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"Getting the Middle East Right"

ON A SUNNY WEDNESDAY morning in early June 2011, the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution convened a symposium on the Middle East. It was a fairly large gathering, which was not terribly surprising given the speed of apparent change in the region. Tunisia's Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali was gone, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak had repaired to Sharm el-Sheikh, a war was under way in Libya, and Bashar al-Assad was in the process of militarizing the uprising in Syria. The political turbulence was not confined to these four countries, however. With the exceptions of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, every country in the Arab world had experienced unrest in the preceding seven months. The Saban Center's director at the time, Ken Pollack—a veteran of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Clinton White House as well as the author of eight books—called the meeting of mostly Washington-based Middle East hands to brainstorm about the region and US policy. One of Pollack's books helped shape the public discourse leading up to Operation Iraqi Freedom; yet another less-noticed volume argued that the Middle East was headed toward a period of coups, internal strife, wars, and general instability.[1] The objective of the meeting was to figure out how to forestall such a dystopian future. Since the uprisings began, the effort (and a good deal of posturing) to make sense of why they were happening and what would come next had been tremendous.[2] Yet very little systematic thinking had focused on how Washington's policy toward a region that had been based on the predictability and stability of authoritarian leaders should change.

The day's agenda included panels on countries already in transition, how to foster reform in other places, the prospects for failing states, and how non-Arab regional actors were responding. Much of the formal and informal discussion focused on Egypt, a country in which the United States had invested close to $80 billion since 1948. To many of the gathered experts, Washington now had an opportunity to liberate itself from the outmoded policies and sunk costs associated with the Mubarak era. These sentiments were not new. In the years before Egypt's January 25 uprising, Americans and Egyptians had come together at various times to figure out how to invigorate a relationship that officials in both countries called strategic but that had little sense of purpose. For all of the expertise brought to bear on the issue during the 2000s, the proposals lacked imagination. The most often discussed three alternatives included maintaining the approach that had sustained the Egypt-Israel peace treaty, ensured open access to the Suez Canal, and kept the Islamists on the defensive; promoting democracy; and shifting the relationship from one defined by aid to one in which trade was the centerpiece. None of these satisfied all the constituents of the relationship, so bureaucratic inertia preserved the status quo. The meeting at Brookings did not generate any new ideas, but a number of the participants asserted that with Mubarak gone and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces promising "to prepare the country for democracy," Washington had an opportunity to "get Egypt right."

It was entirely understandable that the policy community perceived change under way in Egypt and other parts of the Middle East as a chance to begin anew. Yet it also seemed out of step with what was transpiring in the region and the actual limits of American power. Arabs had risen up to demand dignity, representative government, and economic empowerment in response to the problems and contradictions they experienced within their own societies. The United States had few diplomatic tools and little in the way of financial resources to help make Arab dreams of more open, just, and prosperous societies a reality, though this state of affairs seemed lost in the conversation at Brookings that imagined Washington as an influential player in the Middle Eastern political transitions. It was entirely unclear that

Middle Easterners, especially Egyptians, wanted American help. In Tahrir Square, the United States was not a major preoccupation of protesters. And after Mubarak fell, Egypt's activists, liberals, democrats, and revolutionaries were not necessarily interested in assistance from the United States. To them, Washington had been Mubarak's primary ally and enabler. At another meeting that spring, Ahmed Maher—a founder of the April 6th Youth Movement, which had been a creative opponent of the Egyptian leader—suggested that the United States continue its assistance to Egypt as penance for supporting Mubarak for almost thirty years.[3] It is true that Libyans looked to NATO for protection from Muammar al-Qaddafi and Tunisians welcomed whatever assistance well-meaning foreigners, including representatives of the US government, had to offer, but external powers were not central to the uprisings.

It was a special conceit of the policy community—both inside and outside the government—that the United States had a role to play in Arab efforts to build new societies and political systems after the uprisings. These sentiments may have been misplaced, but they came from a good place: the belief in democracy as the best form of governance, that for too long Washington supported authoritarian leaders and looked the other way when those allies violated human rights, that democracies would generate greater wealth and more inclusive prosperity, and that democratic partners were better and more appropriate allies for the United States. It was hard to argue with these assertions, though democracy in the Middle East would not necessarily have made the region's countries better partners. Egyptian activists had argued that democratic government, which would actually reflect the will of the people, was the best way to resist what they regarded as predatory American policies in the Middle East. For their part, the Muslim Brotherhood believed that the close ties between Washington and Cairo had weakened Egypt and compromised its regional leadership role. Egypt was perhaps a special case. By the time Mubarak fell, the United States had become a negative factor in Egypt's domestic politics.[4]

More broadly, a general wariness prevailed about America's promotion of democracy in the region. This was to be expected of authoritarian

leaders who did their best to resist and deflect the policy, but the mistrust ran both broader and deeper. Washington's history of unfailing support for Israel and regional dictators was a source of outrage for many in the Arab world. People in the region had long admired the United States, its principles, and its ideals, but could not understand the gap between the way Americans lived at home and Washington's conduct in the world. The 2003 invasion of Iraq only accentuated the ingrained suspicion of American aims in the region and led people to conclude that the Freedom Agenda was a backdoor effort to remake societies and undermine their collective identities. This was all being done, Arab critics charged, to the benefit of American "interests," which in the Arabic—*masalih*—can have negative connotations. In the mid-2000s, discussions in the Arab world about democratic change and American efforts to encourage reform were invariably met with either accusations about the supposed neoconservative guiding principle of "creative destruction" or outright derision given the disasters that had befallen Iraq. After the revelation of the US military's systematic abuse of prisoners at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, American visitors to the region were put in the odd position of having to listen to lectures from Middle Eastern officials about the importance of upholding human rights. Many Arabs craved democracy and sought various kinds of support from the United States, but leaders and their allies sought to shape a discourse that made these activities and the people who participated in them illegitimate. It was a credit to American policymakers that they continued to promote democracy in the context of this opposition.

The record during the Bush years was not all bad, however. At the time, it seemed that the president's forthright call for freedom and democracy had an effect on the politics in the Arab world in indirect and complicated ways. It placed regional leaders on notice that Washington was paying close attention to domestic political developments in their countries, which forced Arab leaders to position themselves as reformers, if only to relieve American pressure for change. This tactical accommodation of US demands in turn allowed activists, who for so long had worked on the periphery and at the mercy of the Arab world's well-developed national security states, to pursue their agendas in new and more meaningful ways. This, in turn, helped alter the prevailing public discourse in the region, which suddenly seemed to focus on political

reform. Concerned about the new narratives they had been forced to let loose on their societies, leaders sought to balance against it. Almost by reflex, they tried to change the subject, declaring that reform could not take place until the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was resolved. When that did not work, they sought to appropriate the language of reform. When this strategy failed to deflect increasingly bold demands for change, state security services stepped in. Many journalists, editors, bloggers, and activists suffered—in some cases, more than ever. But perceptions had changed. The gap between what the regimes felt obliged to say and what they actually did grew larger and larger. Arab authoritarians could neither roll back the new discourse nor stop the growing recognition of their rank hypocrisy. It was this new perceptual reality that helped set the stage for the uprisings.

Given the prevailing political context in the region during the 2000s, did the actual programs of the Freedom Agenda make a difference? Did the US-Middle East Partnership Initiative, a refocusing of some United States Agency for International Development (USAID) projects on good governance and democracy promotion, and broad multilateral efforts like the (unfortunately named) Partnership for Progress for a Common Future with the Region of the Broader Middle East and North Africa have any measurable impact, let alone a decisive one, on Arab politics? Perhaps, or perhaps not. Despite some clues, there is really no way to know. An internal USAID study of the agency's democracy and governance programs in Egypt found that many did not achieve their objectives.[5] Mubarak resisted these efforts, which of course made their proximate failure more likely, but he fell anyway.

