The Delicate Dance

The US, Egypt, Human Rights and Democratization

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Executive Summary

The Middle East erupted into massive political protests in 2011, toppling the autocrats of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, and leading Syria into a sectarianized armed conflict.

The US government’s reaction to the political upheavals in these countries varied widely from mere public statement to military intervention. The Arab spring pitted US strategic interests against values and principles it advocated in support of democratization and human rights. Washington DC engaged in a delicate dance to marry overlapping, rather than contradictory, interests and values in a way that was affected by assumptions about democratization processes and Arab culture – often raising bad questions such as whether Arab culture or Islam, democratic values and human rights were fully compatible or not.

Traditionally, the US foreign policy in the region has been explained by resorting to two main factors, arguably unchanged since WWII; these are the stable flow of energy resources from giant gulf producers, and Israel’s security.

By studying the US policy formulation process and substance, I show that the US foreign policy in the Middle East cannot be fully understood without resorting to so-called secondary considerations (promotion of democracy and human rights) as well as certain theoretical positions embraced by the US on democratization. Some US allies often fail to see this delicate dance and adopt a fully instrumental view of how human rights and democratic values affect the shaping of the US foreign policy.
Introduction:

More than 20 years after the total collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, which Huntington called the third democratization wave, the Middle East erupted into massive political protests in 2011, toppling the autocrats of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, and leading Syria into a sectarianized armed conflict. This fourth wave of democratization, which came be called the Arab Spring, posed a major challenge to the US foreign policy at a time Washington was looking forward to extricating itself from the 10-year military occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan and pivoting itself more towards east Asia.

In Egypt, massive largely peaceful demonstration removed the aging tyrant and his close circle with the support of the armed forces in February 2011. Islamist political factions, especially the Muslim Brothers, became the ruling force in a shaky alliance with the remnants of the old regime, primarily the security forces (army and police) and the bureaucracy.

US officials sent mixed messages over Egypt during 18 days of civil disobedience (25th January till 11th February, 2011) until former president Hosni Mubarak stepped down. This hesitant and unclear policy resurfaced again and again in the following three years after the US old Egypt policy foundered and a new one, save for pragmatic and adhoc positions, did not materialize.

The Arab Spring swept through a region of strategic significance to the US and threatened long-stated US foreign policy interests. It pitted US strategic interests against values and principles it publicly preaches. Traditionally, the US foreign policy in the region has been explained by resorting to two main factors, arguably unchanged since WWII. These are ensuring 1) a stable flow of energy resources from giant gulf producers; and 2) Israel’s security. If these are truly the most important determinants of US foreign policy in the region, then using them as explanatory principles one should be able to understand the variance in US foreign policy in the region in 2011. Other considerations such as democratization, respect for human rights, the responsibility to protect, US inter-agency bureaucratic politics, Iranian threats, and the war on terror would then be secondary or derivative.

By studying the US policy formulation process and substance in 2011, I intend to show that though Israel’s security and the unimpeded flow of oil could be dominant factors, the US foreign policy in the Middle East can not be fully understood without resorting to these so-called secondary considerations, as well as certain theoretical positions embraced by the US on democratization.

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Key relevant theories:

There is a whole body of work theorizing the underpinnings of US foreign policy beyond the description of interagency tensions and usual Washington horse-trading. Walter Russle Mead believes that there are four distinct impulses that shape the US foreign policy in general. These four broad groups of motivations and objectives have contrasting but also overlapping elements. The Hamiltonians focus on the “nation’s need to be integrated into the global economy on favorable terms”, while the Wilsonians believe the US has a moral obligation and a national interest “in spreading American democratic and social values throughout the world.” The Jeffersonians oppose the former two schools and believe the US should guard such values of freedom and democracy mainly at home. They claim that the Hamiltonian drive to integrate into the global economy or the Wilsonian objective of making the world like us end up involving the US “with unsavory allies abroad or increase the risk of war”. Finally, the Jacksonians take the “physical security and the economic well-being of the American people” as the paramount goal of both domestic and foreign policy and are rather aggressive with military and foreign intervention if it serves these objectives (Mead, XVII).

Many commentators and academics divide the two main drivers of US foreign policy in general into the realist and the idealist motives7, with the former focused on strategic economic and security interests and the latter more concerned with values and principles of democracy and civil rights. In actual practice, the lines are expectedly blurred. One could argue that the 2003 Iraq war was motivated by an amalgam of realist and idealist impulses where both the Wilsonians and the Jacksonians were bedfellows defending the spread of democracy to Iraq and the annihilation of the destabilizing, terrorism-supporting regime of Saddam Hussein. Such strange bedfellows, however, become quickly uncomfortable and split, especially if the democratization impulse is predominantly instrumental and ends up not serving the US interests in the short terms by bringing hostile political forces to power.

