AMERICA IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 2001-2014:
From intervention to retrenchment

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Abstract: The main purpose of this paper is to discuss the paradoxical consequences the so-called “Arab Spring”, understood as a series of anti-autocratic political and social movements from 2011 to our days, which has led in various countries of the Arab world and beyond to different outcomes, but nowhere to stable democracy. We intend to discuss the outcomes of those political mobilizations and revolts, paying special attention to (a) the role of Islamist movements and (b) U.S reactions to the recent Middle East upheavals. We will start with a general analysis, then try to disentangle general patterns from regional variations, through a few case studies (e.g. Egypt, Syria, and Turkey). In discussing the impact of Islamism, we attempt a classification of currents along two coordinates, one parameter contrasting Sunni and Shiite movements, the other laying out the continuum from pacific-modernist to violent jihadist. We posit that the dynamics of intra-Islamist tensions (such as that of Sunni jihadist against the Shiite Hizbullah-Syria-Iran axis) are no less crucial than the religious-secularist divide for understanding recent developments. Regarding US policies, we emphasize the dilemmas and contradictions within U.S government. We investigate the hypothesis that the US was caught largely unaware by the Arab Spring, and that its reactions suffered from the amorphousness of prior positions of the Obama administration, combined with leftovers from the Bush period. Internal contradictions of Obama’s Middle East doctrine coupled with a general isolationist trend have precluded the US from assuming more forceful policies, creating frustrations on all sides, and enflaming rather than dousing the fires of antiwesternism in the Islamic world.

Keywords: Arab Spring ; U.S policies ; Syria; jihadist

Resumo: O principal objetivo deste artigo é discutir as consequências paradoxais da chamada "Primavera Árabe", entendida como uma série de movimentos políticos e sociais antiautocráticos que a partir de 2011 aos nossos dias produziu em vários países do mundo árabe diferentes resultados, mas em nenhum lugar chegou-se à democracia estável. Temos a intenção de discutir os resultados dessas mobilizações políticas e revoltas, com especial atenção para (a) o papel dos movimentos islâmicos e (b) as reações e posturas dos EUA ante os recentes levantes no Oriente Médio. Vamos começar com uma análise geral e em seguida, tentar separar padrões gerais de variações regionais, através de alguns estudos de caso (por exemplo, Egito, Síria e Turquia). Ao discutir o impacto do islamismo, tentamos uma classificação das correntes ao longo de duas coordenadas, um deles contrastando movimentos sunitas e xiitas, e outro que define o continuum de pacifista - modernista para jihadista – para violento? Postulamos que a dinâmica das tensões islâMICOS (como a de jihadistas sunitas contra o eixo Hezbollah - Síria- Írá xiita) não são menos importantes do que a divisão religiosa - secular para compreender os desdobramentos recentes. No que diz respeito aos EUA, destacamos os dilemas e contradições dentro do governo dos EUA. Nós investigamos a hipótese de que os EUA foi pego de surpresa em grande parte pela Primavera Árabe, e que as reações do governo Obama

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traduzem mais um recolhimento do que um novo engajamento. Contradições internas da política externa de Barack Obama para o Oriente Médio juntamente com uma tendência isolacionista geral têm impedido os EUA de assumir políticas mais fortes, criando frustrações de todos os lados, e inflamando em vez de apagando o fogo da anti-Ocidental e anti-americano no mundo islâmico.

**Palavras-chave:** Primavera Árabe; Políticas dos EUA; Síria; jihadismo.

**Introduction**

If we look at US policies in the Middle East and the Islamic world in the period from 2002 to mid-2013, we notice a cycle from complete involvement to far reaching disengagement. We can pinpoint some specific and distinct strategies of power projection, under Bush II first based on internationalist foreign policies. The cycle of political transition that started with the Iraq and Afghan wars in 2001/03 moved towards and end with the unfolding of the Arab Spring, and then from 2008 under Obama, started to move in opposite direction, towards ever greater aloofness.

This paper intends to discuss the above-mentioned cycle, highlighting and discussing the most likely geopolitical consequences of the American involvement in the Middle East. Our aim is to explore the consequences of this cycle of events while also discussing how the American stance is contributing to an unstable and dangerous setting for the international order.

When talking of American foreign policy we have first of all to highlight two aspects, one general and the other specific: (1) in the US as elsewhere there exist in foreign policy traditions that remain relatively unaffected by the domestic political. In the US, too, specific and historically informed foreign policy paradigms have relative autonomy. (2) Public opinion is an important and sometimes decisive actor that in the determination of US foreign policy perhaps more than elsewhere can drive changes. In order to make sense of the trends, continuities, and breaks that define the 2002-2013 period we must pay attention to this interplay between public opinion and foreign policies.

One way of summarizing post-millennium vicissitudes of US foreign policy is to counterbalance periods of expansion with periods of retraction. Moments of expansion may be named in many ways (imperialism, idealism…). They also interact with American philosophical strands such as other traditions pragmatism, or notions of
exceptionalism. Such traditions, as Lynch & Singh show (2008), were based on the decisive historical experiences that shaped the US as a nation and a State. Classical authors like Tocqueville e Hofstadter emphasize that the political experience of national consolidation created not only a national ideology but also an ideological projection onto the outside world. America’s founding documents speak of inalienable human rights, and a political organization based on universalistic principles.

These ideas left their marks, and are still today embedded in the America’s foreign policy. The continuity can be observed over a nearly 200 year period, from 1823, when the Monroe Doctrine proclaimed US hegemony over the hemisphere (while at the same time keeping distance from European conflicts), to 2002 when George W. Bush Doctrine announced that the US would, if necessary, act alone in defense of its values – now no longer defined in isolationist but in universalistic terms: global freedom, democracy, and free trade.

On the other hand, isolationism and retreat have no less profound roots in US political history. Moments of retraction do not as a rule totally negate the idea of American exceptionalism: one way or another, the idea that the US are just one more nation embedded in an international system that far transcends it, has found precious little echo in the formulations of its foreign policies.

In theoretical terms, isolationist impulses often reflect an attempt combine an idealism of ends with the realism of means. Moments of withdrawal tend to occur after moments of power projection, in a cyclical manner. That happened for instance after World War I under Harding, Coolidge and Hoover (1921 to 1933), after the second World War with Robert Taft’s criticisms, and with US withdrawal from Vietnam as defended George McGovern during the 1972 presidential elections. Something similar also happened in the post Cold War era, e.g. when conservative columnist Patrick "Pat" Buchanan who in the 1992, 1996, and 2000 election campaigns tried to present himself as a populist alternative to the existing Democrat-Republican polarization on a platform of "return to the national interest". Paradoxically, the minimalist-State conservative Bush oversaw a huge expansion of US state involvement, while his liberal-internationalist Democrat successor turned back the wheel. But isolationism is present

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5 Itauussu (2001).
among liberals and conservatives. Among liberals the idea is that the State exists to provide security and conditions for prosperity to its citizens, and not to enter in unnecessary conflicts. Among conservative libertarians, many see internationalism as a path that will only multiply enemies and deepen economic deficit (the classical liberal argument that free trade obviates war).

Similarly, as we shall see, the rise of Barack Obama in 2007 and his victory in 2008 were based on a discourse, which implicitly reacted against what he saw as an unsustainable (and undue) expansionism under Bush. Without spelling out “isolationism” or “retraction”, this is what was meant by Obama’s ubiquitous “change”. In this alternation process between expansion and retraction of US power, the Clinton years can the paradigm – showing that there were moments when Clinton (1993-2001) believed that an Economic Council made more sense than an UN Security Council, defining the beginning of a new posture of the US in its relation with the UN, especially in matters like multilateralism and unilateralism and at the same that The Clinton administration showed a temperament for intervention. This shows that Obama is not quite proposing something new he is trying to week on foot on a internationalism perspective also he is willing to retreat U.S involvement specially in the ME.

