

American Foreign Policy and Diplomacy During and After the Arab Spring, the Challenge of Democratization & the Legacy of President Obama's Administration

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Recent scholarship on great-power foreign policy and diplomacy undermines President Obama's realist approach compared to his predecessor Bush's neoconservative idealism approach to the Middle East's geopolitical enduring Arab-Israeli conflict, the rising power of political Islam, the unexpected events of the Arab Spring, along with the challenge of democratization. This article genealogically examines President Obama's foreign policy and diplomacy in response to the chronology of the unfolding events of the Arab Spring in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen that witnessed the Arab Spring of 2011. President Obama and his top diplomats' performances in response to each country recounting events were assessed, critically analyzed, and compared to the other in terms of the U.S. bilateral relations with each country, U.S. national interests, and her strategic goals in the Middle East region. The researcher analyzed the aforementioned issues within the complicated realities of the Palestinian/Arab Israeli conflict, the rising power of political Islam on the Middle East's ground manifested by the Muslim Brotherhood rise to power in Egypt, ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and Libya, and the rivalry between Sunni and Shia'a—supported by Iran in Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. The research findings indicate that in a broader sense Obama's foreign policy and diplomacy has been a movement away from the U.S. foreign policy and diplomacy since World War II, particularly when he (Obama) decided that the U.S. should abstain from exercising the veto power at the United Nations (UN) on resolution 2334 in support of the Palestinian right to have their own state, thus following the consensus of other permanent members of the UN security council and international law.

Keywords: American foreign policy, diplomacy, Arab Spring, political Islam, national interests

Introduction: American Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Hans J. Morgenthau (1973) in his seminal work *Politics Among Nations: The Structure for Power and Peace*, argued that “the objective of foreign policy must be defined in terms of the nation's national interest, and must be supported with adequate power”. Without sufficient power and protecting its national interests, a country cannot survive, let alone prevail, in a tumultuous world (Roskin, Cord, Medeiros, & Jones, 2017). Diplomacy is the putting of foreign policies into practice (Roskin & Berry, 2012). It is also the way nations communicate with each other, feel out their positions and defuse incidents before they get problematic. Kjell Engelbrekt (2016) argued that there are three partly diverging, though mostly overlapping; concepts of

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diplomacy are employed to capture the variety of practices of great powers in particular and of professional diplomats generally. The three concepts, expanded by Engelbrekt, are diplomacy as negotiation, as representation, and lastly, as the employment of leverage. With regard to the latter dimension, which is closely associated with the narrower notion of great-power diplomacy, it is important to not fully accept the recurring claim of many scholar-practitioners that diplomacy is wholly divorced from the use of force. A country's diplomats are its eyes, ears, mind, and mouth. Diplomacy is the operating tool of a nation's foreign policy according to Morgenthau (1973). It has four folds: (1) Diplomacy must determine its objectives in the light of the power actually and potentially available for the pursuit of these objectives; (2) Diplomacy must assess the objectives of other nations and the power actually and potentially available for the pursuit of these objectives; (3) Diplomacy must determine to what extent these different objectives are compatible with each other; and (4) Diplomacy must employ the means suited to the pursuit of its objectives. Failure in any one of these tasks may threaten or jeopardize a country's national interests and the success of foreign policy toward particular geographic region and possibly, the peace in the world.

The author of this research argues that "U.S. foreign policy and diplomacy during President Obama's first term, during and after the Arab Spring is just the latest act in a complex foreign policy situation in the Middle East since the establishment of the State of Israel after World War II. The latest U.S. decision in the last few months of President Obama's Administration to abstain from voting at the United Nations Security Council on Resolution 2334 of 2016 (which recognizes the Palestinian rights to have their own state side by side with Israel) may indicate that President Obama during his second term seemed to be leaning toward putting U.S. national interests first and following international law. This new approach can be a turning point toward signaling a new well balanced U.S. foreign policy and diplomacy toward the Middle East".

