

Analysis

Overcoming mutual mistrust in the Middle East

Obama's challenges to sustain U.S. strategic interests

Roberta Haar

Since the end of the Second World War the U.S. has concentrated its attention on a few key allies in the Middle East, namely, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel. While the end of the Cold War and 9/11 impacted U.S. strategic interests in the region, for the most part relations between the U.S. and its allies remained steadfast. However, the Arab Spring upheavals that started in January 2011 altered their partnerships considerably by creating opposing pressures that have ultimately led to distrust. This article identifies the sources of mutual mistrust that have arisen between America and its key allies since the uprisings that are currently remaking the Middle East.

Strategic interests over time

The strategic goals of the Cold War greatly influenced America's relationship with its key allies. For instance, the role that Saudi Arabia and Egypt played in supporting the CIA's secret war in Afghanistan from 1979-1988 clearly supported U.S. Cold War strategy. The Saudis supplied both money and volunteers to fight against the Soviet army in Afghanistan, while the Egyptians supplied the Soviet-made arms. The continued flow of reasonably-priced oil and the security of Israel were also important Cold War American strategic goals in the region.

The events of 9/11 meant that America's strategic interests shifted to focus on counterterrorism and the promotion of democratic societies. George W. Bush and his Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice initiated a program of political change and democratic reform in the region entitled *The Freedom Agenda*. The thinking underlying the program was that it was the nature of the authoritative regimes in the Middle East that fostered political alienation, which when combined with limited economic opportunity and extremist ideologies created an environment where primarily young, angry men were willing to take up arms, not just against their own state, but against the U.S. too. Promotion of *The Freedom Agenda* translated into supporting free elections in the Palestinian territories in 2006, which ultimately delivered a result contrary to U.S. interests. As Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, gained a parliamentary majority in the elections Bush lost enthusiasm for promoting democracy in the region.

The revolutionary awakening added new dimensions to the relationship America has with its key allies as well as the region as a whole. On the one hand, the uprisings open up opportunities for the continued promotion of American values and the championing of participatory societies. However, on the other hand, the movements undermine traditional U.S. strategic interests in the region, specifically access to oil, Israel's security and counterterrorism. Regrettably, the recent gains by the Muslim Brotherhood in several countries might also indicate that demands for more democracy may really be a mechanism for the empowerment of fundamental Islam. The Arab Spring's removal of autocratic

regimes additionally creates favorable conditions for al Qaeda and its affiliates to restore their networks and replenish their numbers with recently released prisoners. A resurgent al Qaeda certainly opposes American strategic interests in the region.

These conflicting pressures create tensions and mutual mistrust between America and its key partners. For example, America abandoned Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, who had been a vital supporter of American counterterrorism, in favor of the democratic movement on Tahrir Square, whose younger and more secular members likely associate the U.S. with corruption and oppression because of its past support of the discredited Mubarak regime. Additionally, the group winning the subsequent elections, the Muslim Brotherhood, has long been anti-American and as a result the U.S. has a problematic relationship with it. The Brotherhood's newly-elected leader Muhammad Morsi might decide to not only break the treaty that Egypt has with Israel but to openly foster Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt and beyond. Thus, while the revolutionary awakening creates opportunities for Obama to deliver on the promises and the rhetoric of his 2009 Cairo speech—to renew American values in foreign policy and build democratic institutions abroad—the uprisings also generate discord from a strategic point of view. New regimes may not support traditional American strategic interests, creating new challenges for the Obama administration.

Egypt, America's largest Arab ally

The U.S. began developing its strategic relationship with Egypt in the 1970s when the U.S. helped broker the peace agreement with Israel. Over time Egypt became a focal point of U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East, with America investing close to \$70 billion, mostly in the form of military aid. Despite the money and support, Mubarak practiced a policy of deflecting hostility against his own weak government onto Israel and America. This blaming the American "other" sowed anti-Americanism within Egyptian society illustrated, for example, by Egyptians celebrating the terrorist strikes of 9/11.