Observers commonly assume that Obama’s Mideast policies represent a sharp break with Bush’s. We believe that this impression is superficial. We demonstrate that by most national interest-related criteria, there has been more continuity than breach – except on the crucial “idealistic” variable of human rights and democracy promotion that was the Wilsonian hallmark of Obama’s two predecessors – both Clinton’s and Bush’s, but was in practice much less pursued by Obama. The clumsy and ultimately counterproductive interventions of the Bush years had largely delegitimized this agenda. Obama vaguely promised “change”, yet no “Obama Doctrine” has crystallized. That does not mean that his foreign policy in the Middle East is ad hoc or rudderless. It appears on the contrary to be based on a combination of definable and rather constant elements, that are by the way rather consonant with the preferences of the American public: (1) guarantee the energy flow to the West and its allies; (2) defend American security interests by careful balancing and by forestalling nuclear proliferation; and (3) maintain US protection of Israel. (4) Public declarations notwithstanding, the human rights and democracy promotion agenda has taken a definite backseat, with US
absenteeism bordering at times on the callous. It is this last theater that has understandably captured the lion’s share of public attention: less attention is given to the continuities in US foreign policy.

Obama’s Middle East policies can be divided in four arenas: (a) liquidation of the Bush II inheritance in Afghanistan and Iraq; (b) ambiguous engagement with Iran; (c) halfhearted attempts at Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking; and (d) an initially ambivalent but then progressively more undeniable aloofness vis-à-vis Arab attempt to democratize their states and societies.

After the overextension under Bush II, Obama may have concluded that intervention may do more harm than good, and that the Bush’s and neocons had underestimated the counterforces. It is likely that Obama, Hilary Clinton, and Kerry have a sharper sense of the limitations of US power than the former occupants of the White House and State Department, and that this perception has informed more reticent postures. It is also possible that US global power has objectively declined over the past years. It is even thinkable that the present deciders of US foreign policy subscribe to a certain degree to the lately again popular declinist thesis, and forge their policies accordingly. We do not know (nor can anybody yet document) if Obama’s policy has followed from a premeditated project or developed step by step. Nor do we pretend to cast judgment here on US Mideast policy over the past six years - only try to describe its force lines.

The legacy of the Bush years

In this section our focus is on Bush’ Mideast policy. We argue that despite the exceptional circumstances created by the 9/11 attacks, his foreign policy possessed a rather clear direction, and even a few positive outcomes.

In response to the 9/11 attacks, Bush launched a “war against terror” meant to defeat terrorism worldwide. The US were in an offensive mode: assertive action should prevent new attacks on the US homeland. countries that hosted, trained, or subsidized terrorist groups were liable to become targets. The US would go on the offensive

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against States allied with terrorists, in particular in the Middle East and (preferably) mobilize its own allied States. All this called also in the domestic sphere for a new balance between civil liberties and security demands: the Patriot Act of 2011, which provides for extra-juridical wiretaps and surveillance of potential terrorists on US territory – provisions sometimes seen as being at loggerheads with constitutional liberties.

The sense of urgency of combat against a non-conventional enemy forced the US to rethink its strategic agenda and shift its alliance priorities: Washington began to accept the need for unilateral actions. The wars in Afghanistan (2000 ff) and Iraq (2003) marked the onset of a new cycle of US engagement with the Middle East.

Bush’ strategy was immensely ambitious. He believed that victory in the war against terror would come when America’s enemies would be transformed in democracies. That would not only solve the immediate problem – to defeat the terrorists who had attacked the USA – but build in the Middle East a new international order more propitious for global security. A Pentagon document spelled out regime change of enemy states as the new national security doctrine that would replace the Cold War era strategy of containment.7

The progressive and morally argued case for international US intervention, based not just in humanitarian (mostly emergency) interventionism but on the moral ground of bringing freedom and self-government to other peoples, has in the US a historical pedigree. However, its post-9/11 expression differed in that it projected military action abroad that was sold to US public opinion not just on the classical progressive internationalist argument but by the security argument that eliminating the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq would make the US safer.

The National Security Strategy (NSS) annual report of the Bush Administration published in 17 September 2002 affirms that the US does not act in its own unilateral interest only, but that launching the war against terror would further world peace by freeing the world of terrorists and tyrants. Leaving aside any residue of containment thinking, the NSS document defines terrorism as an enemy of global reach that targets innocent people.8

7 Lynch e Singh (2008).
8 In the original (Portuguese translation): “Os EUA estão lutando uma guerra contra o terroristas de alcance global. O inimigo não é um regime político, ou uma pessoa ou religião ou ideologia específica. O
Only political transformation would bring back peace and security. Based on this internationalist approach Lynch and Singh (2008) argue that the Bush Doctrine rests on a triad of three major threats: terror, tyrannical regimes, and access to WMD technology. The combined presence of any two of the three would be enough to cause a US reaction. Thus a despotic regime with WMD access would pose a security to the US, but so would, say, a North African terrorist outfit actively pursuing chemical or nuclear arms.

The perception of that a US response was urgent, created a modicum of consensus domestically. Bush called his war against terror, exaggeratedly, a “crusade”; Vice President Dick Cheney declared that the US operated by a logic that if there were a one percent chance of Iraq possessing WMD, then US armed forces would 100% sure react.9 Such impulse to action was seen in different way by other western actors. From the idea to confront the enemy on his own soil without first waiting to be attacked – over the intense debate about the influence of neoconservative intellectuals on US decision-making – and until the thesis of a new imperialism.10

Farnsworth e Lichter from the George Mason University’s Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) interpret international reaction to the Bush Administration through the prism of a president perceived as wanting to remodel the world. In their words: “(...) frame U.S foreign and military policy as a global push toward greater democratization.”11

This discourse had two consequences – one favorable and the other negative for the Bush administration. In a first moment, Bush succeeded with a hegemonic discourse to convince US civil society that the nation as responding in an adequate way to external attacks, and appeared to restore trust and a sense of security among the American public. This helped the Republicans win the 2002 midterm elections, and his own reelection as president in 2004. However, from 2006 on, and in particular in the international sphere, his credibility sank ever deeper, and Bush rapidly became

inimigo é o terrorismo – a violência premeditada, com motivos políticos perpetradas contra inocentes.” (ESN, 2002, p. 84).


11 Farnsworth e Lichter (2013).
unpopular. With two wars going on at once, by 2006 the US Administration was getting worse marks from European media than in the Arab world\textsuperscript{12}.

The prime justification for invading Afghanistan and attacking the Taliban regime was to destroy al-Qaida’s main refuge and the military stronghold of those responsible for 9/11 and to capture its leaders. Although the US easily and swiftly defeated the Taliban they failed to uproot its resistance, and the Taliban at once began to threaten the new regime planted by the west. Nor did they succeed in laying their hands on Osama bin Laden.

The most important tasks that the US needed to facilitate to bring the post-Taliban political transition in Afghanistan to a good end were (a) to create a central government with a nationwide professional army and (b) to stimulate the growth a pro-democratic civil society and elite, and an active and expansive middle class.\textsuperscript{13}

Similar to the Afghan case, the Iraq war was driven by the intelligence that Saddam Hussein might shelter and equip anti-American terrorists, and by (subsequently proven exaggerated) information that Iraq was developing WMD.\textsuperscript{14} These two motives, though both later disproven) drove US intervention. Regime change was pursued to improve at once US security and regional stability.

The threat of WMD proliferation was in March 2003a much more central factor than Saddam’s support of terrorists (in fact the US had already since the 1990s been actively trying to depose the Iraqi dictator). More idealistic motives such as Saddam’s massive human rights violations, and the wish to spread democracy to Iraq and the Arab world beyond, while not unheard of before, gained more propaganda traction after the US failed to discover Saddam’s WMD.