As far as the Middle East is concerned, it has been a truism for decades to attribute the drivers of US foreign policy in the Middle East to two realist drivers; free flow of oil and Israel’s security, with the latter seen as part of the US power projection in this region since the cold war era and increasingly also a domestic policy concern since the late 1960s. Recently the list of these drivers has been expanding. For example, Nasr believes that counterterrorism joined Israel’s security and ensuring the free flow of oil to form a tripod for US foreign policy in the region (Nasr, 185). The Congressional Research Service expands the list of factors affecting US policy in this region to include “regional security, global energy supplies, U.S. military access, bilateral trade and investment, counter-proliferation, counterterrorism, and the promotion of human rights.” (CRS, 1)

Glibert Achcar in his tour de force of the recent Arab revolutions in The People Want, A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising (University of California Press and Saqi Books, 2013), views the US foreign policy in the region as an exclusive domain for the realists (who care most about the free flow of

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7 For an application of such an approach on the US foreign policy in the Middle East see Haviland Smith “Idealist versus Realist Foreign Policy”, American Diplomacy, April 2011 accessed on 10 June 2013 at http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/item/2011/0104/oped/op_smith_idealism.html
oil and Israel as a strategic asset in the cold war and now the only reliable one in a shaky region). In this he is supported by former Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Martin Indyk, who argues that unlike the balance the US had always to strike between the national interest and the nation’s values, “in the Middle East...every American president since Franklin Roosevelt has struck that balance in favor of the national interest, downplaying the promotion of America’s democratic values because of the region’s strategic importance.” It has to be noted that national interest, according to Indyk who now works with the Brookings Institution, stands for economic and security interests which can be measured in the short term.

Timothy Mitchel, in his seminal work, *Carbon Democracy* (Verso Books, 2011), argued for seeing democracy, human rights and the Wilsonian tradition in general as instruments deployed to stabilize the capitalist project in the region, and the world at large, in a much more effective way compared to brutal autocracies. In other words, democracy and human right are necessary instruments sometimes deployed to stabilize the capitalist project in the region, and the world at large, in a much more effective way compared to brutal autocracies unless the local ally was a socially conservative religiously rooted regime such as the Saudis, which can deploy a rent model of governance. In other words, he dismisses the values/interests dichotomy as false. Does this mean that critical theorists such as Mitchel (2011) and Achcar (2013) believe that all consideration except for Israel and secured flow of oil are indeed derivative in shaping US foreign policy? The answer is ‘No’, but they indeed give primacy to the overall objective of political control and economic interests to which other drivers are subservient.

**Oil:**

The US is the ultimate guarantor of energy supplies from the Middle East, which provides about a third of global oil production and nearly 14% of total global energy production and is the main provider for Europe, China and Japan.\(^8\) The Arab region has about 50% of world oil reserves\(^9\). Though the US does not primarily depend on this oil for own energy needs, it is extremely important for main players in the world economy, whose financial health affects that of the US in the interdependent global economic environment. Historically, it was oil that attracted the US to the region, especially after WWII when the US became the region power broker and security guarantor. The 1956 Suez Crisis signaled he end of 40 years of imperial control by the French and the British following the 1904 Sykes-Picot agreement and the entry of the US as the regional hegemor. Achcar (2013), Yergin (1992) and Mitchel (2011) provide a detailed review of how US foreign policy has been shaped by the need to safeguard energy supplies and especially its distinguished relations with Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia, the largest oil producer in the world, provides the best example of how American values have long been subservient to hard national interests. With no constitution nor real parliament, the royal family exercises absolute authority, which is formally vested in the king but legitimated by an alliance with an extremely conservative clergy, which controls education, public space and is financially well endowed. (Achcar, 103-104)

**Israel:**

Israel competes with Saudi Arabia for the position of the most important US ally in the region.

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\(^8\) See US Department of Energy data base at http://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.cfm?id=11711
US-Israeli relations rest on a complex mix of domestic and foreign policy concerns and priorities. Domestic concerns, especially the role and influence of the pro-Israel Jewish and Evangelical communities in supporting a special bilateral relations, play a strong role. The 1967 war, transformed this relationship into a strategic sphere with Israel becoming a central part of the US cold war policies in the Middle East. Through the pro-Israel lobby, Israel not only impeded itself in the matrix of dominant US interests but was also easily seen as a cause that deserved support on moral and cultural grounds rooted in western affinities, common values and shared historical experiences.10

**Democratization and Human Rights:**

To ensure the stability of the region, the US had to turn a blind eye to the practices of many regimes whose grip over power was rooted in autocratic practices that systematically violated human, minority and women rights and gave rise to extremist and fundamentalist groups which operated underground, partly due to the lack of genuine democratic space. “Support to dictators has been the bane of American policy in the Middle East” (Nasr, 167) Nasr believes that dictators were good to the US but over time they created the problems the US wanted them to contain.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks were a watershed because for a few years they opened a window that showed a possible overlap between democratization and foreign policy objectives in the Middle East bringing them both under the rubric of national security for both the neocons and the liberals. Democratization was no longer dismissed by many hard nosed realists as an idealist concern. Until then there was no alternative strategy and the dominant policy voices in Washington DC were those, at best, calling for “gradual” democratization based on a modernization theory approach of sequencing structural changes (Nasr, 168).