In addition to the US government, an array of organizations such as the federally funded National Endowment for Democracy, its affiliated International Republican Institute (IRI), and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) have long been dedicated to promoting democratic change around the world. These groups had worked in parts of the Middle East for years but sought a more active profile in the region with Bush's "forward strategy of freedom." Among other things, these organizations offered on-the-ground training for activists in election monitoring, party organization, and political advocacy. In April 2011, a few articles in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* suggested that NDI- and IRI-sponsored programs must have been effective because

some of the activists involved in uprisings around the region had participated in them. The efforts of NDI, IRI, and others seemed worthy, but "there are no good metrics for determining how effective democracy promotion programs, whether governmental, quasi-governmental, or private, have been in the Middle East."[6] Regardless of this uncertainty, the consensus among Middle East watchers was that the uprisings had created new openings for the United States to help the people of the region build democracies.

The day at Brookings may not have broken new ground, but there was no shortage of articles and reports offering advice to the Obama administration about what to do. Even well before the uprisings the policy community had been thinking about political change in the Arab world. In late 2004, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) convened an Independent Task Force to study reform in the Arab world. The following spring it produced a report titled *In Support of Arab Democracy: Why and How*. The twenty-six specialists with expertise in a variety of areas including Middle East politics, economics, education, public diplomacy, and religion under the direction of former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and former Congressman Vin Weber, a Republican from Minnesota, offered a detailed set of recommendations for the American and Arab governments that captured Washington's collective mindset on democracy promotion. The task force called on the Bush administration "to encourage" Arab leaders to develop public "pathways to reform," promote change on a country-by-country basis, "support the political participation of any group or party [including Islamists] committed to abide by the rules and norms of the democratic process," pursue political and economic reform simultaneously, and make the quality of relations with the United States conditional in part on reform. An additional grab bag of suggestions included improving public diplomacy, fostering educational reform, and making the Middle East more attractive to foreign direct investment.[7] Similarly, in 2010, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) convened its own blue ribbon commission to look at the issue. The report was prescient about the potential for instability in the region, yet like CFR's Independent Task Force, USIP's experts strained to propose practical suggestions. For example, the report called on the Obama administration to "deploy a mix of private and high-level public diplomacy to encourage ruling

elites to replace short-term tactical reforms with long-term programs that build the legal and institutional infrastructure for democratic representation."[8] Middle Eastern countries were very much in need of the legal and political reforms, but how "private and high-level public diplomacy" was going to help make it happen remained entirely unclear, especially given that Arab leaders had been clear that they were not interested in democratic change beyond cosmetic changes designed to put off American policymakers. The underlying logic of these reports was the notion that Washington could convince Arab leaders that if they did not make changes, they would confront challenges to their rule. This hunch turned out to be correct, but at the time Arab leaders refused to take steps that they believed amounted to little more than reforming themselves out of power.

After the uprisings, analysts labored even harder to find constructive policy recommendations for American policymakers, but the complexity of politics in the region left this work wanting. For example, one idea was that the United States should play the role of a global catalyst that would bring together the resources and expertise of Europe, the Persian Gulf countries, and rising powers such as Brazil and others to invest politically and financially in Middle Eastern transitions to democracy.[9] This was an evolution of the notion that the United States needed a "Marshall Plan for the Middle East," which had come up from time to time in Beltway discussions about the region since the attacks of September 11, 2001.[10] The global catalyst idea was attractive in part because it was multilateral, which avoided reinforcing the impression that Washington was engaged in the same international social engineering project that it launched in the 2000s, but under a different president. Yet working with partners in other parts of the world was hardly an innovation. The reports of both CFR and USIP had suggested it. In 2004, with its partners in the Group of Eight, the Bush administration launched the Partnership for Progress to coordinate democracy promotion with its European, Canadian, and Asian partners. After the uprisings, there was actually not much new to say about multilateralism despite general agreement within the policy community of the need for a multilateral component to American efforts. All that one prominent group of analysts could muster on the issue was that "Both the United States and European countries have a role to play in trying to steer

competing Arab elites away from acrimonious and ultimately sterile ideological debates and toward more practical problem solving."[11] The analysis of what was happening in the Middle East and why was often quite good, but the recommendations these articles, reports, and books offered were frustratingly nebulous.[12]

When it came to specific countries undergoing change, the policy recommendations were no more incisive. On Libya, for example, one expert recommended in 2011 that "USAID, the State Department, and the Department of Defense should design now a package of multiyear U.S. civilian and military assistance focused on capacity building for the new Libyan government, its military, and its civil society."[13] This recommendation was reasonable but hopelessly overtaken by events as Libya fragmented. When it came to Egypt, many of the suggestions echoed what the policy community had offered before Mubarak fell, including American support for local nongovernmental organizations, promotion of good governance, conditioning aid on political reform, and broadening "strategic dialogues" with Egyptians from various sectors of society.[14] In Tunisia, recommendations ran from security sector reform (a good idea) to "engaging" with all parties, especially the Islamist Ennahda Movement, as a way both to promote democracy and "restore American credibility in the region."[15] Everyone who weighed in on what Washington should be doing in response to the Arab uprisings was smart and accomplished, some with years of US government experience at various levels. That they strained so hard to offer policy recommendations that seemed workable and could possibly make a difference in the Middle East said a lot less about them and much more about the nature of the challenge they were addressing.

Turkey also figured prominently in the conversation, so much so that in April 2011, the producers of National Public Radio's program *All Things Considered* aired a mash-up of interviews conducted in the preceding four months during which experts had emphasized the importance of Turkey in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings.[16] Another one of CFR's Independent Task Forces indicated that "The United States and Turkey have an opportunity to cooperate in helping forge a more democratic and prosperous Middle East."[17] This idea was consistent with the White House's position that Turkey was well placed to lead the region after the uprisings and be a model for Arab political systems.

Then prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's declaration early in the Egyptian uprising that Mubarak should heed the call of his people for change, combined with the Turkish leader's undeniable popularity in the region, led administration officials to believe that the Turks had special insight into the Middle East—a message that Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) had been emphasizing well before the uprisings.[18] All the intense interest in the prospect of Turkey's shaping Arab political systems and economies tended to overshadow the deteriorating Turkish political environment, however. By no means did the entire foreign policy community share the sunny optimism about Erdoğan's Turkey.[19] A good deal of commentary and analysis concerned the AKP's efforts to dominate the Turkish political arena, but the overwhelming tendency was to cast these concerns as an implicit form of Islamophobia, a blatant misreading of Turkey's democratic transition, challenges that could be overcome with diplomacy, or problems outweighed by the opportunities Turkey presented.[20] The Obama administration was not unaware of these problems but chose to give them less public attention than they deserved, preferring to communicate concerns privately.