In March 2003 the US at the head of a “coalition of the willing” that included i.a. Britain, Australia, and Poland, but without approval of the UN Security Council, invaded Iraq with 125,000 soldiers. Liker in Afghanistan, military success and political transformation came fast but – just like in Afghanistan – a prolonged and ill-prepared

\textsuperscript{12} According to data in Farnsworth e Lichter (2013), p. 134, the percentage of unfavorable views of the U.S. in France and Germany in 2006/07 reached 60%. In Pakistan or Turkey it was 56%.

\textsuperscript{13} According to UN data of 2006, 90% of Afghan women were illiterate in the preview year. Sodoro (2008).

\textsuperscript{14} On 08 November 2002 the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1441 which demanded that Iraq authorize the entry of WMD inspectors. In his report the chief of inspections Hans Blix detailed the ambivalent behavior of the Saddam Hussein regime, suggesting a refusal to destroy its chemical arms stockpile. The Blix Report was a crucial factor in convincing the US government that Saddam was hiding WMD: Sodoro (2008).
occupation eventually led to an impasse. Many years later, when the US withdrew from Iraq (in 2011) and from Afghanistan (in 2014) they left behind a situation that many observers thought worse than the one they had walked into.

One the earliest critics of the post-Saddam transition in Iraq was L. Paul Bremer III, America’s first proconsul in Iraq, who in 2004 warned that the US would need at least half a million soldiers to pacify Iraq. The political transition occurred amidst an insurgency of radical Islamists and Saddam nostalgias. Simultaneous revolts of minority Sunnis and radical pro-Iranian Shiites (i.a. the group of Moqtada al-Sadr) forced the US to change strategy. From 2006 on, US forces led by General David Petraeus initiated a new counterinsurgency method labeled the “surge.”

It implied increased US military presence, and regional infrastructural investment. The most remarkable part of this surge was the successful mobilization of Sunni counter-insurgents in “Awakening Councils”. Essentially the US bought the support of the erstwhile privileged tribes by promising them equitable representation and resources in the new Iraq. This they never received... But in the short run the strategy seemed to work, as Iraq stabilized. In the words of the neoconservative researcher Max Boot, “(...) from 2007 to 2008 the surge reduced violence by 90% and restarted the Iraqi political process (...).”

As in Iraq thus also in Afghanistan the difficulties political democratization and social liberalization grew over time, exacerbated by Taliban guerilla and endemic insecurity. However, the success of the post-2006 Surge in Iraq was thus that the new president Obama hoped to replicate the formula in Afghanistan. In 2009 the US commander General Stanley McChrystal requested an extra 40,000 troops: 33,000 were conceded. However, the Afghan scenario played out differently. Obama announced a fixed timeline for withdrawal of all troops. The officially announced withdrawal date proved a bonus for the Taliban, who had only to await US departure. This was no doubt among the main factors that caused US strategy to fail (the hardship of combat on the Pakistani frontier was another one).

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16 Counterinsurgency demands substantial intelligence effort and not rarely leads to combat involving urban civilians. Boot (2013) argues that the killing of civilians may play in the hands of insurgents eager to incite the population against foreign troops.
17 Boot (2013), p. 15
Compounding these difficulties are the geographical conditions, much worse in Afghanistan than in Iraq. Pakistan’s growing enmity has virtually turned Western troops in Afghanistan into sitting ducks, making the US dependent on Russian goodwill for their exit through Uzbekistan!

Two long Mideast wars undertaken in response to 9/11 forced Bush to deal with ups and downs in US public opinion. However, Bush’ interventionist casus belli arguments harmed his reputation more than his defense of democracy case (or even his occasional referral to democratic peace theory).

Obama won the 2008 election with a rather ill-defined foreign policy platform. However, his campaign slogan of “change” seemed to address Bush’ interventionist legacy more than anything else. Whether Obama had already planned before the 2008 election a US withdrawal from the Middle East is moot. However, under the new occupant of the White House, significant policy changes soon became noticeable.

When Bush II left the scene, he bequeathed to his successor a legacy of two unfinished wars and occupations, one of which seemed to go somewhat better, while the other worsened. Leaving aside questions of justice or the prudence of Bush’ interventions in the Middle East, it seems clear enough that after the 2006 crisis, success came in Iraq thanks to a deeper (and smarter) US engagement; by contrast, the ever rising difficulties in Afghanistan can be written on the account of the Pentagon’s insistence on waging war “on the cheap”. Western troops in Afghanistan also committed plenty of culturally insensitive and/or needlessly aggressive acts; but this happened in Iraq, too, so this cannot have been the decisive factor: Bush had seriously underestimated the residual power of conservative and antiwestern forces in both countries. As a negative balance, the interventions, of doubtful legitimacy, had gravely affected the soft power of the US around the globe, and fanned the flames of antiwestern sentiment all over the Muslim world. Even more crucial was the growing war-weariness and isolationism of the US electorate, which was grappling with the effects of a serious worldwide recession. Americans had noticed few positive outcomes of interventions that were expensive in both money and lives.

Still, it would be incorrect to state that the US had at that point lost already lost two wars. In fact, Obama began with a halfhearted attempt to copy the Iraqi success formula in Afghanistan. We will never know what would have happened had McCain defeated Obama and won the presidency on his platform of deeper engagement. Nor
may we ever know if and to what degree Obama already planned America’s chaotic disengagement from the Middle East before he was enthroned President in January 2009. The fact remains, nonetheless, that a wide-ranging US withdrawal from one of the world’s most problematic regions has become one hallmarks of his presidency. Regrettably it has coincided with an unplanned firestorm of popular revolts throughout the Arab world, with unforeseen and globally significant effects: the Arab Spring of 2011.

**Obama and the Middle East: liquidating the Afghan and Iraqi interventions**

Obama’s election victory was widely applauded, and when he entered the White in January 2009, Bush was ending his presidency with historically low rates of approval. Obama enjoyed an exceptionally long honeymoon with the media (only conservative networks such as Fox News were from the start more critical of Obama than they had been of Bush). This long moment was in no small measure due a worldwide expectation of some concrete change.\(^{18}\)

Obama’s presidency coincided with the departure of a generation of top echelon generals – exactly those who had conducted Bush’ war on terror. This may have caused a certain disconnect between Obama and his military advisers. There is no certainty that Obama’s declarations on Iraq and Afghanistan reflected the thinking of the top brass.

In fact, Obama own appointees did not hold out long either. John R. Allen who replaced Petraeus as commander in Afghanistan tended his resignation in 2013; James Mattis, who headed Central Command, and had been one of the main architects of US post-Saddam Iraq strategy, retired in the same year. These departures only worsened the crisis between the new Executive and the Armed Forces – and could not come at a worse moment.\(^{19}\)

Obama had originally stipulated December 2010 as the end point for US withdrawal from Iraq. In practice the exit took a year longer than anticipated. By late 2011, though, America’s entire strategy of Iraqi democratic consolidation lay in tatters. From 2012 PM Nouri al-Maliki, in power since 2006, was confronted with rising

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\(^{19}\) Boot (2013) Cf. Gates (2014). Both Petraeus and McChrystal were tainted with moral turpitude scandals. McChrystal handed his resignation in 2010 after disclosures Rolling Stone, however, Petraeus’ adultery scandal occurred well after his discharge.
domestic violence. 2013 was Iraq’s most violent year since 2007. While the US withdrawal sowed the seeds of a security vacuum, Maliki, heading an unstable government, oversaw a rapprochement with Iran, in the hope that Teheran would help pacify Shiite revolts against the Baghdad government. As American troops returned home, Baghdad declined again from fulcrum of US Mideast diplomacy to center of terrorism. 20

The deterioration of the security situation in Iraq has doubtlessly to do with the withdrawal of all US forces, something counseled against by US military staffers, but imposed – perhaps by US policyplanners inimical to the Iraqi intervention - by Maliki. 21 Paradoxically this outcome was perhaps not unwelcome for Obama. Yet the fact that Maliki, a Shiite politician often accused of authoritarian tendencies, felt that he had no political maneuvering room left but to demand total US retreat, militarily unfavorable for both the US and the Iraqis themselves, constitutes in itself already an indictment of US policy in Iraq! Seven years of Western occupation and “democratic education” had failed to resolve Iraq’s ethnic and religious crisis, produced an incoherent and corrupt polity, and irritated its population to the point of projecting its anger with Iraq’s dysfunctional economy onto the power that had delivered them from Saddam’s bloody dictatorship. The Afghan conundrum may well be moving toward the same cul-de-sac, and for largely similar reasons.

