

# U.S. FOREIGN POLICY AND THE ARAB SPRING

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As the uncertainty of the Arab Spring continues, the debate on the future of the movement and the U.S. role in it grows into a colorful debate. As a part of this policy debate I was recently asked to review Foreign Policy Association's Great Decisions episode on the Arab Spring, featuring columnist Mona Eltahawy and Shadi Hamid, director of research at the Brookings Doha Center and also featuring comments from key foreign policy heavyweights like Madeleine Albright, General Michael Hayden, Robert Malley and Carl Gershman.<sup>1</sup>

The debate in the episode is in many ways a small-scale projection of the overall U.S. policy debate on the current and prospective U.S. role in the Arab Spring. It focused on the issues of U.S. military help, danger of militancy, and the Arab Spring view towards Israel and the United States. This article will focus on three of the most under-studied aspects of the U.S. role in the Arab Spring: American policy and the academic debate, the paradigm of 'doing' in U.S. foreign policy and the question of overlap between American domestic and foreign policies.

**Predicting the Arab Spring: U.S. policy and the academic debate**

The widespread policy and media narrative of the Arab Spring is that the movement has been a surprise; emerging completely out of the blue, catching every political player flatfooted. 'Even the regimes and administrations that were targeted by the Arab Spring movements couldn't see it coming'<sup>2</sup> – or so it is argued.

While this shock is somewhat understandable among the regimes of the Middle East whose administrations never really established rigorous 'academia-watch' departments that follow the academic literature and debate, I can't really contextualize the surprise in the American executive branch circles as almost every branch have one or more academia-watch programs staffed by quite capable analysts. My curiosity grows even further as it was Gary Fuller, a former CIA political analyst who wrote about the danger of the Middle East 'youth bulge' back in 1989 and its possible dangers to regime stability, as well as U.S. Middle East policy<sup>3</sup>. The youth bulge literature grew in the 1990s, highlighting statistical correlations between nations with youth bulge demographics and the likelihood of socio-economic discontent. Further studies by political scientists like Jack Goldstone,<sup>4</sup> Gunnar Heinsohn<sup>5</sup> and more recently Richard Cincotta – Christian Mesquida<sup>6</sup> reinforced

Fuller's observations. But the most critical warning was given by perhaps one of the most read books of its genre, Roger Owen and Şevket Pamuk's work on Middle East economics, whose concluding chapter argued that based on the MENA region population growth statistics in the 1990s, the region had to maintain a minimum of %7 economic growth. Otherwise, authors warned, the region would fall to youth bulge demonstrations by 2010.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, the assumption that the Middle East youth bulge would create such a domino effect was one of the hypotheses behind the 2003 War in Iraq. Bernard Lewis for example<sup>8</sup>, was aware of the repeated warnings by Middle Eastern demographics experts and argued that it was the duty of the United States to knock the first domino by invading Iraq. In a romanticist Wilsonian spirit, it was argued that the presence of a large U.S. force intended to overthrow perhaps the most hated dictator in the region would inspire the Arabs to rise and overthrow their dictators as well and create a region-wide movement like the

Third Wave democracy movements in Eastern Europe. However, due to the way in which the U.S. entered the war in Iraq and handled the conflict ended up delaying this domino effect, effectively causing people to rally around their dictators against a possible American invasion, strengthening the position of the very dictators the United States sought to remove.<sup>9</sup>

However, despite the existence of a substantial literature that warned American policy-makers about the Arab Spring as much as two decades ago (including forecasts commissioned by the intelligence service) Washington appeared unable to make sense of what was happening in the region or what to do about it. This raises serious questions over the executive branch's handling of academic information and forecasts.

I recall from the International Studies Association (ISA) annual conference of 2010, that a group of senior analysts from various government agencies were



boasting how closely foreign policy and intelligence programs were following 'all that's going on in the literature', in response to an inquiry from the audience questioning the government's rationale of ignoring the academia's warnings before the war in Iraq. Just about a month after the conference Mohamed Bouazizi's act of self-immolation started the Arab Spring. Ever since the American administration has been scrambling – with mixed results – to situate itself with regard to the movement, still not convincing those who think the government organs are following the academic literature – at best – preferentially.

### **U.S. foreign policy and the 'paradigm of doing'**

Go to Google and search for the query: 'What should the United States do?' – you will end up with thousands of issues and agenda topics on which some expert is 'urging' the United States to do something about. Carry on with the search adding a random country each time; you'd probably be surprised to see that American decision-makers are called on to act in some way on almost every country in the world and every global issue.

Although many American foreign policy professionals don't like 'the E-word', feeling an urge to act in a large volume of area, including literally the other side of the world, is one of the main characteristics of an imperial consciousness.<sup>10</sup> I don't necessarily say this in a pejorative way: projecting an imperial consciousness is not the same as being an empire. Yet cost-benefit calculations don't travel far with 'normal' states; their security concerns are geographically close.<sup>11</sup> The ability to make these calculations globally is the mark of imperial ambition and capabilities.