The purpose of this paper is to make a step by step assessment of the administration of President Barak Obama's foreign policy and diplomacy in the Middle East during and after the Arab Spring within the dynamics of the complicated realities of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the rise of political Islam. To achieve this goal the following specific questions are developed to guide this research: (1) What are the driving forces of the U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East since World War II? (2) Can the U.S. democratization efforts in the Middle East succeed within the context of the complicated realities of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the rise political Islam? (3) How did American diplomacy react to the events of the Arab Spring in the Middle East? Hence, the scope of this research will not cover some questions such as: whether the remedies that are prescribed by American foreign policy toward political Islam were successful or not? This is due to the fact that the entire Middle East is currently still in transition after the Arab Spring, and it is too early to draw conclusions during unpredictable unfolding events. Or whether American or Western Style democracy can work in Islamic or Arab culture? This is due to the fact that all Arab and Islamic authoritarian rulers including U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, and Egypt are still skeptical of incorporating Western democracies' practices into their regimes.

The Driving Forces of the U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East Since World War II

H. Kissinger (1994) in his seminal work on *Diplomacy* argued that in the 20th century, no country has influenced international relations and diplomacy as decisively and at the same time as ambivalently as the U.S. The ambivalence in the U.S. foreign policy can be seen in its relationship with Israel. J. Mearsheimer and S. Walt (2015) argued that since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1947, and especially since the six-Day

War in 1967, the centerpiece of US Middle Eastern policy has been an unwavering support for Israel. After the terrorist attack on New York on 9/11/2001 the Bush administration's foreign policy engineered program to spread a Western Style democracy known as the Freedom Agenda throughout the Middle East as a measure to counter terrorism and radical Islamic violence. The Freedom Agenda implementation via the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and its contractors—U.S. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO), did not take into account the Islamic cultural issues rooted in the authoritarian political regimes—the product of centuries of Ottoman rule which meshed the state with the Mosque, the colonization of the British and French after World War II after the collapse of the Ottoman empire of almost all the Middle East and the created bapite authoritarian regimes obedient to colonial rule. Why has the U.S. been willing to set aside its own national interests and the security of many of its allies in order to advance the interests of another state such as Israel? Mearsheimer and Walt (2015) presented a well-researched, documented and validated persuasive argument of literature on the U.S. Israeli special relationship—*The Israel Lobby*. They argued that,

Firstly, one might assume that the attachment between the U.S. and Israel was based on common strategic interests or gripping moral imperatives, but neither explanation can account for the remarkable level of material and diplomatic support that the US provides. Instead, the drive of U.S. policy in the Middle Eastern region derives almost entirely from domestic politics, and especially the activities of the Israel lobby. Other special interest groups have managed to influence American foreign policy, but no lobby has managed to divert it as far from what the national interest would suggest, which simultaneously persuading American voters that U.S. interests and those of Israel are essentially identical.

Secondly, after the October War in 1973 U.S. foreign aid to Israel has been the largest annual recipient of direct economic and military assistance since 1976, and is the largest recipient in total since World War II, to the amount of well over \$190 billion (in 2016). Israel receives about three billion dollars in direct assistance each year, roughly on fifth of the foreign aid budget, and worth about \$500 a year for every Israeli. This largesse is especially striking since Israel is now a wealthy industrial state with a per capita income roughly equal to that of South Korea or Spain.

Thirdly, other preferential treatments which antagonize the Arab Islamic states, particularly Egypt—a country which took the risk and agreed to sign peace treaty with Israel—are that while other U.S. foreign aid recipients get their money quarterly installments, Israel receives its entire appropriation at the beginning of each fiscal year and can thus earn interest on it. Furthermore, most recipients of aid given for military purposes (including Egypt) are required to spend all of it in the U.S., Israel is allowed to use roughly 25 percent of its allocation to subsidies its own defense industry. Israel is the only recipient that does not have to account for how the aid is spent, which makes it virtually impossible to prevent the money from being used for purposes the U.S. opposes, such as building settlements on the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the potential capital of the future Palestinian state.

Fourthly, the U.S. has provided Israel with nearly three billion dollars to develop weapons systems, and has given it access to such top-drawer weaponry as Blackhawk helicopters and f-16 jets. Finally, the U.S. gives Israel access to intelligence, it denies to its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies and has turned a blind eye to Israel's acquisition of nuclear weapons, and it blocks the efforts of Arab States at the U.N. to pit Israel's nuclear arsenal on the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)'s agenda by exercising the veto power.