Obama and the Middle East: US reactions to the Arab Spring – North Africa

Before long Obama’s “fresh start” in Mideast policy had given way to “fresh problems”. While Obama’s first year in office stood largely in the sign of the new Afghanistan drawdown plans, from 2011 on the Arab Spring demanded ever more attention. The first anti-government demonstrations in the Arab world occurred in December 2010, in Tunisia, and from here spread like a wildfire.

The popular revolts started in Tunisia, bringing down the autocracy of Ben `Ali, and soon spread to Egypt, where mass demonstrations brought about the fall of Mubarak. From there the infectious uprising soon expanded to other countries, leading to regime

20 Greenwald (2014).
change in some places, and to violent repression elsewhere. Mass demonstrations shook old monarchies in Jordan and Morocco, nearly toppled that of Bahrain, and led to fierce street battles in Yemen, Syria, Libya and elsewhere. The speed of developments took the US no less by surprise than any other actor. There is no indication that the US president was any less surprised by this “Arab Spring” than other observers, and it took the US a while to adjust its policies accordingly.

The first challenge for the US was to understand the nature of the crises that were encompassing the Arab world, precondition to deal effectively and not just react ad hoc. A common problem is the personalization of power, where regime interest coincides with the ruler’s interest. Often power is monopolized in a corrupt way without a clear national project. The more personalistic the regime, the less democratic. A personalistic system easily glides into autocracy where the State is split between the power holders and the others who sustain those in control. In such cases gradual internally-generated structural reform may be unviable without external support. The US then faces the dilemma whether to give priority to stable autocratic regimes or to help democratic movements but at the price of instability.

The American sociologist Randall Collins (2013) divides revolutions against autocratic regimes in “turning point” and “State collapse” revolutions. In the first type an outraged population by a wide margin mobilizes and breaks the autocrat’s legitimacy; the latter ends up dead, jailed, or banished. In the second type, Collins identifies deeper roots of State collapse. These latter revolutions are less spontaneous, reflecting profound structural shifts.

A “turning point” revolution can only occur if there is a well organized and structured opposition. That precondition was precisely lacking in, for example, Iran’s Green Revolution of 2009. In Egypt, on the other hand, an organized opposition was present in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Collins concludes that the revolts of the Arab Spring, which easily and swiftly flowed from one country to the other, suffered from vastly different conjunctures among Arab societies. Below we will see how US foreign policy positioned itself vis-à-vis a number of cases in the Middle East.

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22 Shorbagy (2009).
23 E.g. the English Revolution of 1640, the French and Russian Revolutions, and the Meiji Restoration in Japan (1853 - 1868).
After the relatively smooth revolution in **Tunisia**, the Arab Spring produced its first serious crisis in **Egypt**, which since 1972 had been a reliable regional ally of the US. In January 2011 tens of thousands of demonstrators in Cairo’s Tahrir Square demanded the removal of Hosni Mubarak. In power since 1981 Mubarak had always been a reliable ally of the US. Despite repeated concessions to Egypt’s unofficial Islamist opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood, he had also maintained a basically secular framework. Besides Mubarak was central to peace with Israel, and a partner against Iran. The demonstrators clamored for greater freedom and for change that would empower the people. They hoped to have the US on their side, whose president after all had also won on a platform of “change”. Obama, however, responded neither to the appeals of the Tahrir revolutionaries - nor did he help Mubarak. Mubarak’s fall thus owed nothing to the US, and as a result the US could hardly influence what followed. Mubarak’s disappearance ushered in a prolonged era of instability, in which power was contested between three forces: the liberal youth who had constituted the mass of demonstrators; Islamists, divided between the reformist Muslim Brotherhood and more conservative an-Nour salafis; and the army, mostly interested in restoring a modicum of stability, and in protecting its own (also economic) entrenched interests.

In this triangular competition, the liberals were the first to be defeated. The first round saw the election as president of the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammed Morsi, in mid-2012. Though popularly elected, Morsi, no paragon of democratic virtue, used his position to consolidate Islamist power. The ensuing crisis brought liberals, Christians, and the military together in a monster coalition that in July 2013 ousted Morsi. Egypt’s new military leaders next outlawed and tried to destroy Islamists and liberals alike. Throughout this entire unstable transition, It is hardly surprising that Egypt, one of the main beneficiaries of US foreign aid, has become one of the world’s most anti-American nations, an animus that remains as perhaps the only conviction to cross its by now unbridgeable ideological faultlines.

The same oscillation was in evidence in **Libya**. In February 2011 Mu’ammar Qadhafi, brutally repressed pro-democracy protests. His brutality turned an emergency into open civil war. As an erratic and megalomaniac autocrat since 1969, Qadhafi had never been popular with his European neighbors across the Mediterranean. Now his repression of the Libyan revolt created a refugee crisis that threatened to worsen
Europe’s already overtaxed (and politically ever more incendiary) absorption of Muslim immigrants. France and Britain recognized the rebels: their initiative pressed the US to take the lead in an intervention to forestall a massacre in Benghazi. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton signaled, however, that the US would not comply: paradoxically the US would “lead from behind”, following without deploying American troops, any French or British intervention. That was enough to topple the Libyan regime, but not much more.

In contrast to Afghanistan or Iraq, NATO’s seaborne intervention immediately abandoned Libya to its own devices. Qadhafi’s brutal fall exposed a country with neither center nor functioning institutions, torn between incompatible regionalisms and ideologies, and at the mercy of warring militias. In 2012 Islamist radicals killed the US ambassador. The incident led to partisan recriminations in Washington, but to no change in US policies. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that US passivity in Libya was responsible for the spread of turmoil in other African countries such as Mali, Chad and Nigeria - not to mention Somalia and the Central African Republic.25

Syria from Arab Spring to civil war - and America’s inertia

Events started in March 2011 in Syria much like they did elsewhere in the Arab world, with spontaneous mass demonstrations demanding an end to human rights abuses, corruption, and censorship – as yet not regime change. But they soon took another, far more dramatic turn as a result of the brutality of the reaction by security forces. Like elsewhere, repression of one demonstration triggered other protest demonstrations, but unlike elsewhere, the Syrian government answered each wave of peaceful demonstration with an increase in violence. Numbers of victims rose incessantly and by late 2011, pacific protests had given way to armed insurgencies, and requests for reform, to demands for overhauling the regime and democracy. By early 2012 entire neighborhoods of all the important cities except Damascus were in rebel hands. Assad responded with unleashing his full army force against all the oppositionists, which the regime insisted in labeling indiscriminately “terrorists”, bombings, and sectarian mass killings by Assad’s Special Forces, which soon provoked revenge massacres against the dictator’s own Alawite community. What began as civil

unrest soon took on traits of an ugly civil and inter community war replete with unending mutual atrocities. Fear for their survival drove more and more Syrians from their home, and paralyzed economy and social life. More and more driven into a corner, the Assad regime was saved, more or less at the latest moment, by Russian arms, Iranian specialists, and Hizbullah troops rushed to its rescue. By early 2013 the advance of rebel forces had been halted. Since then, the civil war grinds on, with regime forces gradually regaining terrain. Half the Syrian population (9 million) is on the run – six million inside Syria, another 3 million refugees in neighboring countries. As of writing, the Syrian killing fields have cost 150,000 lives. The UN has stopped counting, and after several fruitless attempts, given up on mediating ceasefires or negotiation (so have the Arab League and other mediators). What went wrong?

