagnation, and political hostility in Arab civilizations had created a strong and intensifying confrontation to the legitimacy of authoritarian Arab governments and to their aptitude to govern “peacefully” (Wittes 30-31) which would be demonstrated in the Arab Spring.

The Arab uprisings have proven that what occurs in one country can influence other Arab states in unexpected and compelling ways, resulting in vast implications for the United States (Gause 7). On May 19, 2011 President Obama spoke at the State Department, about the effect of the Arab Spring on U.S. interests. He stated, “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 safeguarding the security of the region; standing up for Israel’s security and pursuing Arab-Israeli peace.” Moreover he indicated, “Yet we must acknowledge that a strategy based solely upon the narrow pursuit of these interests will not fill an empty stomach or allow someone to speak their mind... and a failure to change our approach threatens a deepening spiral of division between the United States and the Arab World.” Since it is evident that “the status quo is unsustainable,” President Obama indicated the importance of “mutual interests and mutual respect” along with a collection of principles in order to take control of this, “historic opportunity.” This collection of principles comprises resistance to the utilization of violence and repression against the people within the region; backing of “a set of universal rights including free speech, the freedom of peaceful assembly, the freedom of religion, equality for men and women under the rule of law, and the right to choose your own leaders;” and finally support for “political and economic reform in the Middle East and North Africa that can meet the legitimate aspirations of ordinary people throughout the region.” President Obama concluded his address stating, “Our support for these principles is not a secondary interest. Today I want to make it clear that it is a top priority that must be translated into concrete actions, and supported by all of the diplomatic, economic and strategic tools at our disposal... It will be the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region and to support transitions to democracy” (Keiswetter). It is evident that the United States has been presented with an opportunity to build an innovative approach in the Middle East in which American policies are in line with American values. However, so far the Obama Administration has replied hastily to the situation in the region as it develops, “sending different signals to those countries where the United States has significant national interests (for instance, Bahrain where the U.S. fifth fleet is stationed) than from those where US interests are more limited” (Sky). Therefore this paper will explore this topic, using Libya and Syria as case studies for analyzing U.S. intervention. The question here specifically is “Why did the United States intervene in Libya, but not Syria?”

## II. Libya

When President Obama accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, he stated, “More and more, we all confront difficult questions about how to prevent the slaughter of civilians by their own government, or to stop a civil war whose violence and suffering can engulf an entire region.” According to Scott Horsley, the situation in Libya was an “early test” of this. Obama indicated that intervention in Libya was important because the violence in Libya could potentially stretch to outside the country. Defense Secretary Robert Gates indicated that even though Libya was not of national interest to the U.S., the vision of mayhem erupting outside its borders was bothersome (Horsley). The Obama administration argued that military intervention in Libya was essential in order to avert regional volatility, indicate to other autocrats that they cannot slaughter their own citizens, and to guarantee the reliability of the UN Security Council (Al-Turk 124).

One of the major reasons the United States took action in Libya was because in reality it had no concrete interests in the country. In fact, the U.S. had halted relations with Libya and inflicted sanctions on Libya in 1986 due to its endorsement of terrorism. In 2002, the U.S. eradicated sanctions since Libya had taken both legal and economic blame for its most despicable terrorist attacks and Gaddafi relinquished any quest for weapons of mass destruction. Even though the U.S. began importing oil from Libya again, it only represented 0.6 percent of American oil imports, which of course is not a very remarkable amount and is in fact a number that could be easily imported from elsewhere. Moreover, Gaddafi’s death had no serious implications for the U.S., and America’s partaking of a “no-fly zone” did not entail grave military commitment. Therefore it was a method that was selected because in reality it was fairly unchallenging and it also was supported by the Arab League and the United Nations (Gelvin 87).

According to U.S. ambassador, Nicholas Burns, Libya is not as densely populated as for example, Syria, which made the tactic of airstrikes a good method because it was highly unlikely to result in a large number of civilian casualties. Moreover international support was evident with France and Britain deeply worried about the situation in Libya and the endorsement of both the Arab League and the Security Council, ultimately driving President Obama to take action in order to “avoid a bloodbath in Benghazi” (Lahlou). According to the British military think tank, Royal United Services Institute for Defense and Security Studies, “The Libya intervention took place in a singularly unique moment where the international stars, as it were, were aligned in a set of propitious circumstances” (Walt). When considering the situation on the ground, pre-intervention, this is very evident. In fact, Gaddafi’s regime had no “standing army.” Furthermore, “Longstanding international sanctions against Tripoli had made the purchase of new weapons impossible. More importantly, Gaddafi had decisively turned on his armed forces after a series of military coup attempts in the 1980s and 1990s. In the place of professional military, Gaddafi increasingly relied on the Revolutionary Committees, an

organization he created in 1977 to politically mobilize the population.” However even in a country where there was no “standing army” and no new weaponry, NATO experienced challenges. Following the bombing operation by NATO to push back “loyalist forces,” the rebels still found it difficult to move ahead very much. As the fight transformed into a deadlock, NATO was compelled to increase its commitment. “Trainers were sent in and NATO personnel shared space in the rebels’ operations room in Benghazi” (Barfi). However, it was the United States that supplied 75% of the “reconnaissance data, surveillance, intelligence and refueling planes.” Thus it is clear that the United States plays a huge role in such an “international” intervention (Husain).