Part of the policy problem US officials confronted was the speed of change taking place and the competing political pressures associated with them. Mubarak had been in power for almost thirty years but was brought down after eighteen days of protest. This occurred after years in which the collective wisdom believed that he would die in office and that power would pass to his son or his intelligence chief.[21] Much of Washington's approach to Egypt was based on this expectation. Yet it was the NATO intervention in Libya that would become the paradigmatic example of the policy challenges that the rapidly changing environment of the Arab uprisings produced. A compelling humanitarian case was to be made as Muammar al-Qaddafi threatened that he was mobilizing his forces to crush Benghazi, in addition to pressure from NATO allies—notably, Great Britain and France—to take military action quickly, but the Pentagon was also wary of yet another conflict after a long decade in Afghanistan and almost that much time in Iraq. President Barack Obama's 2008 run for office was predicated in part on withdrawing the United States from two costly wars, not getting the country involved in what could be another one. Then again, how

could the administration be faithful to the "New Beginning" with the Muslim world that the president announced in his June 2009 speech at Cairo University and stand idly by as Qaddafi killed his own people? The resulting policy—a no-fly zone in which Washington provided its unique military capabilities to allies who lacked them—helped save Benghazi and bring down Qaddafi, but then Libyans were left largely to their own devices in trying to stabilize their country, few in the West (or anywhere else) having either the resources or the fortitude to deploy large forces in support. Detailed reconstruction plans—that the British government took the lead developing—were impossible to carry out effectively without stability in Libya and an international commitment to nation building.[22]

In an effort to give direction to Washington's approach to the Middle East, on May 19, 2011, Obama made the short trip from the White House to the State Department. There, on the eighth floor in the ornate Benjamin Franklin Room with its commanding southern views of the Lincoln Memorial and the Potomac River, the president delivered a speech to America's diplomatic corps and civil servants who, more than any others, would be charged with carrying out US policy in a radically changed Middle East. Among Obama's speeches, his remarks that day will not likely be held up among his best. Despite some promising rhetorical flourishes, it was far from inspiring, and his effort to link Mohammed al-Bouazizi to Rosa Parks fell flat. The speech was notable both for what the president left out—Saudi Arabia—and for what he included—the Arab-Israeli conflict, despite its manifest irrelevance to the issues at hand. In between Obama declared:

> We have the chance to show that America values the dignity of the street vendor in Tunisia more than the raw power of the dictator. There must be no doubt that the United States of America welcomes change that advances self-determination and opportunity. Yes, there will be perils that accompany this moment of promise. But after decades of accepting the world as it is in the region, we have a chance to pursue the world as it should be.[23]

It would thus be the policy of the United States to "promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy."[24] Like a lot of recommendations the policy community had previously offered, few specifics were attached to these platitudes. For example, Obama announced that the United States welcomed "working with all those who embrace genuine and inclusive democracy" and would "oppose" those who sought "to restrict the rights of others, and to hold power through coercion and not consent."[25] These declarations sounded suspiciously like the executive summaries of think tank reports and, as with those summaries, it remained entirely unclear what any of these words meant and how they would be operationalized.

Obama then pivoted to how Washington would support democratic change through economic development. This included a more detailed discussion of debt relief, the announcement of an enterprise funds intended to invest in small and medium businesses in Tunisia and Egypt, and the encouragement of entrepreneurship, among a number of other initiatives. It was no surprise that this part of the speech had more coherence. The economic goals Obama laid out were not only tangible, but diplomats also had clear ideas based on years of experience about how to go about achieving them. In contrast, promoting democratic change was amorphous and the policies aimed at advancing more open and just societies were unproven.

In one particularly important passage of the speech, the president implicitly cautioned his audience about the limits of American policy. This was consistent with an overall theme of the Obama presidency that emphasized rightsizing a US foreign policy that had become badly overextended.[26] Because the president's words were interwoven with statements that George W. Bush could have uttered about "pursu[ing] the world as it should be," it was initially hard to detect the call for restraint, but this passage was the most important of the speech: "Of course, as we [promote reform and support transitions], we must proceed with a sense of humility. It's not America that put people into the streets of Tunis or Cairo—it was the people themselves who launched these movements, and it's the people themselves that must ultimately determine their outcome."[27] Obama then outlined a series of principles that should guide US policy—nonviolence, free speech, freedom of assembly, tolerance, the rule of law, and the right to choose one's leaders.[28] More than anything else that Obama said that day, his admonition about humility without abdicating America's

values was most consistent with what was actually happening on the ground in the Middle East. The uprisings were a source of pride and dignity, in particular. Tunisians, Egyptians, Libyans (even though Qaddafi had not fallen yet), and others were experiencing a moment of tremendous empowerment. And although he was consistent with his Cairo speech that Washington was ready to help, Obama was also signaling to those who saw opportunity for democracy promotion in the ousters of Ben Ali and Mubarak that he preferred a significantly lighter touch.[29]

Even so, it was hardly that the United States shut down its efforts to promote democracy. In the weeks and months after the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, American officials were on the ground offering assistance, "but quietly"—in the case of Egypt—as the *Washington Post* reported.[30] The White House and the State Department shifted gears from trying to understand what was happening in the Middle East to providing support for those working in the region to translate the promise of the uprisings into democracies. Yet a certain ambivalence about US policy prevailed, revealing a philosophical debate within the administration that was never resolved, at least as far as the Arab uprisings and subsequent tumult in Turkey were concerned. In both word and deed, it seemed clear that Obama was inclined toward realism in foreign policy. His mantra, "Don't do stupid shit," was an off-color way of reinforcing for him and his advisors what was really important—balancing the ambitions of other countries, exercising American power judiciously in the service of national interests, and maximizing American strength.[31] An element of "do the opposite of what Bush did" was also a part of the administration's approach to the world. At the same time, much of what Obama did—whether the "reset with Russia," commitment to withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan, outreach to Iran, or reinforcement of ties with countries in Asia—was a retrenchment borne of the realist concern that the foreign policy the administration inherited in 2009 included commitments that sapped Washington's power. In the Middle East, the administration sought a policy that focused on American interests in the narrow way they had traditionally been defined—ensuring the free flow of energy resources out of the region, helping guarantee Israel's security, preventing any single power from dominating the region, countering terrorism, and

preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The way Obama chose to help bolster Israeli security and check Iran's drive for nuclear technology raised considerable hackles, but it did not reflect a fundamental shift in the way American officials defined core US interests in the region.

Obama's realist inclinations nevertheless coexisted with a policy that did nothing to alter the bureaucracy it inherited that was charged with promoting democracy. Still, there was a lack of enthusiasm about this project. Funding for USAID programs in the Middle East initially fell at the same time the Obama administration requested that Congress appropriate larger sums for democracy and good governance initiatives through other State Department offices such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative. Those requests leveled off in 2011 and subsequently fell after 2012. As for the Bureau for Democracy, Rights, and Labor (also within the State Department), Congress consistently granted more resources than the administration requested for its work in the Middle East.[32] Within the White House there were senior members of the National Security Council staff who had supported policies that promoted democratic change in their academic careers and/or prior government service. The same was true at various levels of the State Department, where political appointees, civil servants, and foreign service officers dedicated considerable time and effort to the issue. In what seemed like a compromise between his predispositions and the advice of his advisors, Obama indicated that the United States would support democratic change, but Washington was not going to push it.

The president proved to be as good as his word. When the uprisings happened, the administration accepted the outcomes that people in the streets produced. The White House's rhetoric about "being on the right side of history" was perhaps politically necessary against the backdrop of inspiring events, but had the unintended effect of making it seem as if the United States actually had a choice about what was transpiring in cities and squares far from Washington in the Middle East. It did not. Tunisia had been an afterthought of American foreign policy until the uprising that dumped Ben Ali; it took some time before the US Embassy in Tunis fully understood the magnitude of what was happening after Bouazizi's suicide on December 17, 2010.[33]

Had they grasped the threat to Ben Ali's rule, American diplomats or anyone else could not have done much. Even the French, who had close diplomatic, financial, and military ties with the Tunisian government, were no more than onlookers as Ben Ali came undone. Some commentary at the time of Egypt's uprisings and revisionist analyses since have suggested that the Obama administration "dumped" Mubarak, implying that American support could have saved the Egyptian president.[34] Once the Egyptian military deployed on January 28, 2011, however, Mubarak had little chance of remaining in power. The confluence of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces' interests in stability and preventing Gamal Mubarak, the president's son and presumptive heir who had never served in the military, from becoming the next president and those of demonstrators demanding "the end of the regime" ensured that the Egyptian president's days in power were rapidly coming to an end. Like Egypt's top military brass, the Obama administration spent two weeks after the tanks and armored personnel carriers arrived in Tahrir Square trying to devise a dignified exit for Mubarak with the least amount of bloodshed.