Some analysts and a few U.S. officials “argued that U.S. investments in the advancement of political rights and the development of societies in the Middle East could serve as potential instruments of strategic policy—a down payment on regional stability and a safety valve against popular demands for swift or disruptive change. This argument assumed that U.S. engagement, advocacy, and assistance could build a broad basis for bilateral cooperation and/or that failure to respond to popular dissent or disassociate the United States from abuses by partner governments could produce a harmful backlash.” (CRS, 2)

The Bush democratization offensive in the region, however, floundered in 2005 and 2006 after the Muslim Brothers gained over 20% of the parliamentary seats in Egypt and a majority in the legislative house of the Palestinian Authority and then assumed de facto control over Gaza. But even before what should have been a predictable win by the Islamists, democratization programs through MEPI [Middle East Partnership Initiative]11 were criticized by many as window dressing. Berger (2010) argued that the lack of conditionality in these programs and the bureaucratic management by State Department officials revealed how the promotion of democracy was not a “foreign policy goal in its own right. Instead, the assumptions provided by modernization theory have provided a fallback option for US policy makers unwilling or unable to pursue a more vigorous approach to democratization in the Arab world.”12 Most of

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11 For more information on MEPI, its work and funding, see http://mepi.state.gov/index.html

the funding was channeled through or agreed to by the very governments it was meant to reform. “Even before the wave of change began, balancing these priorities in the Middle East was complicated. For example, the goals of preserving regional stability and protecting U.S. security through counterterrorism and counter-proliferation necessitated cooperation with leaders who rejected efforts toward democratization and human rights.” (CRS, 1)

Even after the effective demise of the Bush doctrine for democratization, there were still some voices in Washington DC supporting the overall effort as a better insurance policy for US national interests and not merely as the right thing to do in line with American values. The position of this camp was best articulated by Tamar Cofman Wittes (2008), who tried to marry the US strategic interests with its values, claiming that only democratization in the Middle East could ensure sustainable support of US interests as the “reliance on strong, autocratic leaders who can guarantee policy cooperation even in the face of domestic disapproval” was no longer sustainable (Wittes, 2). Autocratic regimes were suitable for cold war era policy objectives but that they cannot handle transnational threats such as “international organized crime, refugee and other migrant flows, and, most notably, international terrorism” (Wittes, 4). The Bush administration thought that reforming the autocratic regimes and making them more efficient could drain a major source for radicalism and anti-Americanism, but it could not stomach a transition in which the new democrats are not as malleable and certainly more committed to a nationalist or a religiously motivated anti-Americanism. 13 Wittes agreed with the Bush policy goals but thought the means deployed to implement it were woefully inadequate financially and politically. It is not that the US would lose sway and influence in the region, assets which made it more often than not ignore the structural roots of massive human rights abuses when committed by allies such as Saudi Arabia, but that it can regain this influence at a reduced level in the longer term if it supported the reform better. The deal was clear: “dictators did as America wanted, more or less, in exchange for American indulgence of their illiberalism” (Wittes, 11). But for Wittes and the pro-democracy camp, “the risks that accompany the Arab democratization are at least balanced by, if not overwhelmed by, the risks of failing to act on behalf of democratic development in this strategic part of the world” (Wittes, 8). In 2009, Wittes joined Clinton as an assistant secretary of state for Near East Affairs in the first Obama administration. But the policy did not change much, at least not publicly.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the US could not maintain all its interests while observing its values in the region at any given time and when it made an attempt to promote democracy in the region, it was largely instrumental and lacked perseverance.

**US foreign Policy in the Middle East in 2009-2010:**

In 2009, Obama went to Cairo to call for “change” but stopped short of calling on autocratic regime that were readying to bequeath presidential system to their offspring such as in Syria, Egypt or Yemen. Clinton described this as a delicate balancing act (Sanger, 278). Obama made it clear that, unlike

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13 Rumsfeld was maybe the first US official to use the term of draining terrorism resources as a justification for attacking countries such as Afghanistan and to go to the organizational and financial support bases of terrorist organizations. See Sgt. 1st Class Kathleen T. Rhem, USA American Forces Press Service, “Rumsfeld on Terrorists: Drain the Swamp They Live” accessed on 26 June at http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=44863. On the US differentiated relations with Islamist regimes see Timothy Mitchell, Carbon Democracy, (New York: Verso, 2011)
Bush, he was not interested in imposing any change of governance systems from outside. “While embracing the need for fair elections, accountability, and respect for human rights and particularly women’s rights, Obama was intent on striking a non-imperialist chord” (Sanger, 279). Obama’s senior advisers were either full blown realists such as Dennis Ross or those who have a strong position on human rights and the responsibility to defend them overseas as long as such an intervention would not undermine US national interests. These included Rice and Samantha Power, who was nominated in May 2013 to replace Rice as ambassador to the United Nations.  