### **III. Syria**

Therefore when discussing military intervention in Syria, with this in mind, the United States (at this point in time) does not have the ‘will or stomach to deal with the risks and consequences of a sustained intervention.” Moreover it must be understood that Syria is not Libya. Syria has legitimate defenses, such as “chemical weapons, a credible air-defense system, and a real military determined, as its bloody takeover of Homs suggests, to do anything to stay in power” (Miller). Unlike Libya, Syria has never attempted to squash its own military. Quite the contrary in fact: “Bashar’s father, the late Hafez Assad, transformed the military into his regime’s central pillar, not least because it had already proven a useful sectarian cudgel. Today, 90 percent of military commanders are Alawis as is 90 percent of the elite Republican Guard, despite the fact that they only make up 12 percent of the population.” This greatly elucidates why Syria has not had to deal with military abandonment. While Gadaffi’s partners such as General Suleiman Mahmud al-Obeidi and General Abd al-Fattah Yunis deserted him in just a few days after the rebellion, Assad’s allies have not abandoned him. In reality, “only a handful of officers above the mid-level rank of major have done so. Assad knew he could trust his Alawi co-religionists to build a loyal military that would keep the sect in power.” Furthermore, unlike Libya, Syria has formulated the development and training of a powerful and specialized military as a vital matter of the country. In fact, Hafez Assad’s supreme tactical aim was to follow a policy of “strategic balance” with Israel, which entailed enlarging the state’s military. Bashar resumed his father’s concentration on further developing the armed forces, boosting finances and improving training. Therefore, whereas Libya’s military spending was about \$728 million in 2007, Syria’s was about \$2.1 billion. Consequently, today Syria has a “professional military that is the second strongest Arab army after Egypt” (Barfi). Moreover, according to Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman General Martin Dempsey, “a long-term, sustained air campaign would pose a challenge because Syria’s air defenses are five times more sophisticated than Libya’s.” Moreover “Syria’s chemical and biological weapons stockpile is 100 times larger than Libya’s” (Martin) These are very important reasons that have made the United States hesitate when considering military intervention in Syria.

Besides being a much more powerful enemy than Libya, Syria also poses a much more “complicated political situation” for the United States (Martin). In fact Syria is not Libya: “It’s a more important place, the consequences of sustained sectarian conflict are more severe, and the advantages – weakening Iran – much greater. (Bring down the Assads, and you can undermine the mullahcracy in Tehran too)” (Miller). Syria is bordered by Israel, Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan and is supported by Russia, China and Iran, creating a very problematic political situation (Husain). With intervention, there is a major risk that the political situation will worsen creating complete chaos and further instability throughout the region. Thus, no international player wishes to confront the danger of an unbalanced or split Syria, which could potentially succeed the fall of the Assad regime. American officials believe that the fall of the regime would result in one of two situations. The first scenario involves the potential of increasing “sectarian violence, ethnic violence, or both, as Sunnis seek revenge against their former Alawi overlords (and those allied with the regime), or as Kurds square off against Arabs.” The second scenario involves the concern that the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood would take over power. As noted above Syria borders Lebanon, Israel, Iraq, and Turkey and officials fear that sectarian violence would spread into Lebanon, whereas ethnic violence would have implications for Iraq and Turkey, which have major Kurdish populations. It is also interesting to consider the fact that the borders between Israel and Syria have “remained quiet” since 1973 except for one instance in May 2011 during the uprising when Palestinians in Syria put on a march to the Israeli border, where many Palestinians were killed by Israeli guards. According to James L. Gelvin, “One can assume that the Syrian government either knew about or orchestrated the march, perhaps to demonstrate what might happen if the heavy hand of the government were removed. Whatever the case, Israel’s wariness of regime change in Syria gave rise to the improbable scene of Michael Oren, Israel’s ambassador to the United States, making the rounds in Washington D.C., to deny he had been organizing support for Assad.” Therefore it is very evident that regime change in Syria could have major implications for the U.S.’s ally, Israel (Gelvin 115-116).