While the George W. Bush administration did attempt to implement *The Freedom Agenda* in Egypt, U.S. support for Egypt did not hinge on its gradual reform. Instead, the strong relationship rested on the continued adherence of Egypt's peace treaty with Israel, which Mubarak abided by assiduously, and after 9/11 counterterrorism efforts. Despite Mubarak's dependability in advancing these strategic goals, Obama played an important role in the events that led up to his departure. After the violence against the protesters increased and Mubarak made a series of belligerent speeches, Obama became convinced that Mubarak should step down.¹ Obama told the generals of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) on 10 February 2011 that he supported a timely transition to a new regime and Mubarak stepped down the next day.

Although the military has been close to America, during the revolutionary awakening it is clear that Obama also viewed it as a brake on a transition towards democracy. Instead, Obama chose to give qualified support to the group that won elections in June 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party. This support is unanticipated, since the U.S. has been wary of the movement as it provides the intellectual and theoretical roots of today's Arab Islamism and Islamist extremism. Raymond Stock of the Foreign Policy Research Institute describes the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology as anti-Western, anti-secular, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, anti-female and Muslim-supremacist.² It also has links to Shiite Iran.

In fact on his first official overseas trip, Morsi visited Iran to attend the Non-Aligned Movement meeting just after he went to China. Morsi's visit is the first head of state visit to Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. David Schenker of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy indicates that both destinations appear to be "part of a larger strategy to basically end Egyptian reliance on the West."³

Equally troubling the Muslim Brotherhood is closely linked to al Qaeda. Not only did former Brotherhood member Ayman al-Zawahiri replace Osama bin Laden as the leader of al Qaeda but in his first speech in Tahrir Square after his election, Stock points out that Morsi pledged "to a wildly cheering crowd that he will work to free Shaykh Omar Abdel-Rahman," who "is now serving a life sentence in North Carolina for plotting to blow up the World Trade Center, the U.N. building, and numerous other major sites in New York." Morsi also made inflammatory speeches against Israelis—calling Egyptians to nurse their children and grandchildren on hatred for Jews. With a history like this, the U.S. fears that Morsi will break the treaty that Egypt has with Israel and possibly even support Islamists.

Although Congress expressed outrage to Morsi's pledge to free Abdel-Rahman and, more recently, to Morsi's lukewarm reaction to the September 2012 anti-American riots, the Obama administration's response has been muted. In July 2012, Obama sent a letter to Morsi that extended support for the economy of the new democratic Egypt. This letter clearly emboldened Morsi with regards to the military because not long after he quietly dismissed army generals and began increasing the number of Brotherhood members in governing institutions, including the committee that drafted the new constitution and his cabinet, where Islamists were put in charge of economic-related ministries. Many moderate advisers and ministers resigned in protest, further weakening diversity in the government.

Obama is in a tricky situation: on the one hand he wants to support the democratic movements that were spawned by the Arab Spring and that ultimately brought Morsi to power; but on the other hand, the organization that Morsi heads professes as its goal the destruction of the American way of life as well as the destruction of Israel. In walking the tightrope of this testing situation, Obama made clear to Egypt's new leaders that U.S. economic and military aid is tied to good behavior, especially upholding the peace treaty with Israel. Whereas Morsi's trip to Beijing is certainly designed in part to get around any strings tied to U.S. money, Egypt's rapidly declining economy may push Morsi to uphold Egypt's side of its strategic partnership with the U.S.

Saudi Arabia's security bargain

America's traditionally strong relationship with Saudi Arabia has also developed elements of distrust. In particular, the Saudis paid close attention to how easily Mubarak was abandoned in Egypt. For the Saudis, Mubarak's predicament raised serious doubts about America's reliability in protecting their own authoritarian regime. They were also wary of Obama's vigorous efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the beginning of his first term. Before his much celebrated speech to the Muslim world in Cairo, Obama first flew to Saudi Arabia to persuade the Saudis to normalize relations with Israel—a task in which he did not get far.