A number of internal and structural peculiarities that make Syria a less promising candidate for democratization than for instance Tunisia or Egypt (though not worse than Lebanon’s or Iraq’s). Syria lacks geographical cohesion, historical continuity, and a clear collective identity. It is situated on a geopolitical faultline that has condemned it (like Lebanon and Israel) to be perpetual battleground for invaders. More crucially, its population is deeply divided among mutually hostile religious and ethnic communities: Sunni Arabs (the majority), Alawites, Isma`ilis, and other Shiites, Kurds, Druze, Greek Orthodox, and a plethora of other Christian churches. Alawites have control the armed forces and since the 1960s, rule through the (formally pan-Arab) Ba`th party. The main opposition grouping, the Muslim Brotherhood, was savagely cut down in the 1980s. An extremely repressive dictatorship, Syria lacks experience in self-government. Perhaps as a result, its anti-regime opposition has remained fragmented and ineffectual.

So much for internal, and certainly unfavorable, preconditions. For the tragedy that is currently unfolding, international factors are, however, largely co-responsible. The Syrian opposition against a dictator allied to Iran and Russia sought, but never received decisive outside, particularly military, help. Only Turkey has really helped, sacrificing its relationship with Assad, and bearing the brunt of 100s of 1000s of refugees. In the UN, sanctions and even limited humanitarian support has been blocked due to Russian vetoes in the Security Council. The US under Obama has essentially hidden behind this cloak of specious international law to prevent having to intervene.
Nor has help to Syrian civilians, e.g. through the imposition of no-fly zones, safe havens, and other military measures short of direct intervention, been forthcoming. Obama has systematically refused to allow the Free Syrian Army serious arms aid, and been lukewarm in its diplomatic support. It appears that his calculation is that Syria does not represent a vital US interest, that the US bears neither responsibility nor possesses the means to settle it, and that passively letting the fortune of limited internal war decide the outcomes was domestically and internationally the least costly course for America. Without the US, Germany and many other European states do not wish to meddle in this hornet’s nest either, leaving France and the UK basically alone in clamoring for intervention.

The results have been as terrible as predictable. As Assad receives arms and fighters, and shows no compunction in using the cruelest means against his challengers – including systematic torture, rape and other depredations not just against combatants, but against defenseless civilians - the civil war has turned into an unequal struggle.

Unable to either make significant gains or protect civilians, the “official” relatively secular and moderate opposition has weakened, losing morale and popular support. The only groups that have profited from the disarray are externally-funded radical Sunni Islamist militias, of which the most dangerous are linked to al-Qaeda: the Nusra Front, the Islamic Front, and ISIS, financed by Saudi Arabia and Gulf sympathizers, and bolstered by thousands of jihadi volunteers from all over the Middle East, Europe, and even the US. They have succeeded in conquering vast areas, particularly in Northeast Syria, where they are establishing oppressive Taliban-like emirates that are far more antiwestern than Assad, or even Iran. These extremist and expansionist ideological proto-Statelets are a consequence of the West’s own permissive attitude. They reject the Middle East state system along with the UN principles, democracy, and human rights, and promise at some point to spread all over the whole world, posing a threat to the Middle East and the West alike. In turn, then, the Obama administration (as well as other western countries, and Turkey) has been forced to reassess the risks, and now views the Islamist opposition as the worse security threat. The West has mitigated its stance against Assad, who thus sees his brutality rewarded. As little is done, practically, to stop the bloodletting, the conflict is relentlessly spiraling and spilling over to Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq in particular. The threat to regional stability is real.
The turning point occurred in August 2013 when Syrian troops killed 3000 civilians in a chemical near Damascus. Obama certainly did not and does not wish a generalized Mideast conflagration. But internalization of the Syrian conflict had until then been a gradual process that the US allowed to happen. On the other hand Obama had declared that use of WMD would cross a red line. Now Assad called his bluff. This created a discrete, and unavoidable, choice point. Reluctantly Obama announced an (albeit very limited) punitive intervention.

This at once raised tensions with Russia. If Putin put “trapwire” Russian advisers on Syrian ground, international peace might be in jeopardy. Domestically Obama had bound his own hands by making US retaliation conditional on Congress approval, and this appeared very dubious. The American president was now between a rock and a hard place. If he attacked, he risked clashing with Congress or Russia or both, with unforeseeable consequences. If he did not, the US would be unmasked as a vacillating power whose word could no longer be trusted. When Russia pressed Syria to “voluntarily” deliver its chemical stockpile for UN-overseen destruction, Obama rushed to accept the fig leaf. US prestige was severely harmed, and it lost its last vestige of credibility with the Syrian opposition. Anti-western Islamization of the anti-Assad front accelerated. Russia, and Assad, won. Autocrats all over the world were watching and, no doubt, relished the spectacle.

**Syria destabilizes the further Arab East – discomfiture of US absenteeism?**

**Jordan**, another historical US ally indirectly involved in Syria, must no doubt feel isolated, too. Beyond its Palestinian problem (the majority of inhabitants of the Hashemite monarchy are of Palestinian descent) the kingdom is inundated by over 600,000 Syrian refugees. Theoretically Abdullah II, pro-Western, modernist and moderate and at peace with Israel, might be one of the more important strategic regional partners of the US in the region. Despite its British-imperialist roots, the dynasty has gained a modicum of acceptance and as a relatively “soft” absolutism, has so far weathered remarkably well the Arab storms. However, absent any forceful protagonism from Washington, the Jordanian monarchy is internally more and more at the mercy of a growing Sunni (fiercely anti-Israel) Islamist movement, and externally buffeted between
Shiite pressure from Damascus (and further afield, Iran) and the expansion of ISIS (Da`ash) jihadis in North Syria and Iraq.

In parallel to US loss of military and diplomatic credibility, the Syrian government, abetted by Russia and Iran, advances against its own population. As of this writing, the number of dead of the Syrian conflict has surpassed 150,000. Half the population is chased from its home, and more than 4 million Syrian refugees are destabilizing Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, and in particular Lebanon, whose delicate post-civil war powersharing arrangements look increasingly frayed, and pro-Iranian Hizbullah militias are openly intervening in Syria on Assad’s side.

Syria, then, is key to understanding the deterioration of America’s relations with a number of its most important regional friends: Jordan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia (US relations with Israel have for other reasons also become strained, however, as Israel has fewer alternatives, this tension may subside, or take awhile to play itself out)

In summary, anti-autocratic revolts happened all over the Arab world but - whether due to Western inaction or independently of it - led to regime changes in only a few states. Nowhere did the Arab Spring affect the Arab states system. Except for the obvious example function of the revolts in other Arab capitals, external pressures were secondary at most.

Occurrence and outcome of the uprisings corresponded in general to two variables: (a) how democratic or dictatorial was a state’s regime before 2011? And (b) how united or heterogeneous was its population?

In terms of political system, in the Middle East only Israel and Turkey, both non-Arab states, qualify as functional democracies, i.e. responsive to the popular will through institutionalized, equalitarian and universally accessible channels. These two have indeed been spared the kind of revolts that shook the region; Turkey’s current turmoil started much later, for reasons unrelated to its constitution, and without influence of the Arab Spring. In the Arab world itself, only Lebanon, the West Bank, and Iraq can count as democracies albeit weak and partial exemplars: still, their systems were strong enough to absorb protests rather easily. The same was true for Jordan and Morocco, where royal absolutism was already moving toward some watered-down parliamentarism - here the Arab Spring slightly accelerated a transition already underway, without ever threatening regime continuity.
At the other extreme end, one finds the unreformed absolutisms of Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, and to a lesser degree the UAE and Kuwait: for the most part politically too primitive and economically too oil-rich for contestation mass movements to have a real chance – but unrestrained in their violence whenever they did feel threatened, as happened in Bahrain.