Fifthly, backing Israel against the Arab countries was not cheap; it complicated America's relations with the Arab world. For example, the decision to give Israel \$202 billion in emergency military aid to Israel during the October War with Egypt and Syria triggered an Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil embargo that inflicted considerable damage on the U.S. and its Western allies' economies.

Sixthly, the first Gulf War revealed the extent to which Israel was becoming a strategic burden. The U.S. could not use Israeli bases without rupturing the anti-Iraq coalition, and had to divert resources (e.g., Patriot missiles batteries) to prevent Tel Aviv doing anything that might harm the alliance against Saddam Hussein.

Seventhly, beginning in 1990, and even more after 9/11, U.S. support has been justified by the claim that both states are threatened by terrorist groups originating in the Arab and Muslim world, and by "rogue states" that back these groups and seek weapons of mass destruction. This is taken to mean not only that Washington should give Israel a free hand in dealing with the Palestinians and not press it to make concessions until all Palestinian terrorists are imprisoned or dead, but that the U.S. should go after countries like Iran and Syria. Israel is thus seen as a crucial ally in the war on terror, because its enemies are America's enemies. In fact, Israel is a liability in the war on terror and the broader effort to deal with rogue states. The terrorist organizations that threaten Israel do not threaten the U.S., except when it intervenes against them (as in Lebanon in 1982). Moreover, Palestinian terrorism is not random violence directed against Israel or the West; it is largely a response to Israel's prolonged campaign to colonies the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Finally, the U.S. has a terrorism problem in good part because it is so closely allied with Israel, not the other way around.

To many Muslims, Sunni or Shi'a, the sense of injustice in international relations and Western diplomacy is symbolized by the fate of the Palestinian people, especially the perceived Western led by the U.S. use of double standards. Strictly upholding resolutions and international law when it comes to Muslim countries, but not when it involves Israel, are something of which all Muslims are sharply aware and resent. The treatment of Palestinians is one of the major areas of policy where the approach we in America and Europe could abate or exacerbate Arab hostility, and build rather than burn bridges between the West and the whole of the Islamic world. The reality of the creation of Israel from the Arab point of view dates back to the famous British Foreign Minister Balfour's Declaration of 1917, which promised a national home for the Jews in Palestine. Mohamed Heikal (1973) documented the Arab and Muslims perception of this declaration as a result of the Zionist movement pressure upon the victorious British government after World War I. After this declaration the Zionist movement attempted to create a Jewish majority in Palestine or at least to establish a large enough proportion of the population which would consider the establishment of a Jewish state. The true picture of the Balfour Declaration from the Arab and Muslims point of view as President Nasser of Egypt said is "a fraud which any tribunal would condemn, it was a question of he who did not own giving to him who did not deserve".

Political Islam and Transition to Democracy

In his book *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State*, Noah Feldman (2008) argued that when empires fall, they tend to stay dead. The same is true of government systems. There are, however, two prominent examples of governing systems reemerging after they had ceased to exist. Feldman explicated that one is democracy; the second is political Islam.

Democracy is a form of government that had some limited success in a small Greek city-state for a couple of hundred years, disappeared, and then was resurrected two thousand years later. Its re-creators were non-Greeks, living under radically different conditions, for whom democracy was a word handed down in the

philosophy books, to be embraced only fitfully and after some serious reinterpretations by British, French and American revolutionary and reformers.

The story of political Islam according to Noah Feldman (2008) is one of power, decline and revival. Its founder Muhammed (570-632), was both prophet and warrior. For the faithful, his historic accomplishment was to receive the divine revelation which was set down in the *Qur'an* and became the essential framework for Muslim life and Muslim law. But Muhammed established not merely a religion and a code but a community *al-Umma al-Islamia*—the model for *worldwide family of societies*.

The Prophet transformed the warring tribes of Arabia into a federation under his control. It was a political and military force that the Arabians set out, under the banner of Islam, on the road of conquest. Under the caliphs who succeeded Muhammad, Islam took on two empires—the Byzantine and the Sasanian, and from them shaped its own. Little more than a century after the Prophet's death, the Islamic empire stretched from Spain to Samarkand. The Muslims established centers of power and culture in Damascus and Baghdad and eventually in Cairo, Fez, and Beyond.