Therefore as long as the 'what should we do?' paradigm remains integral to American foreign policy-making and 'not doing' is often associated with disinterest or isolation, we can't *not* talk about U.S. foreign policy from a non-imperial perspective. A hegemon can be benign or malignant and therefore an imperial foreign policy consciousness should not readily be

understood in terms of global domination, but the hegemon's perception of itself (and the following policy discourse about its intentions) will usually reflect benignity.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the hegemon's foreign policy behavior and how this behavior is perceived by the international system often change over an extended period of time. Therefore, while talking about 'what the U.S. should do' about an international event (in our case, the Arab Spring) it would perhaps be a better idea to direct our inquiry not towards *what* the U.S. should *do*, but rather towards *which* U.S. we are talking about.

Think about two cases; the Gulf War of 1990-91 and the Iraq War of 2003-11. Both have been important cases of American military action and both instances take place literally on the other side of the world.

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Although the target of two military interventions is the same, there are in fact two very different kinds of American presence in each instance. The Gulf War coincided with the end of the Cold War whose victor was the West, led by the United States. Having prevailed in this protracted conflict, the United States had managed to force the USSR into bankruptcy, without coming into direct military confrontation and such American leadership – coupled with the fact that the ever-imminent threat of a nuclear war was now over – rendered the benign hegemon image of the United States credible. The size of the U.S. economy, its living standards, democratic credentials, multi-ethnic, religious, linguistic character and its level of social freedoms dwarfed the considerable majority of the world. On top of all this, the United States still refrained from a multilateral intervention ►

to attack Iraq and scrambled to build a global coalition, even including its Cold War nemesis: Russia. Furthermore, the move against Iraq was decided institutionally, through consensus reached within NATO and UN. Let's then consider 2003. In 2003 we have an administration that is still coping with the post-traumatic stress of 9/11. Instead of following a uniting discourse, the administration did not refrain from polarizing the global public opinion by introducing the "with us, or against us" doctrine. Furthermore, in a very clumsy political move, the Bush administration had defined Iran within the 'axis of evil' even though U.S.-Iranian relations were going through a delicate process of détente under the Presidencies of Bill Clinton and Mohammad Khatami and the streets of Tehran were filled with mourners who showed support for the U.S. after 9/11. The bullying rhetoric of the Bush administration, not only towards the 'axis of evil', but also towards U.S. allies who were unconvinced about the American justifications for a war in Iraq further isolated the administration. Then by using deliberately inaccurate intelligence to make the case for a war and then, deciding to bypass NATO and the UN to launch an attack on Saddam with a poorly assembled coalition that fell apart very soon all added to the process that took the United States

from a considerably powerful and prestigious position and dragged it into a mud of international isolation and opposition, reversing its image as a benign hegemon. Additionally, as the war went on, growing number of torture cases, frequency of illegal combat methods and mounting civilian deaths, ended up rendering the U.S. flag to represent the exact opposite of what it represented in 1991 in the Middle East. More importantly, 9/11 succeeded perhaps, in the sense that it forced the United States to drift off from its declared core values and what it came to represent. Using the war on terrorism as a pretext for reducing civil liberties, such as media censorship related to Iraq and Afghanistan war, the NSA electronic surveillance program, DARPA's 'Total Information Awareness', lack of judicial oversight concern over the National Security Letters, Section 505 of the USA Patriot Act which enabled FBI to demand records without prior court approval, as well as the Protect America Act of 2007 – all added up to this drift from core values.

Perhaps the American public isn't really aware how closely foreign countries, institutions and organizations follow U.S. politics. This is also true in the Middle East. Even so-called anti-American groups and



organizations follow American media; after all anti-Americanism paradoxically takes its power from its narrative of the United States. Yet, American policy-makers must take note of this shift: foundations of American foreign policy and its global influence rests not in what the United States does; it rests in what the United States is. If the United States distances itself from the fundamentals of its social and political identity, a great divergence emerges between its domestic and foreign policies. For a successful foreign policy, all countries – but especially the hegemon – must maintain considerable overlap between its domestic and foreign policy ideals and practice.

### **Domestic-foreign policy overlap**

Therefore, when we return back to the question “what should the U.S. do” with regard to the Arab Spring, the only level-headed answer becomes: it should demonstrate the same domestic political standards that it advocates in its foreign policy. This is even more relevant and important with regard to the Arab Spring, which is essentially a call for democracy, liberties and better economic distribution. There is absolutely nothing the United States can ‘do’ – as in policy – to expedite, ease or form this movement. The best it can do, would be to become the inspiration it used to be for these kinds of movements – and if I were pressed to point to one issue on which the U.S. can become such an inspiration, I would highlight the question of financial recovery. As long as the United States deals with a serious financial crisis, with visible side effects of unemployment and increasing homelessness, its inspiration to the Arab Spring will be limited. While the Obama administration has taken steps towards tackling these issues, we can’t really talk about an American inspiration until the U.S. fully recovers from this recession.