All-out repression was even more manifest in cases such as Syria and Iran. Syria belongs to the type of dictatorships where a brutal minority rules (with a greater or lesser veneer of strictly controlled pseudo-democratic institutions) and acts as the only cement to keep a sophisticated but deeply divided population together. Although Iran is also deeply divided along ethnic and religious lines, here the ideological faultline (Islamism or democracy?) is paramount. Khamenei and Assad will stop at nothing to maintain their hold on power - and yet can count on the loyalty of substantial minorities. The crushing of Iran’s Greens movement in 2009 may well have been the only alternative to a civil war scenario of the sort currently playing itself out in Syria. Had Saddam Hussein still been in power in 2011, Iraq would today doubtlessly experience the same tragedy.

The only regimes that succumbed to the Arab Spring, then, were relatively homogeneous North African countries with brittle autocracies whose legitimacy and social basis had gradually evaporated to the point of losing even the support of their armed forces: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya. (Yemen seems to be a case apart).

Guiding principles of US policies in the Middle East: continuities and ruptures

One of Obama’s first international speeches addressed the Arab world. In Cairo in July 2009 the new president paid his respects to Islam, and promised to restore American relations with the Muslim world and curb Western extremism against Muslims. He also spoke out against Islamic extremism and in favor of religious tolerance and women’s rights. However, the crux lay elsewhere: Obama expressed regret at earlier American interventions against Iran, vowed to remove US troops from Iraq, called for a Palestinian state alongside Israel, and publicly distanced himself from Bush’ export of democracy agenda. Most Muslim opinion leaders cautiously welcomed this fresh attempt to mend fences; others called it a public relations stunt. At home and
in the wider West, many leaders were pleased with the new tone. Conservative Republicans were livid. In October of the same year, Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Little has remained today of the widespread enthusiasm that initially greeted Obama’s presidency. Most foreign policy observers have only bitter words, though (as usual) for discordant reasons. America is today more hated in the Middle East and by Muslim populations across the world than in the Bush years.

Nor is there a lack of harshly critical voices in America itself. Commentary editor Abe Greenwald (2014) emphasizes two weaknesses in his Mideast policy: lack of timing (i.e. failing to sense opportunities) and zigzagging postures have helped create in the Middle East a formidable power vacuum that has reignited dormant conflicts and fostered new ones.26 Towards the end of the Bush era, US opinion was fed up with US foreign entanglements. This reaction against what was widely perceived an empire stretched too thin by too many unnecessary engagements abroad, was exploited in Obama’s campaign, when he emitted ambiguous signs, at times reminding his audience that as a senator he had opposed the Iraq War, and at times promising that he would never negotiate with Hamas and would not cede terrain in Bush’ war on terror.27

The same ambiguity becomes visible when we attempt to draw the balance of six years Obama policy in the Middle East. As president, Obama’s campaign promises translated in his “listening” posture, in acts to wind up existing wars, and in the president’s resistance – sometimes against his own Ministers – against new military adventures. Nowhere do the inconsistencies show more clearly than US betrayal of Middle Eastern populations struggling for self-government, in Iran, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain and elsewhere. At the same time, Obama continued traditional US policies in its protection of Israel and Saudi Arabia, its continuing antiterror interventions, and its struggle – albeit through novel means - against nuclear proliferation of Iran and elsewhere.

How to decipher Obama’s seemingly contradictory policies? The US must juggle a number of difficult issues in the Middle East. Most of the time these issues develop more or less autonomously, on parallel tracks. From time to time, they interact,

26 Abe Greenwald (2014).
Cf. from Barack Obama, Renewing American Leadership; Foreign Policy NY, August 2007.
and then we have a crisis. When we look at the overall picture, though, the appearance of incoherence evaporates. We can see clear and consistent principles that underlay the US Mideast policies.

The US has **six basic priorities in the Middle East**: (1) oil, (2) balance of power, (3) WMD proliferation, (4) the war against Islamist terror, (5) Israel, and (6) expanding “the American way of life” – democracy, human rights, modernity. These priorities are long term. Obama inherited them, and he will leave them to his successor.

1. **US interest in maintaining a steady and affordable flux of oil.** 40% of US energy consumption comes from petroleum. Although the US is a major producer in its own right, its dependency on oil from abroad has only increased over the years. Today it is the biggest oil importer in the world: Saudi Arabia is the biggest exporter. Other (pro)Western nations and major commercial, security and political partners of the US such as the EU and Japan are even more dependent. Since World War II an informal alliance binds the USA and the Saudis, who provide affordable oil against military protection. The same is true to a lesser degree for smaller Gulf producers such as Kuwait, Qatar, and the Emirates.\(^{28}\) Other major exporters such as Russia, Iran, and Venezuela, are unreliable or hostile. Despite the recent attrition in US-Saudi relations related to America’s reticence in Syria and recent US rapprochement with Iran, Obama essentially maintained this principle. When Saudi soldiers and police restored the Sunni sultan’s regime in Bahrain, the US looked the other way. When they enforce one of the world’s most misogynistic systems at home, idem. We may predict that as long as the US (along with the rest of the industrialized world) maintain its dependence on fossil fuels, it will not significantly change its policies vis-à-vis the Arab petromonarchies, no matter how unjust their rule or how egregious their human rights abuses.

2. **US interest in preventing the rise of any indigenous power** the Middle East that could credibly challenge US power. In the past such challenges have arisen from Nasser’s Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s; from Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in the 1980s and 1990s. Lately, they have come from Iran. Alternatively, the US must **prevent any outside power from becoming dominant in the region**.\(^{29}\) Since the fall of the Soviet

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\(^{28}\) The US imports most of its natural gas from Canada, and is self-sufficient in coal.  
\(^{29}\) Cf. Friedman (2009).
Union until recently, the latter specter has been distant. However, over the last years, Russia is clearly expanding its sphere of influence over Syria, Iran and more recently, Egypt. Crude though it sounds, in cold geopolitical terms, a chaotic and internally divided Middle East is from a balance-of-power perspective for the US the second best scenario - after a Middle East dominated by pro-American regimes. Bush c.s. believed that intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq would unleash a tsunami of democratic revolutions in the Middle East, and that these new democracies would naturally gravitate to American ideals and to the American sphere of influence. But in fact the opposite happened, and US popularity took a nosedive. Now we see the opposite. Rightly or wrongly, the Obama Administration showed little belief in and offered little support to the Arab world’s democratic revolutions. The unspoken assumption appears to be: if (as old fashioned pundit would have it) the Arabs are really unsuited for democracy; and if Arab democracy, if and where it prevails, does not lead to liberal and/or pro-Western orientations anyway – then better endemic instability and even proxy wars, than a new Arab Bismarck such as Nasser or Saddam Hussein, or Muslim Reconquista led by an Osama bin Laden or a Khamenei.

But then again, fostering turmoil instead of stability may negatively impact on the other spheres: security of oil shipping, preventing new rounds of anti-Israel wars, avoiding WMD from falling in terrorist hands, etc. So must the US isolate and weaken its foremost antagonist in the region – or bind it in a structure of peaceful coexistence, hoping that in time peace, trade, and Facebook would dissolve it from within? The US dilemma with Iran resembles that with the Soviet Union in the Cold War.

3. **US security interest in preventing proliferation of WMD** to both states and nonstate actors. This leads directly to the West-Iran nuclear negotiation, and the question if the US is under Obama looking for a powersharing formula with Iran.