From the time the Prophet Muhammad and his followers withdrew from Mecca to form their own political community until just after World War I, Feldman argued, almost exactly 13 hundred years, Islamic governments ruled states that ranged from fortified towns to transcontinental empires. These states, separated in time, space, and size, were so Islamic that they did not need the adjective to describe themselves. A common constitutional theory, developing and changing over the course of centuries, obtained in all. A Muslim ruler governed according to God's law, expressed through principles and rules of the *Shari'a* that were expounded by the Islamic scholars *al-alamah* and Islamic Jurisprudence *al-fakh*. The ruler's satisfaction of the duty to command was based on what the Islamic law required and ban what it prohibited made his authority lawful and legitimate.

John Hursh (2009) argued that "Islamic law offers a distinctive characteristic not found in other legal systems. While the sources of the law are considered divine and reliable, and therefore impervious to the influences of culture, the application of the law creates diversity in locality not present in other legal systems". Consequently, since the dawn of history, the application of Islamic law and Jurisprudence is based on the following hierarchy: Firstly, interpretations of Qoran; Secondly, the *Sunna* or the interpretations of Mohammed behavior and practice observed by his close followers and articulated in his saying and doing while in his daily contacts with Muslims and confronting social issues of his society; Thirdly, *Agmah* or the consensus of Islamic scholars *al-alamah* at particular historical period on particular verdict or issue facing the Islamic community; and fourthly, *Qiyas* or analogical reasoning. Before employing the practice of *Qiyas*, an Islamic jurist would first need to attempt to resolve the legal question through the *Qur'an* or the *Sunna*, then, *Agmah*. If all the three sources did not provided explicit direction, a jurist could then apply *Qiyas* or analogize a parallel example based on the underlying principles within the *Qur'an* and the *Sunna*.

In the 19th century, Arthur Goldschmidt Jr. and Aomar Boum (2015), Jillian Schwedler and Deborah J. Gerner (2008), William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton (2013), and Noah Feldman (2008) noted that, since the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, distinctively Islamic government began to falter after England and France—the winning powers, divided its lands. Its lands were divided into Western spheres of influence, guided, if not governed, by France and England. And in 1924 the Islamic state died when the new Turkish government that eventually established itself on the Ottoman Empire's Anatolian rump declared itself secular and abolished the Caliphate.

In the absence of the caliph—the Islamic ruler, the new governing arrangements championed by internal reformers and pressed by Western debt-holders resulted in institutional changes like a legislature and a legislative code shook the foundations of the traditional and unwritten constitution guided by the *Qur'an* that had prevailed under traditional Islamic rule. Yet today the Islamic state rides again and is championed by the Muslim Brotherhood international organization and its affiliates in the entire Muslim world. Governments in majority Muslim countries are increasingly declaring themselves Islamic. Their new constitutional regimes replace secular arrangements adopted over the last century with government based in some way on the *shari'a*. In the Muslim countries running the geographical span from Morocco to Indonesia, substantial majorities say that the *shari'a* should be a source of law for their states. In simple terms, they argue that *Qur'an* must be the source of constitutions, law, and governance, and *shari'a* must see whether the law is in the direction of *Qur'an* or not in the jurisprudence of Islam. In important and populous countries like Egypt and Pakistan, large majorities say that Islamic law should be the only source of legislation. Wherever democratic elections are held in Muslim countries, large numbers of citizens vote for *shari'a*-oriented political parties that are best described as Islamist. The programs of these parties differ from one country to another, but they embrace democratic elections and basic rights.

They promise economic reform, and an end to corruption. When studying an established political regime, one can rely on relatively stable economic, social, cultural, and partisan categories to identify, analyze, and evaluate the identities and strategies of those defending the status quo and those struggling to reform or transform it. The aforementioned process according to Cammack, Dunne, Hamzawy, Lynch, Muasher, Sayigh, and Yahya of the Carnegie Endowment For International Peace (2017) and Wittes, Cook, Heydemann, Brumberg, Campbell, Diamond, Diwan, Hamid, Hawthorne, Heydemann, Jenkins, Lebaron, Mezran, Mallot, Shehadi, Stephan, and Yahya (2016) of the Brookings Institution, is difficult and sometimes impossible to do in transition from authoritarian rule particularly the one is controlled by the military and security establishments as in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria cases, during their respective transitions after the Arab Spring. In many cases, it is almost impossible to specify *ex ante* which classes, sectors, institutions, and other groups will take what role, opt for which issue, or support what alternatives. Political alliances are formed and dissolved or changed rapidly and unexpectedly.