FROM PRINCIPLE TO PRAGMATISM

The president's nod to values in his May 2011 speech was to be expected. Any American president is going to have to say something about values when somewhere in the world people rise up and demand dignity and freedom. The exception was the Obama administration's silence during Iran's uprising two years earlier. This decision had an inherent logic. The White House feared that full-throated American support for Iranian protesters would provide an opportunity for hard-liners in Tehran to delegitimize the demonstrations as yet another American effort to undermine Iran. This made sense, but as the aftermath of the Arab uprisings unfolded, the Obama administration demonstrated a pattern of forsaking the core values the president himself outlined at the State Department to preserve working relationships with the leaders of the Middle East. Under different circumstances, that might have been the most prudent approach, but in the unstable, uncertain, and politically variable environments in which Washington was operating, it proved

damaging. Even in relatively stable Turkey, the administration did itself no favors.

When then secretary of state Hillary Clinton visited Egypt two weeks after the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi took the presidential oath of office, protesters greeted her at her hotel with chants of "Mo-ni-ca! Mo-ni-ca!" A day later, demonstrators threw tomatoes, water bottles, and shoes in the direction of her car as she arrived to open a new US consulate building in Egypt's second city, Alexandria. Though small in number, the demonstrators seemed to represent a far larger group of Egyptians seething over the turn of events that placed a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Ittihadiyya Palace. The crude, sophomoric, and shameful displays of anger directed at Clinton were based on the canard that the Obama administration not just supported Morsi's candidacy for Egypt's presidency but also brought pressure to bear on election officials to declare him the winner. It was a bizarre allegation given the Brotherhood's illiberal worldview that included healthy doses of anti-Americanism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Zionism, along with the decades of mutual hostility between the organization and the United States. Certainly an argument could be made that for exactly these reasons the Obama administration should have opposed the Brotherhood and Morsi. Yet such an approach would have placed Washington in the awkward position of opposing the outcome of elections after Egyptians had risen up in part because they wanted their country's electoral process to mean something. In early 2006, after pushing for Palestinian elections, the Bush administration refused to deal with a victorious Hamas. The policy achieved nothing. Hamas remained in power—at least in the Gaza Strip—and the United States was widely denounced for liking elections only when its friends won them. Instead, the Obama administration chose to accommodate itself to the results and outcomes that Egyptians produced.

It was the only reasonable approach for Obama to take given the Egyptian search for a democratic political system. It would also free the United States from falling into the same trap it had with the former president, Hosni Mubarak, in which Washington became identified specifically with the Egyptian leader. The White House and the State Department wanted to establish a working relationship with Egypt's

new leadership. As Secretary Clinton noted in her remarks at the consulate in Alexandria, however,

> I want to be clear that the United States is not in the business, in Egypt, of choosing winners and losers, even if we could, which of course we cannot. We are prepared to work with you as you chart your course, as you establish your democracy. . . . And we want to stand for principles, for values, not for people or for parties but for what democracy means in our understanding and experience.[35]

This statement represented all the right instincts about Egypt, which is why it was so mystifying to many in Egypt that the actual conduct of American policymakers turned out quite different. Public commitments aside, the administration placed working relationships ahead of principles and values, which made it seem as if Washington was, in fact, "choosing winners."

Whether Morsi intended to amass so much power or not, the effect of his November 2012 decree was the same, providing an excellent opportunity for the Obama administration to emphasize the values that both the president and the secretary of state had articulated. The State Department's spokesperson, Victoria Nuland, offered a milquetoast statement expressing the "concerns" of "many Egyptians and the international community" about Morsi's actions. She also called on "all Egyptians to resolve their differences over these important issues peacefully and through democratic dialogue."[36] Nuland's counterpart at the White House referred inquiring journalists to her statement and reiterated the role the Egyptian leader played in helping negotiate a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas.[37] The reluctance of the American government to take Morsi to task for what many saw as a power grab fueled Egyptian suspicions that Washington was once again willing to trade stability for authoritarianism. It also provided further evidence for those Egyptians inclined to believe that the United States was invested in the success of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. This perception actually went back as far as the mid-2000s at the height of George W. Bush's Freedom Agenda, but it became more commonplace as the United States tried to navigate the uncertain and contested political environment of post-uprising Egypt. This made for some ugly

moments during the massive demonstrations that preceded the July 3 coup, during which the American ambassador was called a "bitch" and an "ogre" and Obama was called a "supporter of terrorism."

By the time the military ousted Morsi in July 2013, considerable mistrust had built up between Washington and Egypt's senior military officers, who were wary of US intentions. Once again, though, Washington abdicated the values that Obama articulated in 2011. In its effort to accommodate a political outcome that was purely of Egyptian making, the administration studiously avoided calling the military's intervention a coup, which it surely was. To the commanders and their supporters, this four-letter word became an anti-military epithet associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. The Obama administration wanted to sidestep section 508 of the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act, which requires the suspension of aid to governments that had come to power by coup. Washington did register its disapproval some months later when Obama delayed the transfer of twenty F-16 fighter planes, ten Apache helicopters, 125 M1A1 tank kits, and twenty Harpoon missiles. This was an uneasy compromise between principle and pragmatism, however. Although the Egyptians complained bitterly—despite already having the fourth largest inventory of F-16s in the world, thirty-four Apache helicopters, and large numbers of M1A1 tanks in storage—the freeze was actually done in a way to avoid damaging their national security, especially given that the administration maintained all levels of specific counterterrorism aid. Nevertheless, that Obama did not unconditionally welcome the coup and support Major General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi once again reinforced the notion that the United States was pro-Brotherhood. The situation was made worse, however, because the Brothers and their supporters regarded Washington's reluctance to identify the military's action as a coup d'état, demand Morsi's return to the presidency, and cut military assistance completely as an indication that the Obama administration supported Sisi's takeover.[38] The inevitable result was the worst of all possible worlds: across the board hostility toward the United States.

Of course, the White House could not be faulted for the competing narratives that emerged from the summer of 2013. The problem came with the Obama administration's unwillingness to be forthright about first-order principles like nonviolence, rule of law, and a variety

of personal and political freedoms. Without any clarity about what the United States stood for, Washington became unwittingly ensnared in the high-stakes struggle over identity in which Egyptians were engaged. In the process, it hurt everything the United States wanted to do in Egypt, from counterterrorism to technical assistance for ministries, which were gummed up not just because of Egypt's usual bureaucratic lethargy but also out of mistrust and the malice it bred. There is no guarantee that the Obama administration would have avoided this problem had the president and other senior officials been consistent with his May 19, 2011, speech, but it certainly would have helped Washington avoid the general distrust and anger that every player in Cairo held toward the United States.

A similar dynamic was under way in Turkey. As deliberalization proceeded, Washington remained mostly quiet. Determined to rebuild ties with Ankara after a tension-filled five years following the US invasion of Iraq, Obama delivered an address to the Turkish Grand National Assembly in April 2009 and spoke of "Turkey's strong and secular democracy" and the "common values" between Turkey and the West.[39] The new American president was fulsome in his praise for what the Justice and Development Party (AKP) had achieved but also encouraged the Turks to broaden and deepen the reforms they had previously undertaken. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became an important interlocutor for Obama in the year after the Arab uprisings began. The thirteen telephone calls between the American and Turkish leaders during that period became an informal measure of US-Turkey relations. The interaction between the president and prime minister was so frequent that American diplomats began referring to Obama as the Chief Turkey Desk Officer—a reference to country desk officers at the State Department who coordinate policy.[40] Yet the new dawn in Washington-Ankara ties coincided with troubling domestic changes in Turkey to which the administration tended to demonstrate a studied indifference.