Furthermore, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Martin Dempsey has indicated that Syria is the concentration of vying Middle Eastern countries, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia, and thus creates much larger problems for the U.S. than Libya. He stated, “There’s indications that al-Qaeda is involved and that they’re interested in supporting the opposition.” Moreover he indicated there is “a Sunni-Shiite competition for, you know, regional control” of Syria between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Al Arabiya). Syria has demonstrated to be a dependable ally for Iran, supplying Iran with a great deal of strategic advantages in the Middle East. It is also significant in that “the current alliance with Iran continues to bolster Syria’s anti-imperialist reputation and increases the price it can demand from the West in exchange for making peace with Israel or ensuring quiet in Lebanon.” Moreover, Syria has assisted the Lebanese Shi’i organization

Hezbollah and made its ports accessible to Iranian warships, permitting Iran to “project power into the Mediterranean.” Therefore it is likely that Iran has been providing Syria with aid to crush the uprising. It is evident that Iran has a lot to lose if the regime falls and Iran will most likely not let this happen without a fight (Gelvin 116-118). Thus “a power vacuum, a civil war, or both will have significant destabilizing implications for Syria’s neighbors” which the United States is fully aware of. Even Turkey has considered intervention due to the fear of refugees, particularly Kurds. The Iraqis worry about the “creeping autonomy of the tribal regions on their border” and Iranians “continue to support the regime, which is Tehran’s closest ally in the region and the gateway to its proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas.” As a result, “Syrian domestic politics will become enmeshed with regional politics” and could be a volcano just waiting to explode impacting the entire region. With the United States fully aware of this, it is possible that they fear that U.S. intervention would just be an immediate catalyst of chaos and instability in an already fairly unstable region (Doran and Shaikh 238).

#### **IV. Conclusion**

According to Henry Kissinger, “The evolving consensus is that the United States is morally obliged to align itself with revolutionary movements in the Middle East as a kind of compensation for its Cold War policies (invariably described as ‘misguided’), in which it cooperated with nondemocratic governments for security objectives.” Whereas the Obama administration has indicated support for democratic transformation in the Middle East, the inherent problem here is that so far the results of the Arab Spring are not democratic. Kissinger argues, “The Arab Spring is widely presented as a regional, youth-led revolution on behalf of liberal democratic principles. Yet Libya is not ruled by such forces; it hardly continues as a state. Nor is Egypt, whose electoral majority is overwhelmingly Islamist; nor do democrats seem to predominate in the Syrian opposition.” Kissinger’s advice for American foreign policymakers is: “America should encourage regional aspirations for political change. But it is not wise to seek an equivalent result in every country at the same pace. America will serve its values as well by offering quiet counsel as by issuing public declarations, which are likely to produce a sense of siege. It is not an abdication of principle to tailor the U.S. position on a country-by-country basis and attune it to other relevant factors, including national security; indeed that is the essence of a creative foreign policy” (Kissinger).

Thus far the Obama administration has dealt with the Arab Spring on a case-by-case basis as was depicted through the case studies of Libya and Syria. It is not that the United States is operating a double standard, but rather that the Middle East is an extremely complicated region, and each and every state is completely different, and in reality a specific policy must be developed towards each country because the make-up and environment of each is very different. However it is difficult to assess each country as the on the ground situation continues to change. There are still many questions that

need to be answered such as the fate of the Assad regime and the outcome of Islamist governments such as in Egypt. Therefore the Arab Spring is still unraveling and its implications are not 100% clear. As of right now it appears as though intervention in Syria is not an option; however the U.S. will most likely continue to pressure the regime and provide aid to rebel forces, as Secretary of State John Kerry promised earlier this year (BBC). As Islamists take power throughout the region, the United States is faced with the challenge of how to respond to this. According to Henry Kissinger, "The United States should be prepared to deal with democratically-elected Islamist governments. But it is also free to pursue a standard principle of traditional foreign policy to conduct its stance on the alignment of its interests with the actions of the government in question" (Kissinger). While each country may be very different, what we have learned from the Arab Spring is that each country can still greatly affect one another. Thus the United States must be careful in how they continue to deal with the Arab Spring. For example, if the political volcano in Syria erupts, the dynamics of the region could completely change and the United States must keep this in mind as it continues to respond.

How the United States decides to deal with this challenge is gravely significant. "The empowerment of publics means that America cannot hope to succeed without systematically listening to, engaging with, informing, and communicating with the new Arab publics." The Obama administration will need to understand the connection between issues throughout the region and the complexity of dynamics throughout the Middle East. Moreover one of the biggest challenges may be the situation in Syria and Islamist groups coming to power. This is a problematic issue because "Even where such movements credibly commit to democratic rules, they are still profoundly anti-liberal." However, the Obama administration has "laid out a position that accepts their democratic participation, while also advocating for core liberal values. Its senior officials have declared their willingness to engage with Islamists who commit to democratic participation and nonviolence, and such meetings with Islamist party leaders in places such as Egypt and Tunisia have begun. There are even more resources upon which to draw, not least the fact that America itself is a land of deep religious faith mediated by a shared civic contract and could be a model for Arab societies in that vein." Lastly, the U.S. will need to recognize the boundaries of its capacity to "control the Middle East." It is evident that a lot is changing and according to Marc Lynch, "The Arab uprisings are only the beginning of these changes, and the world they are making will not be as familiar, comfortable, or predictable as the world we have come to know" (Lynch 232-235). Therefore response means everything and the Obama administration will have to do its best to create a policy that adheres to American principles and at the same time works to protect American interests. Democracy in the Middle East will not come overnight. It could take years, but in the end democracy in this volatile region could prove to be a much better scenario for the United States as long as it can maintain a "creative foreign policy" as according to Henry Kissinger (Kissinger).



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