However the deterioration of the previously strong Saudi-American relationship had already begun under Clinton and worsened under George W. Bush. After 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, relations were at their worst. Since the end of WWII, the U.S. had provided a security umbrella over the Kingdom in return for a guarantee on the continuous flow of acceptably-priced oil. But 9/11 put this pact under immense pressure since 15 out of the 19 hijackers were Saudis as was Osama bin Laden. Not only were many in Congress and the media questioning the depth of Saudi Arabia's friendship because of its links to the terrorists but the American response to 9/11, the removal of Saddam Hussein, was a major shock to the Saudis. Regime change in Iraq transformed the U.S. into a major source of insecurity because it had installed a pro-Iranian, Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad.⁴ The Saudis countered by asking the U.S. Air Force to leave the Prince Sultan Air Base, an indispensable hub 50 miles southeast of Riyadh, and stopped negotiations with American oil companies to look for more deposits of gas and oil and started negotiations with Chinese, Russian and European firms instead.

Despite these differences over Iraq, in 2004 the Saudis did try to comply with an American request to bring down the price of oil by conveying more of their reserve capacity to the world market. However, this attempt at manipulating the price had no effect. After the financial crisis the U.S. again wanted the Saudis to bring down the price of oil, but by this time the acceptable per barrel price both countries had in mind greatly differed (the Saudis wanted \$75-80 per barrel while Americans wanted much lower). The Saudis are also aware that the U.S. today receives less of its energy needs from the Kingdom. Today, America receives most of its oil from Canada, Latin America and Africa. Moreover, sources of oil are more diversified with technology and market-driven innovation delivering vast reserves of shale oil gas inside America. This change in energy sources means if any sort of pact still exists between the Saudis and the Americans it has more to do with the price of oil and not the oil itself. And, today China seems more relevant to price determination than Saudi Arabia.

A further complicating factor is related to Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. Starting in the early 1980s, King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz initiated a Wahhabi Islam proselytizing campaign in order to counter the aggressive Shiite theocracy of Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran. Harvey Sicherman of the Foreign Policy Research Institute writes that, "The Saudis would counter Shiite propaganda abroad with Wahhabi missionary activity on a large scale, especially through subsidized education (the madrasas) in South and Southeast Asia."⁵ Unfortunately, by the 1990s the \$10 billion a year spent proselytizing Wahhabi Islam began to contradict America's counterterrorism strategy.

Adam Garfinkle argued in 2001 that American experts on Saudi Arabia, radical Islam and the Middle East knew for years that the ruling al-Saud family allowed wealthy Saudis to fund extremists in return for a pledge that acts of extremism would not be undertaken on Saudi soil. Fanaticism was instead directed toward Israel and the United States. Despite the growing threat of violence, Garfinkle writes that consecutive American administrations did not address the problem because they were "too afraid to raise such a sensitive issue with the Saudi government, lest U.S. economic interests in the Kingdom suffer."⁶ Garfinkle further points out that Wahhabi evangelism was particularly successful in Pashtun Pakistan. As a matter of fact, Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) branch is filled with Wahhabist adherents. The actuality that Osama bin Laden was found in Abbottabad, where many

Pakistani generals have retirement homes and only a stone's throw away from an elite military academy, hints at the Pakistani military's sympathy with Wahhabi Islamists.

The partnership with Saudi Arabia also brings out the more convoluted elements of America's views on human rights and its commitment to the promotion of democracy. Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy that embraces a form of Islam that is intended to foster political apathy.⁷ For years the U.S. promoted a theory of "Arab exceptionalism" or more recently "monarchical exceptionalism" to justify supporting strategically valuable absolute monarchies in the Gulf. When the Bush administration's democracy agenda tried to shift this policy and coax the Saudis toward liberalizing, they recoiled.

Obama too has found it hard to establish a basis of cooperation let alone a way to coax the Kingdom to a more participatory society. The Saudi state still incarcerates thousands of political prisoners, arrests people arbitrarily, holds secret trials, bans thousands from travelling and muzzles the press. In the wake of the revolutionary awakening the Kingdom also successfully muzzled any push for reform. As *The Economist* put it, "There was no Saudi Spring."⁸ Although King Abdullah did pour \$130 billion into housing, education and unemployment benefits in early 2011 as a response to the wave of revolutions sweeping the region, he very pointedly did not make any political concessions. Indeed, the Kingdom's desire to avoid political change is reflected in the rapidity with which it moved to help Bahrain put down pro-democracy demonstrations. The Saudis feared that demonstrations might spread to their eastern province, where most of Saudi oil is produced and also where the majority of Saudi Arabia's Shia Muslims live. For Saudi leaders the demonstrations directly threatened Saudi oil deposits.