Invariably, the White House rejected suggestions from Turkey analysts, editorial boards, and members of Congress that Obama publicly criticize the Turkish leader. First, the Turks were sensitive to what they regarded as interference in their domestic affairs. Second, public chastisement did not seem to work. Secretary Clinton's July 2011 comments

in Istanbul concerning press freedom fell on deaf ears. When the American ambassador, Frank Ricciardone, did the same shortly after taking up his post in the summer of 2011, Erdoğan called him a "novice" who did not know the country (despite his previous service there and his fluent Turkish). When the ambassador broached the issue again two years later, other AKP officials reacted angrily, accusing Ricciardone of exceeding the limits of what was appropriate diplomatic behavior.[41] In March 2013, Clinton's successor as secretary of state, John Kerry, rebuked Erdoğan for his assertion that "Zionism is a crime against humanity." The Turkish leader treated America's top diplomat with pouty disdain at a subsequent meeting and never retracted his statement. Finally, the administration had enjoyed previous success airing differences with Erdoğan privately. Relations between Washington and Ankara had grown tense in the spring of 2010 over Turkey's efforts—along with Brazil—to negotiate a nuclear deal with Iran and Turkish opposition to sanctions on Iran in the UN Security Council. Also, Turkey-Israel relations were in a deleterious state after a confrontation at sea in late May between activists aboard a Turkish ferry trying to run the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip that left eight Turks and a Turkish American dead; this was of serious concern to the Obama administration. Rather than snubbing the Turkish leader at the annual summit of the Group of Twenty (G20) of the largest economies, as a variety of outside experts suggested to senior American officials, Obama decided to meet with Erdoğan. In the privacy of a Toronto hotel room, the two leaders reportedly set aside diplomatic niceties and hashed out their differences, which placed ties on a more constructive path for the next two and a half years.[42] During that time, the administration seemed to treat warnings from Turkish opponents of the AKP about Erdoğan's troubling illiberal approach to politics as little more than the complaints of elites who failed to compete effectively in the political process.

By the time the Gezi Park protests broke out in May 2013, however, it became increasingly difficult for the administration to overlook what had been happening in Turkey. The rate of phone calls between Obama and the Turkish prime minister slowed. They did have a conversation on June 24—three weeks after the demonstrations began—in which, according to the White House's summary of the call, "the two leaders discussed the importance of nonviolence and of the rights to free

expression and assembly and a free press."[43] The State Department did little more than reiterate its concern about the violence; it informed the press that Secretary of State John Kerry had been in touch with his Turkish counterpart, and "called for calm."[44] Over the following eighteen months, subsequent phone calls dealt with Syria, Egypt, Iraq, counterterrorism cooperation, Erdoğan's presidential election, refugees, the US commitment to Turkey's security, Cyprus, the G20 summit, and Turkey's tense relations with Russia. In one call, in February 2014, Obama mentioned the rule of law, likely in response to the corruption scandal rocking Turkey at the time.[45] None of the calls with Obama or the intermittent and mild US government statements had an impact on Erdoğan.

In Istanbul and Ankara, Turkish journalists and activists concluded that the subdued response from the White House to the Gezi Park protests was directly related to Washington's strategic ties with Ankara rather than the principles for which the United States stood. It was an easy critique in the anger over tear gas, water cannons, and arrests, but it was also true. Among American policymakers, ties with the Turks were extremely important. Policymakers had grown used to telling themselves that Ankara's proximity to some of Washington's most pressing foreign policy concerns made it indispensable. The record of Turkish indispensability was actually rather mixed because Washington and Ankara differed on a variety of issues related to Iraq, Syria, Israel, Hamas, and Egypt. Nevertheless, having no choice but to work with Turkey, and in the absence of any alternative to Erdoğan and the AKP within the country, officials placed faith in their ability to encourage and cajole the Turks to cooperate, realizing that criticizing Erdoğan on the illiberal turn in Turkish domestic politics would jeopardize the already existing areas of cooperation with the Turks.[46]

One of the points on which the United States wanted Turkey's cooperation was the March 2011 intervention in Libya. The US government justified Operation Odyssey Dawn on humanitarian grounds, specifically a concept called *responsibility to protect*—often referred to as R2P. The basic premises of the concept are straightforward: states have a responsibility to protect their citizens; if they cannot, the international community must assist them; if a state is the perpetrator of mass atrocities, the international community has a responsibility to intervene to

protect the population under threat.[47] Humanitarian intervention was not unprecedented in American foreign policy, but it was applied unevenly. In 1992, the United States and other countries intervened in Somalia on humanitarian grounds but failed to stop the genocide in Rwanda a few years later. At the end of the decade, Washington and its NATO allies took military action in Bosnia and Kosovo for the same reasons, though only after about 200,000 had been killed.[48]

The military operation in Libya, which the French and British governments first proposed, proved controversial within the administration. The secretary of defense, Robert Gates, and the uniformed military were opposed, whereas other influential figures such as Secretary Clinton, Susan Rice—who represented the United States at the United Nations and who later became the National Security Advisor—and Rice's successor in New York, Samantha Power, argued in favor. Supporters won the day and on March 19, 2011, the Libya intervention began. It was a very big story. The West had stood on the sidelines when Tunisians and Egyptians rose up, but in Libya, NATO countries along with forces from Qatar and the United Arab Emirates undertook operations to protect Libyans that, in effect, also amounted to regime change.

In time, however, the actual intervention and its underlying rationale received far less attention than the events of September 11, 2012, when the American ambassador in Libya, Christopher Stevens, and three others were killed in an attack on the US consulate in Benghazi. After ten congressional committees, including one by the Select Committee on Benghazi, investigated the incident, *Benghazi* became a watchword for scandal and negligence. This was unfortunate because it obscured the actual failure that lay elsewhere. The international reconstruction plans for Libya that had been developed in the spring of 2011 were abandoned as soon as the Europeans and the United States recognized the magnitude of such an undertaking in a chaotic security and political environment. There are good reasons to question the wisdom and applicability of R2P, but once the intervention took place, the Obama administration and its allies were obliged to continue the mission to its logical conclusion. Instead, they betrayed the very principle that the United States and Europeans invoked to justify their collective intervention. They entered the Libyan conflict to rescue people, but once

Qaddafi had fallen, those countries left the very same people they had just saved to the mercy of the violent forces pulling the country apart. At least in Egypt and Turkey an argument was to be made that abdicating values in favor of a pragmatic policy served the national security interests of the United States. What was the argument in Libya? There was none. Abandoning principle in 2011 as Libya descended into chaos forced Washington and its allies five years later to confront the possibility of another military intervention in Libya, this time to attack affiliates of the self-declared Islamic State and other extremist groups.