In perhaps no other case is the conflict between Obama’s “Jeffersonian” and his “Wilsonian” impulses clearer – and, the eventual supremacy of realist over idealist motives, more unambiguous. In fact when Obama promised in 2008 dialogue and a “new beginning” he was referring in particular to Iran. What Obama may have had in mind was a US amenable, in the framework of the general disengagement he projected

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may, to divide the Middle East in spheres of influences with Iran, or even to accept some US-Iranian condominium. That would represent a complete reversal not only of Bush’ policy (which was frontally hostile against Iran as a member of the “axis of evil”) but of all US presidents since Reagan. Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 Iran has consistently been America’s most intransigent foe in the region, and the US has retaliated by trying to isolate, and if possible, topple its regime.

From the declinist perspective that may implicitly govern Obama’s international behavior, there is a logic to this accommodationist position. But to implement it there are difficulties that the US government has so far not been able to overcome. Iran possesses the fourth strongest army in the Middle East, and the only one that in theory can challenge the US (Turkey, Israel, and Egypt, the first three, are pro-Western powers). Iran increasingly produces its own military hardware, is a Russian protégé, and is the world’s epicenter of radical Islamism, today’s most viable antimodernist, antiwestern and antidemocratic ideology. Iran also aspires to nuclear power and to regional hegemony. Syria, Lebanon’s Hizbullah, and lately also Iraq have become satellites. Iran attempted and largely succeeded in projecting its power in any territory left in a vacuum by the US – not only in Syria, but also in Egypt and even Turkey.  

Iran is also suspected of abetting terrorist groups, though the evidence is murky. To arrive at a peaceful coexistence, then, the US would have to peacefully disarm Iran’s nuclear potential, somehow appease its messianic fervor, and counteract Russian influence. And as in the case of Russia and China, the price of embracing Iran instead of knocking it out, would presumably be to leave its internal politics alone – one more negative score for the human rights crowd. Furthermore Iran’s uncompromising anti-Israel stance has made accommodation even more difficult to achieve, and constituted an even more serious constraint. When Obama came to power in 2009, Iran was governed by its most antiwestern and anti-Semitic president since Khomeini. Indeed for Khamenei the US can never be Iran’s reliable partner.

For the Iranian theocrats, regime survival takes of course precedence over any competing consideration, whether regional stability, economic progress, or anything else.  

31 Greenwald (2014)  
political change and economic and personal freedoms. Reformist tendencies came already to the fore during Khatami’s presidency (1997-2004), but that “thaw” was repressed by the Iranian power elite – not only by the clerical establishment, but also by ideologically-driven former Revolutionary Guards who had infiltrated both the military and the commanding heights of the economy. The latters’ chief Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won the 2005 presidential election with populist, religious, and antiwestern rhetoric. During his first mandate he alienated the West even further.

Ahmadinejad’s reelection in June 2009, by contrast, was hotly contested, and his 63% “victory” at the polls was widely seen as fraudulent and fed mass protests in all big cities. In retrospect we can understand this “Green Movement” as the bellwether of the Arab Spring. Iran’s popular, liberal, democratic and reformist movement, inchoate and leaderless though it was, commanded a majority among Iran’s youth, its women and educated classes. From the vantage point of democracy promotion, the West could not have hoped for a “better” movement ever. This was in fact Obama’s first great Mideast test. Yet it did not elicit more than a couple of tepid comments from Washington.

The repression was fierce and eventually successful, deadening the best hope for internally-generated Iranian regime change.

Once his power was consolidated, Ahmadinejad continued his anti-western policies, pushing full steam toward nuclearization. Fear of a nuclear Iran now stoked hardly veiled Israeli threats of a preemptive attack; and US fear of that was the motor behind ever more draconian international sanctions. It was their bite, and the economic difficulties the Iranian population faced, that in June 2013 drove the election victory of Hassan Rouhani, a centrist cleric (still the least conservative of the allowed candidates) who promised to get the West to lift its economic blockade.

Rouhani presented himself as a moderate ready for dialogue with the West, and Obama answered positively to the new president’s charm offensive. Iranian declarations of good intentions and conversations have helped it break out of a decades-old international isolation, though little as yet beyond that. The stranglehold of economic boycott has not been lifted yet, as negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program are now reaching a climax. As both Obama and Rouhani appear to be in thrall to the hardliners

33 Cf. estimates of the IAEA, Iran’s protestations of peaceful intentions notwithstanding. Proliferation is, of course, not a uniquely Middle Eastern problem, but one that over the past decade and a half has largely been associated with the crisis of Islam.
in their respective constituencies, the question is what concessions they may gain from the other side – and at what price.

4. US interest in preventing terrorism. Despite liberal promises and public pronouncements to the contrary, Obama’s war against terror shows little discontinuity with Bush’s. Obama did not close down Guantánamo, hardly mitigated the negative civil liberties effects of the Patriot Act and took a hard position against undesirable disclosures of US security policies. In fact, the Wikileaks affair, though initially dealing with Iraq scandals under Bush, occurred entirely on Obama’s watch. Neither here nor in the subsequent NSA spying program discovered by Snowden was Obama’s stance very different from Bush. Obama had Osama bin Laden liquidated the moment it was possible, continued a hidden all-out war to dismantle al-Qaeda, and expanded the drone war against suspected terrorists to new theaters. In none of these aspects was there more than a shift in nuance compared to Bush.

5. Within the US, the Israeli-Arab conflict attracts extra attention, in deference to its potential to destabilize the entire region, the global ideological ramifications of the Holy Land, but in particular because of the contrasting loyalties it commands in parts of the American public – pitting an influential pro-Israel lobby of Jews and fundamentalist Protestants against a much less entrenched Arab vote. Israel’s security value for the US has become much more problematic over time, but a turnabout remains unthinkable for domestic reasons: no presidential candidate and no president can circumvent the disproportionately powerful Israel lobby.

A peaceful solution of the Palestinian question can for the foreseeable future only mean a two state solution, with Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian territories. Disarming the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would clearly be in the best interest of everybody in the Middle East, except Palestinian terrorists and Israeli settlers – and of the US. If peace were to be mediated by the US, it would give a considerable boost to America’s battered prestige. However, since the complex parameters just mentioned dictate that the US cannot pressure Israel too much, each administration must at least be seen as making a bona fide broker’s effort. This was as true for the Bush government, which ideologically identified with the Israeli Right, as for Obama who detests it.
Unlike not only Bush and his evangelical supporters but also the Clintons, Obama does not appear to be emotionally linked to Israel, and this does not go unnoticed by US Jews. But like all presidents, he must go through the motions of showing solidarity. And this explains the rather energetic attempts of Obama, Hilary and Kerry to force through a solution, after a period of “benign neglect”, and despite Obama’s glacial personal relations with Israeli leaders. At least for outside spectators, US goodwill was visible. Predictably, the effort led first to clashes with Israel’s Rightist government of Netanyahu, and from there, nowhere. And predictably, the US folded - with so far no negative consequences for Israeli-US security cooperation.

Is Israel really a vital interest for the US? Many have begun to doubt it, but at least in this sphere, values consistently trump realist calculus. For historical reasons, Israel’s wellbeing has become an internal US interest. Kissinger once quipped that Israel has no foreign policy, only domestic politics. Is it too risky to suggest that since his days, the US has no longer an Israel policy, only Israel-related domestic politics? Each administration hands this hot potato over to its successor. Obama has not been and neither, it seems, will he be an exception.