Although Obama did call both the Saudi and Bahraini kings to encourage them to meet what the U.S. thought were reasonable demands by Bahraini citizens, the Saudis replied that if the U.S. pushed the Bahraini King from power as it had pushed Mubarak in Egypt the Saudis would "cause a break in U.S.-Saudi relations."⁹ Strife also threatened the price of oil, which had already risen because of the effects of the Arab Spring in Libya. These two factors, combined with a sluggish U.S. economic recovery that would weaken if oil costs went up (jeopardizing his reelection prospects), meant Obama adhered to America's default strategy of placing interests above values in U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia. Accordingly, Obama gave his assent to Saudi military assistance to Bahrain.

America's special relationship with Israel

America's partnership with Israel is under pressure over differences in how to react to the Arab Spring's increase in Arab Islamism and the Islamic Republic of Iran's nuclear weapons program. Certainly Israelis fear that the relatively stable region of the past couple of decades has shifted against them.¹⁰ Many Israelis also misinterpreted Obama's attempts early in his first term to improve America's standing in the Arab and Muslim world as a deliberate policy to move the U.S. away from Israel in order to ingratiate Arabs. In a bid to capitalize on these fears, especially the rise of Islamism, Russian President Vladimir Putin told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that he should think twice before he wanted Bashar al-Assad gone in Syria because an antagonistic Muslim regime could rise there, just as one might be rising in Egypt and Tunisia.

On a personal level, interactions between Obama and Netanyahu acquired elements of mistrust, which is reflected in Obama's failed attempts to get peace talks going anywhere and that Netanyahu tried to scare pro-Israel voters into supporting Mitt Romney in the 2012 presidential campaign. The Israeli leader even appeared in an alarmist campaign ad that aired in select Florida localities where Jewish people were concentrated.¹¹ Netanyahu also pushed Obama to get tougher on Iran by threatening the power of the Israel lobby in the lead up to the elections. Netanyahu's September 2012 speech before the annual United Nation General Assembly, in which he urged the setting of a "red line" that would trigger military strikes against Iran, exemplifies the many sharp attacks made by the Israeli premier against Obama's policies in the Middle East. The additional fact that Obama did not meet with Netanyahu during his visit to the U.S. prompted speculations that U.S.-Israeli relations were in crisis. For Obama's part, his initial hard press to stop Netanyahu's government from building illegal settlements on occupied Palestinian West Bank land has softened as it became clear he might suffer political costs at home.

Despite his fraught relationship with Netanyahu, Obama has continued to provide Israel with record-high levels of Foreign Military Financing (FMF). Since WWII, the U.S. has given \$115 billion, making Israel the largest cumulative recipient of U.S. foreign assistance.¹² Obama will not deviate from this policy of backing Israel's security requirements in part because he believes that threats to security keep Israelis from making peace with the Palestinians. In line with this thinking Obama requested \$3.1 billion in FMF for 2012 and made advanced-weapons systems available, including the fifth-generation stealth Joint Strike Fighter.¹³ Additionally, Obama has pledged to use all instruments of U.S. power to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, which is further evidenced by his administration's efforts to build an international consensus for employing multilateral sanctions against Iran. Not only have the Europeans, some of which get 13% of their petroleum from Iran, supported UN Security Council Resolution 1929, but Obama persuaded the Russians and the Chinese to support it as well.

So far, not so good

Undoubtedly, the revolutionary awakening in the Arab world is seriously testing the United States' ability to shape the Middle East and in particular to influence its main allies. Despite rhetoric that he would make peacemaking and improved relations with the Muslim world priorities of his presidency, Obama's response to the conflicting tensions created by the uprisings has been anti-ideological pragmatism, which has pleased few and opened him to attacks from both the left and right.¹⁴ Obama's policy emerges in part because he realizes that today the U.S. exercises much less influence in the region but also because it is his personal approach. Obama uses soaring rhetoric in his speeches but practices a pragmatic realism in his foreign policy. To date, this approach has not overcome the mutual mistrust that has developed as a result of the Arab Spring between the U.S. and its three most important allies in the region.

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