Tunisia, by contrast, looked very good in comparison with Egypt, Turkey, and Libya and, as a result, the country became of great importance to the United States. The irony was that few in Washington had ever thought about Tunisia or North Africa more broadly until it dawned on them a few days before Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali was toppled that he might fall. Yet because Tunisia's transition proceeded relatively better than those of other countries, Washington became even more invested in its success. The desire to support Tunisia was without a doubt for the benefit of Tunisians, but it was also part of a broader democratization agenda. The thinking went that if Tunisia's transition to democracy was truly a success, it would be a powerful model and would have a demonstration effect on other societies. The idea came from the academic literature on the spread of war, democratization, and the role international linkages play in both. Scholars had established that international demonstration effects did exist, especially in the "diffusion" of war, as did waves of democratization. Like a lot of ideas and concepts that first appeared in the pages of specialty academic journals, international demonstration effects lost some nuance and complexity in policy discussions.[49] The focus on Tunisia as the demonstrator of democracy got the concept backward. The literature indicates that "a high proportion of democratic neighbors facilitates democratization" rather than a single apparent democratizer among countries with authoritarian systems doing so.[50] One study also found that societies needed to be receptive to change for an international demonstration effect to be possible in the first place.[51] In other words, if Tunisia was going to rub off on Libya or Egypt or Algeria or any other country in the region, political actors in those countries would need to be amenable to the lessons of Tunisia's transition. They were not. Still, the United States became invested in

Tunisia because it was good for both the many Tunisians who wanted to live in a democracy and the purportedly dynamic effect its success would have on the rest of the region. Consequently, President Beji Caid Essebsi enjoyed the extraordinarily rare privilege of sharing a byline with an American president and Tunisia was bestowed the designation of major non-NATO ally in an effort both to validate what Tunisians had accomplished and to show others in the region the benefits of positive change.[52] For President Barack Obama and his advisors to agree to coauthor with his Tunisian counterpart, they had to overlook what Nidaa Tounes stood for, or at least what factions of it stood for, and the willingness of Essebsi himself to play identity politics, albeit neatly intertwined with jargon about democratic change. On Essebsi's visit to Washington, one American official relayed that any question about the Tunisian president's commitment to democracy on these grounds was "trying too hard to find a dark cloud around the silver lining."[53] The Tunisian transition was shaky to the point that these kinds of protestations seemed forced, to say the least. Yet the country's problems, which became clear not just with the terrorist attacks of 2015 but also with the violent protests that swept through parts of the country on the fifth anniversary of Ben Ali's departure, were to the policy community more reasons the United States had to "get Tunisia right."

WHAT LEVERAGE?

As democratic transitions in the Middle East faltered, the policy discussion tended to focus on what kind of leverage the United States could bring to bear to shape the choices of governments in the region. In Tunisia, the Obama administration clearly pursued a "more honey than vinegar" approach to encourage change. It was unclear, however, how much difference a coauthored op-ed and an upgraded alliance status would mean. Between 2012 and 2015, Washington committed $700 million in direct assistance to Tunisia. The Tunisians also received an additional $142 million in aid in 2016. There were also loan guarantees from the United States that allowed the Tunisian government to raise up to $500 million on international capital markets at preferential rates. Taken together this financial support underlined the importance American officials attached to helping the country's shaky transition

become a success story.[54] In addition, between 2014 and 2016, the IMF, World Bank, and European Union extended slightly more than $10 billion worth of loans to Tunisia. This assistance represented an important international commitment to the country's success, but an open question remained of whether the Tunisian government could put it to good use given its inability to do much of anything.[55] With Libya, the conversation about leverage was largely irrelevant. None of the political actors there had the kind of relationship with the United States that would allow Washington either to provide or to withhold any meaningful financial, diplomatic, or military assistance to make much of a difference. The Central Intelligence Agency had reportedly cut ties with General Khalifa Haftar in the 1990s.

That left Turkey and Egypt, where the United States had long-standing strategic relationships that could surely be used to alter the behavior of Turkish and Egyptian officials. Yet, in both cases, either considerably less leverage was available to the United States than many believed or American officials were unwilling to pay the price for using it. Washington's economic and military assistance to Turkey is minimal, devoted mostly to helping Ankara deal with the Syrian refugee crisis, a US-based military education program, counterterrorism, and nonproliferation. Like Egypt's military, the Turkish air force was well stocked with F-16 fighter planes and other weapons systems purchased from the United States, though the Turks have their own defense industrial base. There was precedent for the United States to use its security relationships with these countries to make a political point. After Turkey's 1974 invasion and occupation of Cyprus, the US Congress embargoed arms sales and military assistance to Ankara. The embargo was lifted during the Carter administration, but not because of any change in Turkish policy. About 30,000 Turkish troops remain on the northern side of the island to protect the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus—an international pariah. In 2015, some members of Congress expressed concern that the precision munitions Ankara sought for its F-16s would be used against Turkey's Kurdish citizens in the government's fight against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). That concern did not result in any congressional action to block the sale of these weapons after Ankara played the "you are asking us to help fight the Islamic State, but won't sell us bombs" card.[56] And, as noted, the United States was more often

than not reluctant to speak out to protest Turkey's deliberalization. Ankara was deemed too important to a variety of US policy priorities, most important of which, beginning in 2014, was the fight against Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's caliphate. The United States coveted the use of Turkey's İncirlik airbase, which is much closer to eastern Syria and Iraq than are bases in Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates and aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf. After a year of negotiations, the Turks granted American and allied forces access to İncirlik and other bases. Clearly, Washington did not want to do anything to jeopardize those negotiations or its access to the airfields once it had them, so the Obama administration said little about Turkey's domestic politics.

Yet even had the administration been less reluctant to criticize Erdoğan's approach to domestic politics, one was hard-pressed to think of what Washington could actually do, what threat it could brandish, that might push the Turks. In early 2016, then vice president Joe Biden made an official visit to Turkey during which he met with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, a small group of journalists, an NGO activist, and a law professor. It was an important encounter because it was a very public signal that the administration recognized all was not well in Turkey. One participant expressed gratitude for the meeting as a "reminder that we were not alone in the world" and hoped it meant that the United States "will not remain silent against the gross violations of basic rights and freedoms in Turkey just because it needs Ankara's collaboration in their [*sic*] fight against ISIS."[57] The meeting coincided with the government's attack on about a thousand academics who signed a petition expressing their opposition to Turkish military operations against the PKK in the southeastern part of the country that were also taking a heavy toll on civilians. In his fury, Erdoğan accused the professors of "treachery" and called them a "fifth column."[58]

Providing support for Turkey's beleaguered academics and journalists was not the only or even the primary reason for Biden's trip to Ankara, however. The top of his agenda included coordinating with the Turks on the fight against the Islamic State, moving them closer to the US position on Iraq, and, importantly, convincing the Turkish government to accept the presence of Syrian Kurds at talks aimed at finding a solution to Syria's civil war. It did not work. Ankara remained steadfast

in its opposition to empowering this group. For months, Erdoğan had watched with growing unease as Syrian Kurds wrested more territory from the Islamic State with the help of American airpower. In public statements, he emphasized Turkey's opposition to the emergence of an independent Kurdish entity along the Turkish border in northern Syria. Ankara regarded such a development to be an existential threat to Turkey's unity given the impact it could have on its own Kurdish population, especially as the Syrian Kurdish forces were allied with the PKK. The combination of Biden's efforts to convince Erdoğan on Syria's Kurds and his meeting with the Turkish leader's opponents prompted Erdoğan to trash the United States almost as soon as the vice president departed, declaring that "Some of Turkey's allies do not want to recognize the real terrorism threat in Turkey."[59] This type of rhetoric took on a more sinister tone after the attempted coup in July 2016 when Turkish leaders, but Erdoğan in particular, darkly insinuated that the United States and the West "support terrorism" and have sided with plotters.[60] They were able to get away with this conspiracy theory because during the AKP era, Ankara had come to believe that the United States needed Turkey more than Turkey needed the United States. This diminished Washington's ability to influence Turkish decision making, which was not substantial from the start. The country's location at the geographic center of some of the most important foreign policy concerns of the United States dating back to the Cold War, Turkey's status as a NATO ally, and the prickly nationalism of its leaders always made it difficult for American officials to compel the Turks to cooperate with Washington.