Ultimately Obama and his administration desired democratization and human rights in the Middle East but did not indicate that the Arab potentates would pay any price for maintaining dictatorships. Even the promises he made in his Cairo speech on funding technological development and expanding exchange programs for students and a new “corps of business volunteers to partner with counterparts in Muslim-majority countries” were not even followed up and one year later he was “deeply disappointed in how little got done.” (Sanger 279)  

In August 2010, the White House commissioned a study on the stability of Arab regimes, friends and foes alike. The conclusion went along the gradual democratization camp line calling for pushing reform and working more with civil society and people inside the government who support reform. The study concluded that most regimes would resort to repression to deal with unrest and that pressure on them to reform does not work. Tunisia, the first piece of domino to fall in the Arab Spring was not considered at all. The report main conclusion was that “the older generation of strong-men leaders would have to die off before the region would experience any significant political opening.” (Sanger, 283) The Study did not lead to any concrete decisions or policy changes. BBC foreign policy correspondent in Washington DC described the atmosphere around the study as relaxed. “There was no rush – the Arab world moved at a glacial pace” (Ghattas, 226). Another working group was formed by policy researchers from leading think tanks in Washington DC in February 2010, focusing on Egypt. The group did not get much support from the administration but after the farcical Egyptian parliamentary election in November 2010 where wide scale rigging was reported, presidential foreign policy adviser Ross invited the group to a meeting. “The administration was disgusted by the November elections, which were very corrupt … they issued a press release as a sign of displeasure with Mubarak… There was a growing demand for change in Egypt … the administration should have expressed more unhappiness with human rights abuses and the rigged elections. I do not think the US officials accepted our thesis … their job was to repair the relationship with Mubarak, which was harmed by the Bush administration pressure for reform … There was a significant disagreement within the administration and some people within were unhappy but there was no sense of urgency.”  

The Obama administration, like many others before it, was seen to be stuck in this dichotomy between American strategic interests and American values. It is a false dichotomy, I would argue later in the paper, because there is a limit to the price America will pay in ignoring its very values to secure strategic or hard interests and vice versa. It is more often than not a pragmatic amalgam that expresses the relative weights of the interests, values and actors in question. This very pragmatic policy hit reality in December 2010 when protests swept across Tunisia, then on to Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain. One day before Ben Ali fled Tunisia, Secretary Clinton hedged her bets in a speech in the tiniest but richest country in the Middle East, Qatar. Speaking in Doha on 13th January, 2011, she said that “in too many places, in too many ways, the region’s foundations are sinking into the sand.” She did not

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14 Interview with Bennis.
15 Interview with a former State Department official, Washington DC, 22 May 2103
mention the ongoing developments in Tunisia. The administration was clearly unprepared and was taken by surprise because, though they were aware of the repressive and corrupt policies of the Tunisian regime and other governments which were sinking in this “quick sand”, they thought these regimes, especially in Tunisia, were too strong to allow any popular revolt to topple them. Even after Ben Ali left and almost one day into an unprecedented massive protest in Cairo, Obama stood to address the Congress on 25th January to say that “the USA stands with the people of Tunisia and supports the democratic aspirations of all people.” Egyptian democracy supporters had to wait a few days and see hundreds killed before Washington publicly sided with them.

**How US Policy on Egypt Evolved (focus on 18 days in 2011):**

The US government always thought it had a binary choice between “Mubarak old military apparatchiks” and the Muslim Brotherhood. It had thought about such a stark choice in tabletop scenario exercises in the State Department, but never as a distinct possibility. Thus, it was genuinely surprised according to a senior state department official at the time. “[I]n Egypt, we thought it was one of these protests . . I talked to colleagues two days before and we thought it could be bigger . . [T]he protests were large and it was immediately apparent that there is a new level of escalation”16 Another former officials took a few days to appreciate the depth of anger and the tectonic shifts in the Egyptian body politics, believing even through 28th January when the whole police apparatus collapsed throughout Egypt that Mubarak still could survive if he compromised a bit. “We had this long relationship with Mubarak . . if he did make concessions . . [the protests] would have fizzled.”17 This possibility of saving Mubarak seems to have controlled the thinking of the administration until 1st February, when Mubarak made a vacuous speech with no concrete proposals to break the deadlock. A former top national security official with whom I spoke on 3 February said: “If I can advise Mubarak now, I would tell him to make some concessions, appoint a new cabinet and then in a few months crush the opposition.”18 Sensing he might have gone a bit too far, he stopped and said: “I am saying that as an academic who studied dictatorships for a long time and not because I want it to happen.” But like many other administration officials from the old realist school, this retired official saw an irreconcilable tension between democratizing the governance systems in the region and primary strategic interests. He wished for democracy to reign in the region, but thought the transition could be too costly to bear and quiet unpredictable. Secondly, he though the political culture in the region was anathema to democracy. The people are not ready for it because “the people here [do not] have the culture of democracy” as late Egyptian spy chief Omar Suleiman told ABC TV on February 6, 2011, mere five days before he and Mubarak were swept off the political scene by these very people.19

The focus in the administration since 1st February seems to have moved to the Egyptian army to ensure that it does not use violence against the demonstrators.