On the same note, no amount of policy ‘doing’ will improve the credibility of the United States as a role model as long as movements like Occupy Wall Street attract so much popular support and there is so much anger in the United States towards income inequality and poor redistribution of wealth. After all, this is also

what the Arab Spring is about. If anything, it will increase the solidarity between the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street movements, but that doesn’t imply anything for U.S. foreign policy. More worrisome, U.S. foreign policy discourse against the violent suppression of the Arab Spring demonstrations simply become invalid when the Arab youth watches the NYPD’s heavy handed tactics of suppression of Occupy Wall Street demonstrators or read the blogs describing in detail, how the UC Davis campus police pepper sprayed the passive demonstrators on campus or go on YouTube and watch videos of police brutality directed towards Occupy Oakland protestors. As Arab feminists and gender equality activists

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see the Capitol Hill hearing on contraception featuring an all-male panel of experts in which women are deliberately prevented from testifying, as the Arab youth, attracted to the opportunities of the United States read about the austere Arizona law on immigration or the NYPD’s Muslim surveillance program or as the Arab politicians examining the U.S. electoral system read about the Supreme Court rule rejecting a ban on corporate political spending, effectively increasing the penetration of the big oil companies, Wall Street banks and health insurance companies into the electoral system, the question of why the United States has lost so much influence in foreign affairs in the last few years and why it currently is not an inspiration to the Arab Spring become quote obvious.

Yes, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube became a part of the Middle Eastern revolutions. Some over-excited Western analysts even dubbed the Arab Spring a ‘Twitter Revolution’ perhaps unaware of the fact that the mobilization of these revolutions took place pri- ▶

marily in the traditional public spaces of the Middle East: the mosque and the coffee house. However, as much as the West reaches out into the Middle East through online media, so can the Middle East reach into the United States and follow its daily workings through these media outlets. Just like the 'information revolution' nullified state control on information and propaganda in the Middle East, it also opened up a parallel window for the Middle East, into the everyday life in the United States, independent of the American foreign policy discourse of what the United States is. And as a result, the United States domestic politics have become a function of its foreign policy image perhaps more than ever. Globalization and online media is a double-edged sword – and we all have heard the overused truism 'U.S. foreign policy begins at home, in domestic politics'. But what is it that we call 'home'? Is this home the launching pad of a malignant empire, domestically reflecting the same mistrust, greed and fleeting calculations that the same empire pursues in its foreign policy, or, is this home a working example of a human ideal – a new way of life and interacting with the social, political and economic environment?

The United States will most probably emerge from its current crisis by re-creating itself along an updated version of its ideals. But how it does so and what this new identity will imply will be the only honest answer one can ever give to any questions arising from the post-Arab Spring U.S. foreign policy.

#### Notes:

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1. To watch this episode, please refer to the author's review of the episode on the FPA Blogs: <<http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2012/02/28/review-fpa-great-decisions-arab-spring/>>
2. On this, see 'The Arab Spring and Why Nobody Saw it Coming?' Reinsurance Magazine. June 24, 2011. <<http://www.reinsurancemagazine.com/articles/arab-spring-and-why-nobody-saw-it-coming>>
3. A more accessible 1995 version is: Gary Fuller. "The Demographic Backdrop to Ethnic Conflict: A Geographic Overview," in: CIA (Ed.): The Challenge of Ethnic Conflict to National and International Order in the 1990s (Washington 1995), p. 151-154
4. Goldstone, Jack A. (1991). Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World. Berkeley: University of California Press.
5. Gunnar Heinsohn. 'Vielleicht unser ganzes Leben lang: Youth bulges und die Zukunft des Terrorkrieges', in Die Zeit Online. February 7, 2002
6. Richard P. Cincotta and Christian G. Mesquida. 'Authoritarianism as a Form of Sustained Low-Intensity Civil Conflict: Does Age Structure Provide Insights into the Democratic Transition?'. Paper submitted at the Population Association of America 2007 Annual Meeting, Princeton.
7. Roger Owen and Sevket Pamuk (1999) A History of Middle East Economic in the Twentieth Century. Harvard University Press. pp. 229-35
8. O'Reilly is quoted in Matt Corley. 'Rove: a win after more years in Iraq will rally the Muslim world to us'. Think Progress. March 21, 2008 <<http://thinkprogress.org/politics/2008/03/21/20720/rove-iraq-oreilly/>>
9. On this, see: Marvin Baker Schaffer. 'The Iraq Experience and Domino Theory Revisited' Joint Force Quarterly, issue 57, 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter 2010. National Defense University. <<http://www.ndu.edu/press/lib/images/jfq-57/schaffer.pdf>>
10. On this topic, see: G. John Ikenberry. 'America's Imperial Ambition' Foreign Affairs. September/October 2002. Council on Foreign Relations. <<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/58245/g-john-ikenberry/americas-imperial-ambition>>
11. This is the main hypothesis of the regional security complex theory (RSCT); on this, see: Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security, Cambridge University Press 2003.
12. For a discussion of benign and malignant hegemony in international relations, see: Benjamin Miller. States, Nations and Great Powers: The sources of regional war and peace. Cambridge University Press.