Turkey was clearly not the best place for American leverage. If any country was supposed to be responsive to American demands and threats, it was Egypt. The seven-decade American investment in Egypt included food aid in the 1940s, dramatic increases in economic assistance in the mid-1970s, and annual infusions of $1.3 billion in military aid beginning in 1987. By one authoritative account, US assistance covered most of Egypt's costs associated with procuring American weapons systems.[61] This apparent dependence bred the belief that Washington could use the money it sent to the Ministry of Defense as an instrument of behavior modification. Beginning in 2005, when Congressman Tom Lantos (D-CA), who was a founder and longtime co-chair of the Congressional

Human Rights Caucus, proposed shifting $325 million from Egypt's military assistance to the economic support it received from Washington, seven efforts were made in eleven years to cut or withhold this aid; none had been made in the previous two decades. Each of the proposed measures was based on the premise that threatening something as important as security assistance would compel the Egyptians to undertake reforms. At the very least, it would signal to Cairo that Washington was serious about promoting democracy and implementing a foreign policy consistent with the values and ideals that Americans lived by at home. The proposition was never tested, however, either because bills never made it out of committee or because the George W. Bush administration signed waivers attesting to potential damage to US national security by withholding military assistance to Egypt.[62]

Proponents of leverage often invoked the case of Saad Eddin Ibrahim, an Egyptian-American academic and democracy activist who won his release from an Egyptian prison after Bush refused to consider Hosni Mubarak's request for supplementary security assistance. Was this a one-off event or could the copious amounts of aid the United States had supplied to Egypt be used to promote change? Some advocates of what was referred to as conditionality thought so, arguing that Washington's reluctance to use aid as leverage was needlessly hampering its ability to promote change. Fears that the Egyptians would retaliate were overblown. Would Egypt really deny the US military overflight rights if Washington withheld or cut aid? After the July 2013 coup, the debate over the continuation of aid grew more intense given the legal and moral concerns associated with American taxpayer assistance to Egypt's new military leadership.[63] These arguments made sense, but they often failed to take into consideration or downplayed two important factors. First, Washington actually received something for its investment in the Egyptian armed forces, namely, fast-track access for its warships through the Suez Canal and other logistical support that proved valuable to US military efforts in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and later against the Islamic State. Under these circumstances, the Department of Defense—an important interest group—and members of Congress who regarded the war against terrorism as Washington's top priority remained reluctant to risk picking a fight with the Egyptians over democracy. Second, and more important, to the extent that Egyptians

framed the post-Mubarak political struggle in terms of identity, the stakes became critical. The political forces in the country involved in the battle had their own conception of an allegedly authentic Egyptian way of life and worldview they were fighting to preserve. Under these circumstances, it was hard for external actors, even those thought to be uniquely influential, such as the United States, to say or do anything to alter the decision making of Egypt's leaders. Washington had made a strong statement condemning the conduct of Egypt's security forces after the Battle of the Cabinet Building in 2011 and noted its concern when authorities rounded up and arrested employees of various NGOs in 2012—including Americans, among them the son of then secretary of transportation Ray LaHood, who was forced to hide in the US embassy for thirty-four days. These protestations had no effect on the way Field Marshal Mohammed Hussein al-Tantawi and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces administered the country. After the July 2013 coup, the White House docked Egypt's military aid—something no administration had ever done. This major step made no difference to the way Major General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi calculated his political interests. Repression continued. By the time the weapons systems were released to Egyptians in early 2015, it was clear that their delay made Egypt neither less unstable nor more democratic.[64] A good moral case was to be made for suspending aid to Egypt, but policymakers needed to understand that it would actually do little to alter Egypt's behavior.

In the late 1950s, Premier Nikita Khrushchev of the Soviet Union voiced concerns about the treatment of the Egyptian Communist Party; Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, however, brushed these off as a violation of Egypt's sovereignty.[65] Mubarak approached George W. Bush's push for democratic change in much the same way. This problem has only been accentuated during the Sisi era. Egypt may be paradigmatic of this problematic dynamic, but the situation is also present in Turkey, Tunisia, and Libya, hampering any effort by America—or any other power or combination of them—to have an effect on these internal struggles or the path these countries eventually follow.

LITTLE TO DO ABOUT A LOT

The level and scale of violence buffeting the Middle East has been unprecedented. The actual or potential failure of four states—Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen—the related matters concerning the exercise of Iranian power, the threat of the Islamic State, and resurgent authoritarianism have led to calls from places as disparate as Jerusalem, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and the United States Congress for "American leadership." It was hard to know exactly what this meant, especially because in the United States these entreaties were intertwined with presidential politics and President Barack Obama's effort to shape his legacy. In general, however, they revolved around different notions about how to deal with the conflict in Syria, the breakdown of the state in Iraq, rolling back Iran's influence, and combating the Islamic State. For Washington's Middle Eastern allies, American leadership meant bringing down the Assad regime, unconditionally supporting Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt, and eschewing a nuclear deal with Iran.

Obama was not prepared to pursue these policies because, from his and his advisors' perspectives, they amounted to "stupid shit" that did little to advance what had become Washington's policy priority in the Middle East: combating the Islamic State. Still unwilling to commit large ground forces to the fight, the administration securitized its relations with those in the area. Two problems were inherent to this approach, however. First, most of its allies in the region were decidedly ambivalent about fighting the Islamic State. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were more engaged in prosecuting a war against Houthi tribesmen in Yemen whom Riyadh and Abu Dhabi insisted were doing Iranian bidding. Both Saudi and Emirati officials warned of the Hezbollah-ization of Yemen and as a result focused their military resources and diplomatic attention there.[66] The clerical establishment in Saudi Arabia bolstered the war effort with anti-Iran—actually anti-Shia—propaganda that at times tracked closely to the Islamic State's discourse. The Jordanians stepped up their air strikes against the Islamic State when it burned a Royal Jordanian Air Force pilot alive after his F-16 fighter plane crashed in Syria in late 2014, but the tempo of Jordan's operations decreased with time. Egypt wanted to combat the Islamic State, but it intended to combat only the group's affiliates

in the Sinai Peninsula and Libya. When it came to Syria, the Egyptians actually supported Russia's intervention on behalf of Assad, calculating that this was the best way not only to defeat the extremists but also to forestall a post-Assad Syria in which that country's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood could likely play an important role. As far as the Turks were concerned, Kurdish nationalism, which the Syrian conflict boosted, was a more immediate threat than the Islamic State. In addition, Ankara argued that Washington's anti–Islamic State strategy was not enough. From the Turks' perspective, the best way to defeat Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's caliphate was regime change in Syria, where the Islamic State had fed off the chaos and bloodshed of the civil war. Ankara needed to be cautious; it was geographically close to Raqqa and Mosul, and it had permitted extremists to flow across its border with Syria and back in its effort to harm the Syrian government. If Turkey committed itself to the fight against the Islamic State, it would be an easy target for retaliation.

Second, Washington's air strikes against the Islamic State and its coordination with friendly forces on the ground—mostly Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, as well as elements of the Iraqi Security Forces—were critical to countering the threat that Baghdadi's forces represented, but these measures alone could only degrade the group's military capacity. That in and of itself was a good thing, but defeat was an entirely different story. Even if it had been US policy to "make the sand glow," the political and theological nature of the problem of the Islamic State made the statement empty rhetoric. The military component of the fight against the Islamic State was critical in keeping the group at bay and rolling back its territorial gains, but the Islamic State could only be defeated in the realm of ideas. As the United States itself proved when it killed Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al-Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula's Anwar al-Awlaki, and Osama bin Laden, warheads and bullets are extraordinarily effective and efficient ways to kill people, but they do not kill sentiment. It is hard to imagine what message the United States can bring to bear in this intra-Muslim and intra-Arab struggle that could contribute to the group's defeat. Washington has proven that it can fight ideological battles—the United States defeated Nazism and communism—but that does not mean it can play the same role in the war of ideas with the Islamic State. Without a doubt, the United States

stands for important and universal values, but it is ill-equipped in the ideological campaign against the terror group largely because American policymakers have proven time and again that they do not understand the Arab and Muslim worlds. More important, Washington's vision, which is based on a specific version of the American experience, does not resonate with those attracted to what the Islamic State has to offer and is thus not a potent alternative to its grand religious and political project. In the mid-2000s, Washington's message about democracy had some impact, but never as much as supporters of the Freedom Agenda had hoped it would. The Middle East in 2005 was also a very different place from the one it had become in 2015.