Secretary Clinton made the argument in early February “that the right path was to pressure Mubarak for change . . but not to pull the rug from beneath him” (Sanger, 357). She tried to balance strategic security interests in the one hand and soft human rights and democratization desires on the other. “We support the fundamental right of expression and assembly for all people . . but our assessment is that

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16 Interview with former senior administration official, Washington DC May 22, 2013.
18 A conversation with former top national security official, New York 4 February 2011
19 ABC TV, Interview for Egyptian Vice President Omar Suleiman with Christian Amanpour, accessed on 1 June 2013 at http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/egypt-vice-president-calls-calm-protesters-return-opposition/story?id=12851774#.Uc4yYOvOn88
the Egyptian government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people,” She said in a statement that would haunt her later (Ghattas, 232). This came a few days after Vice president Biden volunteered on 27th January to state that “Mubarak was no dictator” in a media interview.20 The US was keen not to alienate Mubarak till February 1, 2011.

There were two camps of people in the White House – one camp called for saying very little publicly in the hope that Mubarak would carry the day, thus maintaining the basic formula of the relationship between the two countries. On the other side, there were those who cared more about Obama’s legacy and role in history and advocated a clear statement, especially after the failed attempt by Mubarak supporters to dismantle the main protest in Tahrir Square on 2nd February which led to the murder and injury of many protestors.21 The second camp invoked principles, legacy and long term strategic gains, but not without a small measure of risk. It took one week, which was “maybe too slow for events on the ground but very fast for US foreign policy making”22 to settle this policy feud.

Chairman of the joint chiefs and few senior members of congress and Secretary of Defense spoke with Egyptian Defense minister General Hussain Tantawi and Chief of Staff General Samy Annan to stress the importance of not using violence against peaceful demonstrators. “Tantawi had good reasons to take the position he took: field commanders might not obey orders to shoot and this could create a rift in the army … and they were against the succession plan too [to Have Gamal Mubarak succeed his father as president].”23

After February 2nd, Egyptian military officers started to receive e-mails from American counterparts they had trained with in the US “cautioning them against firing on the protestors.” “You would almost hear them making the calculations in their heads,” according to one senior official quoted by Sanger. “Faced with a stark choice, the Egyptian military heeded the warning.” (Sanger 298) The developments in Cairo between 2nd and 10th of February and the signals that Washington kept on sending convinced the Egyptian military that it “would have Washington’s backing if it moved against Mubarak.” (Sanger 301) “Egypt’s top officers seemed to have come to the same conclusion that South Korea’s did in the 1980s and Indonesia’s did in the 1990s: the country’s leader had changed from an asset to a liability,” but it was the US clear messages at one stage that tipped the balance and these messages were largely motivated by the fear that the army itself might splinter and that the revolutionary demands might escalate even further by which time it could become impossible to save any part of the regime including the very army without bloody confrontations (Sanger, 301).

The US strategic interests and values were both better served by saving the regime after decapitating it. Egyptian generals informed American officials that everything was set up for Mubarak departure on 10th February. When the octogenarian Mubarak demurred that evening, Secretary Gates called his Egyptian counterpart to tell him that Mubarak had to go, which took place few hours later. The US stood ready “to mentor them and help the Egyptian army” through the transition” (Ghattas, 242-243).

Since the Egyptian-Israel 1979 peace treaty, the Egyptian military has been seen in Washington DC as an ally to the US. It preserved the peace with Israel and its military equipment and systems were becoming much more sourced from the US, thus interoperable with the American ones in huge annual joint military exercises or even joint deployments as happened in the 1991 Gulf War. The army itself had

22 Interview with former State Department official, Washington DC May 22, 2013.
23 Ibid.
a lot to lose if the regime fully disintegrated. The army controlled “resorts, gas stations, pharmaceutical facilities, and fish farms, and received a steady $1.3 billion annual military aid package from the U.S. (the military built such a cushion, in fact, that when the Egyptian government was burning through more cash than it had in early 2012, The Egyptian military lent the government a cool $1 Billion.”) (Sanger 306-7) Egyptian military runs “four-fifths of all industrial concerns and accounts of upward of 30 percent of the economy,” (Nasr, 175). The annual military aid package was never used as a pressure tool though at 2.8% of the government revenues (2011 figures), it could have been used as such.\(^24\)