6. **US interest in pursuing its ideological agenda.** Only in the last instance is there room for genuine **values-driven policy of promoting democracy, human rights, liberal capitalism, and the modernization of patriarchal, authoritarian and increasingly anti-liberal Middle Eastern societies.** This project had probably its best chance under Bush II who explicitly adopted it. After 9/11, multiculturalist ideologues who had become hegemonic in the 1990s were temporarily at a loss, and neocons, whose worldview amalgamated these ideals with the overall US strategic interest, were the only ones to step forward with a coherent strategy, and became influential in the Bush administration. But the failure of Bush’ interventions signaled at the same time the eclipse of the democratization and human rights tendency. Despite Obama’s humanitarian rhetoric, his appointment of Susan Rice and Samantha Power, etc., his political praxis has consistently been that of a Jeffersonian neorealist: foot-dragging in Libya, wishy-washy with the Egyptians, disastrous toward the Syrians. Ideals took a back seat.
Results

Obama fulfilled his promise to disentangle the US from Afghanistan and Iraq, and this is doubtless in conformity to the wish of the majority of Americans. It remains to be seen if this outcome is beneficial for either of these countries. It is also too early to evaluate if disengagement helps or harms US security. Besides this cleaning up operation, though, the only sphere where Obama’s Middle East policy significantly differs from his predecessor’s, is that of protection of human rights and promotion of democracy. After inspiring both Clintonian and neocon strategy, it has for all practical purposes been laid to rest. In this respect, whether from his own convictions or in the interest of pandering to public antipathy to new military adventures, Obama has been the one to press on the brakes e.g. when he expressly blocked intervention in Syria, against Kerry’s wishes.

Whatever the motives, results have not been positive so far. The US has tactically destroyed the al-Qaeda nucleus, but failed to strategically combat the attraction of jihadist ideology among fractions of the Muslim populations. And this hangs of course together with its neglect of the ideological struggle to foster democracy, tolerance, and respect for human rights against totalitarian foes such as radical Islamists! As a result, al-Qaeda’s original core has fragmented, but jihadist terror has expanded to new areas and targets. Democracies and their underlying values, coexistence of civilizations etc. are worldwide on the defensive, and in the midst of a deepening malaise. It would be unfair to chalk all of this up to Obama’s failures. It stands to reason, however, that more proactive and idealistic US policies might have prevented or at least alleviated the current crisis.

In 2009 Obama let down the Iran’s Green Movement. The result has been to strengthen the Iranian regime. In 2011 and 2012 he dropped longstanding US allies in the Arab world, but without embracing the popular revolts that brought them down. In Cairo, the world’s new “conspiracy theory capital”, Islamists believe the US is in complot with the generals. Secularists swear it is in cahoots with the Muslim Brotherhood. The Egyptian army is considering switching to Russian suppliers.

Strategic failure: the same verdict can be given to Obama’s handling of the Syrian tragedy. Rather than risk a very limited military operation against a murderous regime using chemicals to poison its own people, in July 2013 he eagerly accepted a
problematic Russian-brokered decommissioning of Syrian chemical arms, as if it were a lifeline thrown to him by the Russians. But accepting Putin’s proffered poisoned cup was the easy way out. New mass murders are committed every day. Despite the destruction of part of his arsenal, the Assad regime continues gassing and bombing its citizens. But the new evidence does not elicit the same shock anymore. The use of WMD is becoming the new normal. Obama’s posture has helped break a taboo.

In the end, then, Western passivity has strengthened Assad, demoralized the secular opposition, and played in the hand of jihadist groups, now in control of an Islamist virtual state that includes parts of Northeast Syria and West Iraq, where they establish a realm of terror that mirrors and outcompetes Assad’s! Obama has empowered an al-Qaeda state whose chickens may yet come home to roost. Meanwhile the bloodbath continues, and the world’s worst refugee crisis is destabilizing Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, and Iraq.

By the same token Obama has strengthened and emboldened Russia. The Ukrainian crisis, where the US and the West in general hold fewer cards than it had in Syria, is an indirect fruit of the Syrian catastrophe.

To the extent that US geopolitical decline is not fatally determined by irremediable external factors (for instance economic or military competition of the BRICS), but results from human choice, it is hard to deny that Obama’s policies have contributed to it. 500 years ago Macchiavelli pontificated that it is better for a prince to be feared than to be loved. Liberals disagree. The world Obama helped to create is one in which the USA, and what it stands for, is hated without inspiring any more fear.

Conclusion

Six years Obama have severely undermined America’s position in the Middle East. The project of political transition that morally underlay US intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq - transition toward a fairer government that would be more representative of its diverse population groups - suffered disastrous reverses on Obama’s watch. The Syrian civil war that the west might have contained if not prevent, is now actively destabilizing its three Arab neighbors, and indirectly affects Israel, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. Old friends like Egypt, Turkey and even Israel are
taking their distance vis-à-vis an American foreign policy of retraction and and growing disengagement.

More than that, Obama’s vacillations and his aversion to use force when necessary have helped dictators here, extremist jihadist rebels there, and weakened everywhere the cause of moderate and modernist-minded popular reform – whether of the secular liberal or the Islamist variety. He has emboldened on the one hand Russia, China, Iran, and a host of minor absolutist forces, and on the other, neglected the fight against al-Qaeda offshoots such as ISIS and Islamist extremists in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Nigeria, and in the West itself.

Both the elites of autocratic states and the champions of a new transnational caliphate mask their anti-Western and antimodern programs under an “anti-hegemonic” discourse, and both reject the democratic aspirations of the peoples they claim to represent – the first in the name of national interest, the second in the name of God. It would be unfair to blame Obama for the global crisis of democracy, which has deeper causes over which no American president would have much power. Nor can it be claimed that Obama is out of sync with the general public mood of isolationism in the US. In our opinion, however, Obama has done very little to stop the downward slide and the demoralization of democratic forces worldwide.

Country by country, Obama’s Mideast policies have left each state increasingly on its own, in a region gripped by seemingly uncontrollable and spiraling forces. Within each country, a priori anti-Americanism of large sections of the population is compounded by the disappointment of those liberal who had pinned their hopes on the US. Muslim civil society expressed great hopes when Obama entered the White House, and is today more anti-American than under Bush.

In theory democratic forces might fill the vacuum. In reality we witness the victory of autocratic and authoritarian forces.

This is more the result of US inertia than of US “oscillation”. Alternatives existed, and are still present. It is not the case that the US was at a loss as to how to react (at least not more so than in other crises, under other presidents). It is that opposing foreign policy interests clashed and temporarily paralyzed decision-making. In most instances, the interest of democracy and human rights promotion clashed with US strategic interests (e.g. in Bahrain, Egypt, Syria); sometimes, democracy and human rights were deemed to weaken the war against terror (also in Egypt; and later in Syria);
and occasionally, democracy and human rights conflicted with US economic interest (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain), or with the pro-Israel imperative (in the Palestinian case). In each and every of these cases, the US ended up sacrificing democracy promotion and respect for human rights to other, and more immediate, geostrategic, antiterrorist, economic, or domestic (Israel-related) interests.

We do not mean to imply by this that American interest in democracy and Human Rights is only skin deep or hypocritical: many efforts dating from the Bush period or earlier have continued under Obama (e.g. the work of the NDE). Still, the cause of promoting HR and democracy as a US interest has over the past years encountered increasing obstacles.

The old Wilsonian slogan “to make the world safe for democracy” is understood as: a more democratic world, and a world where human rights are respected, will be a more peaceful world. More democracy will make the world also safer for Americans. By and large, we believe that this premise holds. It bears repetition that regime change is needed, although it should of course emerge from the people rather than from foreign occupation.

There are, however, many ways (including sometimes military ways) in which foreigners can, and have the moral duty to, protect people far away and help them express their will. The problem is that engagement is dangerous, expensive, often unpopular, and always takes longer than was originally foreseen. Democratizations such as the Arab revolutions are transformative projects that will be necessarily long, costly and certain to be traversed by fallbacks. These projects may demand help from friends abroad. Often the process surpasses the stamina of electorates. Democracy has many virtues, but patience is not one of them. Short-term emergencies too often take precedence. One day, we may all pay the price.
Bibliography

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