That decade was critical in both good ways and bad. About halfway through, Arabs rose up and demanded economic, political, and social change. A few years later, Turks vented their anger at a leader and ruling party that emulated the politics and tactics of recently deposed Arab dictators. Roughly five years after these events, countries in the Middle East seemed no closer to democracy than before Mohammed al-Bouazizi took his own life. Since that time, American officials have wrestled with Tunisia's fragile transition, Egypt's resurgent authoritarianism, Turkey's deliberalization, and Libya's fragmentation. The result has consistently been frustration. This is because of both the nature of the problems and the expectations that Washington sets in the way it talks about them. Obama's May 2011 declaration that "after decades of accepting the world as it is in the region, we have a chance to pursue the world as it should be" captures a quintessentially American ideal about the world, Washington's role in it, and the desire to help people realize their dreams of democracy. This was the reason for the stream of unsatisfying reports, recommendations, and proposals coming from the American foreign policy establishment.

As noted, it was actually Obama who expressed caution during that moment of enthusiasm in the spring of 2011 about Washington's role in the region. When that moment morphed into one of profound pessimism, the question before officials remained essentially the same as it had been five years earlier: what should the United States do? The easy answer is to recycle the litany of "Washington musts" and the "United States shoulds," propose a regional investment bank, encourage the growth of small and medium enterprises, and devise new ways

to cooperate with international partners to support change. Perhaps some of this might help, which would be a good thing, but against the backdrop of the actual political dynamics roiling Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Turkey, they seem beside the point. It would be better for American officials and the policy community to recognize that there is not much for the United States to do. This is a difficult proposition to accept given the turbulence, authoritarianism, and bloodshed that is the daily fare of headlines coming from these countries. Even if good news does come from Tunisia—the last refuge for optimists in an environment of failure—the overall trend is uncertainty and instability.

The underlying reasons for the parlous state of politics—the non-revolutions of the region, sticky institutions, and identity—should inform US policy in the region. Under these circumstances, it seems clear that the high-stakes struggles under way in the Middle East are so great that their resolution is well beyond the tools of American diplomacy. Consequently, the United States should not even try to resolve them. This is not a cultural argument about the suitability of Arabs and Muslims to democracy. Instead, it reflects the reality that US policy can accomplish little in a political environment where it is at best a bit player. What can the United States offer Tunisians in the bitter fight to overcome the legacies of Habib Bourguiba and Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali? Or to Egyptians who are engaged in an iteration of a struggle they have been waging since the late nineteenth century? Does Washington have the answer to Turkey's complex and connected layers of political contestation related to secularism, religiosity, Turkishness, Kurdishness, republicanism, and Ottomanism? How can Americans put Libya back together? The problems are daunting; in fact, for the United States they are too difficult, if not impossible. The responsibility for answers to them lies squarely with Arabs and Turks.

It will nevertheless be hard for American policymakers to stop talking about democracy. It is part of the American identity running from the Boston Tea Party and President Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1940 declaration that the United States "must be a great arsenal of democracy" to President Ronald Reagan's Westminster Speech in June 1982, the Clinton administration's democratic enlargement, and, of course, George W. Bush's Freedom Agenda. Yet policymakers would do well to recognize that the conditions for democratic change do not currently

exist and Washington can do little to forge them from Arab and Turkish societies. As the Iraq war and the uprisings demonstrated, these conditions come from within.

The United States can do some things, however. It can uphold—at least rhetorically—the principles and values that Obama laid out in his remarks at the State Department in May 2011, along with the sense of humility he expressed that day. Had his administration emphasized nonviolence, tolerance, pluralism, accountability, and the equal application of the law, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Turkey would still look the way they do, but at the barest minimum, Washington would have avoided the worst of all possible worlds in which virtually all the players in these countries harbor profound mistrust toward the United States. Current and former policymakers often protest how hard it is to be consistent, but in the tumult that is the present (and likely future) Middle East, unwavering public support for first-order principles would likely serve Washington best. This may sound suspiciously similar to some of the airy-fairy policy recommendations outlined earlier. It surely is. Emphasizing basic principles will not make Middle Eastern democracies, but it is also cost-free and consistent with American values. That is worth something in a region where people tend to view Washington as a peddler of pernicious double standards.

The United States still has an opportunity to invest in the Middle East's future, but not through the good governance and democracy promotion programs of the recent past that have not worked. Scarce resources are better spent on the kind of technical assistance programs that improve the daily lives of people. This would be hard in Libya, where central authority is fractured and likely permanently impaired, and in Turkey, where development assistance ended long ago. Investments in agriculture, education, and public health can have a profound, though often unseen, impact on politics. History is never a blueprint for the future, but it does offer insights into the present. When British colonial officials in Egypt instituted a series of administrative, agricultural, and educational reforms beginning in the 1880s, it had an important, but unintended effect, on Egypt's masses. A new technocratic class emerged. It was this group of new professionals, relatively wealthier farmers, and administrators that formed the crucible of Egypt's nationalist movement. The analogy is not perfect, but wealthier, healthier, and better-educated

populations may be in a better position to demand change and, unlike the last five years, achieve it. Nothing is guaranteed, of course. The path dependencies of authoritarian institutions and identity politics will likely have a negative impact on the Middle East for years to come. These ideas for US policy are deeply unsatisfying, especially given the magnitude and scale of the problems in the Middle East. Yet in the complex reality of the region, beyond America's control, policymakers need to think small and patiently wait for the world to turn again. This leaves the bottom-line question concerning America's core interests in the Middle East—oil, Israel, and ensuring that no country dominates the region—along with two derivatives of these interests, counterterrorism and nonproliferation. Rethinking these interests or reconsidering how best to achieve them is long overdue, especially given the turbulence and tumult of the region. Yet that debate would require political will and foresight that are presently in short supply in the United States. Even if that conversation could be had, it is likely that the United States would still be committed to securing these interests but would seek to do so in different ways. In the interim, the uncertain politics of the Middle East will force Washington to improvise as it tries to salvage what it can from a fractured regional order. If the last five years are any measure, however, American policymakers will continue to find themselves in the profoundly awkward position of rhetorically supporting progressive change in Egypt while working with a military and leadership that rejects liberalizing reform, of reintervening in Libya, standing by as Turkey's Justice and Development Party continues to limit political contestation, and holding Tunisia out as a shining example of success. Of course, policymakers have a choice, but it would mean forsaking either security interests, which have always been paramount, or their public commitment to democratic development. It seems that neither the Obama administration nor its successor would be willing to make that choice.

The inevitable result will be more of the policy improvisation and contradictions of the Obama years no matter what politicians say on the campaign trail about the need for American leadership. The idea that the Middle East just needs leadership is oversold and half-baked. With the exception of Iraq, the Middle East looks the way it does because of the outcomes that people who live there have produced. The region has always been hard for outsiders to manage short of suffocating

force; it is now harder. The revolutions that were not to be, a cadre of leaders intent on leveraging political institutions for their own interests, and a prevailing sense of failure and disorientation have fueled unprecedented instability and violence. These may not be "rooted in conflicts that go back a millennia" as Obama erroneously indicated in his last State of the Union address, but that still does not mean that their outcome depends on what Washington does.[67] That is because what ails the Middle East has less to do with the United States than Washington's political class and the foreign policy establishment are inclined to believe. Policymakers should get used to it because it will likely be the story of the Middle East for at least a generation to come.