In addition to the military relations, the Egyptian regime performed various services to the US in the region. This included priority crossing in the Suez Canal for the US military, over-flight rights in the Egyptian air space and the political pacification of the Hamas-controlled Gaza strip. In other words, Cairo helped with force protection and facilitation for the projection of American military power. Over the last 10 years “we had 100,000 troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. You have to get people and supplies in and out of the region. The priority arrangement to cross the Suez Canal and the over-flight rights, both have been very important. Think also of how central these two arrangements are if you had to hit Iran.”\(^25\)

The Egyptian military had gone through a major shift over the last 40 years “from an Egyptian military that used only Soviet arms and doctrine to one which relies on American arms and doctrine… It is very good to have Egypt with you but definitely important not to have her against you … nor is it useful to have Egypt project power on its own.”\(^26\)

For the Pentagon, investing in the Egyptian military and ensuring it survives this stormy political transition intact was paramount. “The Pentagon and the US military will continue to support the Egyptian army now that they have succeeded in its transformation and for the first time you have US-trained military leadership. Hundreds of Egyptian officers dream of coming to the US for a few weeks for training or to accompany an arms shipment back.”\(^27\)

Unlike Israel and oil producing countries in the Middle East, the non-military economic relations with Egypt was more often than not a burden to the US tax payer. The US was worried that if Mubarak fell down, reform and transition would require billions of dollars it could not afford under the recessionary economic conditions and Republican pressures for budget cuts for domestic programs. Riyadh would have to be asked in due course to provide the funds for Egypt (Ghattas, 241), though it would be Qatar, another close US ally in the Gulf, which would initially step in to provide the Egyptian government with eight billion dollars in loans in the following two years.\(^28\) Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kuwait would almost double this in the few months after former President Morsi was overthrown by a popularly-supported military decision in July 2013. Led by Saudi Arabia they sent US$16 Billion to Egypt in budgetary support cash, fuel and investments.

Human rights and democratization have had marginal effect on US relations with Egypt. In his final days before he left the State Department as an assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs in November 1999, Martin Indyk told Arab journalists that human rights concerns were usually on the agenda for meetings with senior Egyptian officials, but often there were so many other higher priority

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\(^24\) Information derived from Egyptian ministry of Finance website accessed on 28 May at http://www.mof.gov.eg/Arabic/%D8%B9%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%8A%D9%86%20%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%87/PE/Pages/budget10-11.aspx

\(^25\) Interview with former senior administration official.

\(^26\) Interview with former State Department official.

\(^27\) Interview with a Washington DC policy analyst at a think tank, Washington DC 23 May

\(^28\) Nada Badawi, “Egyptian Foreign Debt increases by $8 billion”, Daily News Egypt, 29 June 2013, accessed on 29 June 2013 at http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/05/18/egyptian-foreign-debt-increases-by-8bn/
items on the agenda that the discussions often ended before the agenda was properly finished. 29 A similar view was expressed 14 years later by an equally senior state department official. 30

Having said that, there seems to be a perceptible, though small change from the kneejerk low priority reaction the administration had towards human rights and democratization issues, which it developed after the Islamist Hamas 2006 election victory in Gaza. “The US is still experimenting here with issues it needs to speak up about. Would we talk about niche issues like sexual assaults on women? How strategic are these issues after all? If Egypt passes a stifling NGO law, I think it would be a big problem but people who believe so are still a minority within the government because they do not think through all the consequences and what Egypt would be 10 years from now if they have a hollowed out democracy without free media, freedom of the judiciary, …” 31 Speaking up is one thing. Exercising actual pressure is another. There is no evidence that the US has used available tools for pressure on Egypt to promote more democratization or respect for human rights before and after the downfall of Mubarak. “There are no sticks and not too many carrots … the funding, the implementers and the agencies that implement the policy have not really changed [since the end of the Bush democratization drive]. US agencies try to act in terms of human rights, election monitoring and training and to seize opportunities, but the Arab Spring coincided with the worst time economically in Washington DC. There is no money.” 32

All strategic interests and values aside, there remains this belief that the political culture in Egypt is difficult to change from inside and impossible from outside. “You cannot transform Egypt, but you can work with what you have. The army is the strongest institution and the lasting power as the revolution proved. Hopefully one day, one day, Egypt would not be like this.” 33

This is reminiscent of the infamous statement by the former Egyptian head of intelligence that the Egyptian people were not yet ready for democracy. These two statements are the more popular rendition of a body of work, which attributes the lack of democracy in the region to cultural aspects, especially Islam. Mitchel (2011) would turn this argument upside down and claim that the US indeed preferred to deal with conservative Islamists and strengthened them over decades, turning a blind eye to the lack of democracy and massive human rights abuses, as long as these regimes stayed within the proscribed role of domestic social control and undermining leftists and anti-capitalist forces. In other words, the US policy makers adopted a culturalist view of the Muslim Middle East and even reinforced the anti-democratic conservative regimes or supported merely cosmetic changes as what happened in Saudi Arabia over the past few years in terms of education and the installment of toothless parliament. It was not that the US feared electoral democracy because it would bring the Islamists who espouse different values, but rather the US did not want a specific kind of Islamists who, like nationalists and leftists before them, would challenge US interests or demand a more equitable relationship.

Many interagency meetings were held in Washington DC in late January and early February 2011 to discuss whether - and then when and how - Mubarak should go. Obama, Gates and Clinton were more traditional and cautious. Clinton repeatedly warned about moving “too fast and making it look like the US was abandoning its allies … she was also the one … warning that the choice was not between reform and

29 A meeting I attended with Indyk and Arab journalists at the National Press Club in Washington DC in October 1999.
30 Interview with a former senior administration official, Washington DC 22 May 2013
31 Interview with a former senior administration official, Washington DC 22 May 2013
32 Interview with a senior researcher at the Congressional Research Service, Washington DC 22 May 2013
33 Ibid.
stability but between reform and chaos. Now chaos was knocking at the door and it was important to manage it properly.” (Ghattas, 241)

The US foreign policy on Egypt in 2011 and before has always been captive to a delicate dance performed by three partners: US strategic interest guarded or facilitated by Egypt, the Egyptian people desire for democracy and better governance resonating with US values and, to a lesser extent, the belief held by several academics, politicians and bureaucrats that the Arab culture of Egypt was not compatible with democracy. It was this dance that US foreign policy makers engaged in for about a week between 25th January and 1st February until they reached a position calling on Mubarak to have an “orderly transition … [that] must begin now” or in less diplomatic words withdrawing US support for the Egyptian autocrat. 34

And it is other reincarnations of this dance that the US policy makers came back to again in the bloody summer of 2013 when the MB-led regime was brought down and then an ill-planned and badly-executed security operation to disband the MB supporters sit-in in Cairo led to the death of as many as 1,000 civilians after security forces used very disproportionate force against tens of thousands of protesters. These two major controversial acts, the last of which was seen by various local and international human rights organizations to have included major human rights violations by the state, led the US government to temporarily suspend military aid and to issue several critical statements against the Egyptian military-led government. This, however, did not last long as a rising terrorist threat in Sinai and pressures from Riyadh, Tel Aviv and other gulf capitals brought human rights concerns again to its lower status in comparison to other so-called strategic considerations driving the US foreign policy. The realists have ceded some ground in the past three years in the Middle East but they are still dominant.

Conclusion:

Why did the US intervene in Libya but declined to do so in Syria? Why did it criticize Bashar and Gaddafi but did not speak much about the Bahraini regime and its failure to open up and include the Bahraini Shiite? Why was it hesitant on Mubarak and extremely patient on Saleh? Is this a dispute between idealism and pragmatism as Sanger claims (Sanger, 301) or basically a delicate balancing act of interests, values, feasibility of action, cultural assumptions, US government agencies’ positions, and the interagency dynamics. The US foreign policy decisions since the political upheavals took over the Middle East in 2011 revealed how the latter fluid model of all these considerations interacting to shape the policy provide a better answer and stronger explanatory power. No one single school (realist or idealist) or approach to understanding how the US foreign policy evolves and what drives it would work. Hard strategic interests of the US (or allies) obviously had primacy, but when they were not at all in danger and the cost of intervention for purely humanitarian reasons or to ascertain US values was reasonable, Washington acted. When there are no clear national interests, and the price of action is high, as is the case in Syria, then Washington does not act.

The major dominant factor in shaping US foreign policy was the need to ensure regional stability and the need to uphold certain human rights and prevent likely massive abuses, when possible. Regional stability is a function of the need to secure the free flow of oil and also to avoid the emergence of anti American regimes. The specter of Islamic rule did not scare the US to the dismay of allies in the Gulf and Israel as long as these Islamists were not anti American. And the MB, in terms of foreign policy, were not

that different from Mubarak, After all the major Arab allies of the US in the region are conservative Islamic regimes in places like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Morocco.

The stability of autocratic Arab regimes served US foreign interests in the region because the US always feared what Nasr summarized in his recent prognosis for the Middle East post the Arab Spring: “There will be civil wars, broken states, sectarian persecutions, humanitarian crises, faltering economies, and new foreign policy challenges, (ranging from warming relations between Egypt and Iran to new issues to fight over with Russia and China) – nothing resembling a resounding march to democracy and economic prosperity, and no clear embrace of free institution and norms,” (Nasr, 163). Even if Nasr’s vision is too pessimistic and not supported by many developments in the region, nobody likes change especially when it is turbulent to say the least. Clinton told Obama as they pondered what would happen in Egypt after Mubarak fell: “this would probably turn out all right … but it would take twenty five years.” (Sanger, 301)

Nasr and his ilk going all the way to Huntington and Fukuyama and their theses on Clash of Civilization and End of History seem to adopt an essentialist Hegelian approach to history and social change whereby we all move inexorably in stages towards an ideal end state. This is partly why they would prefer (or accept) dictatorial stagnation to forced change, which can go bad. The dramatic change in the Middle East however, was neither instigated nor stoppable by the US. It was indeed the realistic, rather than the idealistic approach to be on ‘the right side of history’ and to embrace change, trying only to control its pace.

Yet again, the decision to let go of stability for a few years was premised on the impossibility of maintaining it with these rotting regimes. Obama told his staff after a tense conversation with Mubarak on 2nd February, that “he was not going to back a dying dictator with the faint hope of buying a few more years of stability. This would only perpetuate a failed American approach, one that left Egyptians understandably bitter,” (Sanger 302)

In a major policy speech in May 2011, Obama articulated this somewhat new approach to policy in the region: “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. We will continue to do these things, with the firm belief that America’s interests are not hostile to peoples’ hopes; they are essential to them... [because] the narrow pursuit of these interests will not fill an empty stomach or allow someone to speak their mind... after decades of accepting the world as it is in the region, we have a chance to pursue the world as it should be.”35

Rhetoric aside, Obama is somewhat mixing means and ends. Reshuffling this important paragraph from his speech, one could safely say that he advocated a regional stability, which is predicated on regional security, counterterrorism efforts and achieving an Arab Israeli peace, in order to realize ‘free flow of commerce’ and ‘Israel’s security’ without opposing ‘people’s hopes’, which seems to be a euphemism for political participation, less corruption and more social and economic benefits.

There does not seem to be a major reformulation of US foreign policy in this regard nor actual measures on the ground to integrate such concerns and values. In his May 2011 policy speech, Obama touched on various principles to guide the ‘new’ US foreign policy in the region. They included: “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 — whether you live in Baghdad or Damascus, Sanaa or Tehran … Our support for these principles is not a secondary interest… 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.”

But Congress would not support such promises, nor would the economic recession help Obama effectively push for them. For two years in a row, “additional money has been requested [for Middle East democratization programs] but has not been approved [by congress]… The MEPI is currently using money from the foreign authorization account. … these issues are more amplified now because of Islamist positions on women and human rights, their dysfunctional domestic politics and the need to finance their operations.”

The State Department still persists with a half-billion dollar request for the 2014 budget.

This also indicates the limits on US influence in the region. It is true that “[n]o longer does the US have the prestige and resources to dominate Middle East affairs to the degree it has since the British withdrew from east of Suez in 1971. Neither the US nor Europe has the great financial resources needed to shape prospects in the Arab Spring countries other than marginally.” Whether China, India and other rising economic power would come into the fray is still unclear.

Washington was shocked by the unfolding of the Arab Spring and torn between the apocalyptic scenarios drawn up by Nasr and feared by Clinton and the need to accept what was fast transpiring and make the best out of it. It is evident why the transition away from the stifling autocratic regimes of decades to a more democratic ones will have to be long, but the only reason to think that it would be impossible is the belief that the political culture in the region, largely due to Islam, is hostile to democracy, hence stability can only be secured through authoritarianism and autocracy. Even when observers admit that it will take years for such a transition, they still think that “there is no assurance that culture will protect the rights of Copts, or build a functional democracy, or apply international standards of justice,” (Sanger, 334)

Many officials in the US and the fallen dictatorial regimes in the Middle East had a set view of the cultural politics of the region; they believed that the pressure from society would not be able to change the ruling regimes, that the societies had become totally morally corrupt and that any change would be through the naked force of the army or through a very long and slow process of modernization.

Some activists in the Middle East region were not impressed by how Obama and the US foreign policy establishment danced around the issues of the Arab Spring in 2011-2012, but a closer look shows how delicate this dance had been and how it might have changed the US foreign policy premises in the

36 ibid.
37 Interview with a senior researcher at the Congressional Research Service, Washington DC 22 May 2013
38 Josh Rogin, “State Department tries again to create Arab Spring support fund”, Foreign Policy, 10 April 2013 accessed on 1 June 2013 at http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/04/10/state_department_tries_again_to_create_arab_spring_support_fund
Middle East to an extent. A whole generation in Washington will miss the time when Mubarak was around. “All you had to do was make one phone call. Now you have to make one hundred,” according to one longtime American officials (Sanger, 316) and some analysts will also miss these days and will have to revise some assumptions on democratization, transition, drivers of US foreign policy in the Middle East and the region’s political culture.

The US foreign policy response to the Arab Spring in 2011 was driven not in a small part by human rights concern but these concerns led to action largely because the region is strategically significant in terms of energy supplies to the US, necessitating a minimum of regional stability. Safeguarding Israel’s security played a minimal role, while certain assumptions about how democratization evolves and whether democracy and Islam were compatible have somewhat affected certain aspects of how policy was framed and implemented.