U.S. Democratization Efforts in the Middle East

A quick glance at the U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East since World War II demonstrates the need for change in the face of the region's different realities. During 1945-1989, U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East region promoted stability, the preservation of the status quo, and reinforced repressive rule in the Arab world, rather than promoted democracy. The period of 1990-2001 however saw the end of the Cold War, shifting the balance in favor of expanding civil society and democracy and political openings in some parts of the Middle East region, particularly the countries who are receiving U.S. military and economic aid such as Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Bahrain. With the 9/11 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S., however, U.S. foreign policy reverted back to supporting repressive regimes in a bid to secure their cooperation in the global war on terror.

In 2006, the U.S. under President Bush's "freedom agenda" (which was the road map for democratic reforms Western Style with no consideration to the Islamic culture which the state and the Mosque are intertwined), put the country (the U.S.) in an uncomfortable position when Hamas won elections in the

Palestinian territories. Fear that radical, militant, or overly Islamist regimes might come to replace the secular, Western-friendly predecessors, was powerful.

Obama's Foreign Policy and Diplomacy Toward the Muslim World and the Middle East

John Esposito (2011) argued that the election of Barak H. Obama in 2008 created a new atmosphere in the Muslim world and globally, and hope of potential redirection of U.S. foreign policy. During his campaign and election, he styled himself as a technocratic pragmatist, always interested in what “worked”. In his inaugural address, President Barak Obama declared: “To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect”. In his speech in Cairo University, Egypt, Obama demonstrated his personal knowledge and experience of Islam, as well as his appreciation of Islamic religion—the backbone of the Middle Eastern countries’ culture and political systems. In a stark contrast with his predecessor George Bush, whose foreign policy seemed to be influenced by the belief and designs of the Christian right—as indicated by him using the phrase *Crusades*, and later spoke of Islamofascism, Barak Obama dramatically reflected a different kind of Christianity. He projected a compassionate understanding that paves the way for accepting Muslims in the U.S. as valued citizens who have fought in our wars, excelled in business, universities, and sports, who won Nobel prizes and lit the Olympic torch. Obama creatively noted that the first Muslim American recently elected to Congress took his oath to defend our constitution using the *Qur'an* that Thomas Jefferson had kept in his personal library. Perhaps the most striking statement that would echo across the Middle East and the broader Muslim world, was Obama’s strong statement of sympathy and the broader Muslim world, was Obama’s strong statement of understanding for the dilemma of the Palestinian, the creation of a Palestinian state and the status of Jerusalem, one of the great sacred cities of Islam and a major impediment in Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. However, one must distinguish between Obama first term in office with the top diplomat Hillary Clinton as a Secretary of State and Ann Paterson as a U.S. Ambassador to Egypt and Obama second term in office, with his top diplomat John Kerry as a Secretary of State.

In his first term in office President Obama came into office deeply skeptical about the foreign policy and diplomacy of his predecessor, George W. Bush, to make democracy promotion a key, if not central, aspect of American policy toward the Middle East. Shortly before his own inauguration in January 2009, Obama stated that while he did not mark down “the sincerity and worthiness of President Bush’s concerns about democracy and human rights”, he was critical of what he said was Bush’s push for, and reliance on, elections in the Middle East as a indicator for democratic development. Implicit in this criticism was that Bush’s policies also angered long-standing U.S. allies in the region with few positive results to show for it. When authoritarian leaders like Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak resisted U.S. pressure to democratize in the late 2005-early 2006 period after initially making some political reforms earlier in 2005 in response to this pressure, there was no “Plan B” (Eizenstat & Ross, 2017) Bush administration’s grand strategy. The Bush administration ultimately backed down, and U.S. policy was left with the worst of all outcomes—a disappointed group of democratic activists in the Arab world (whose hopes were raised and then dashed) and an angry group of authoritarian leaders who believed that U.S. officials were unappreciative for the stances that they had taken to support unpopular U.S. policies in the region such as supporting Israel against the Palestinian, and invading Iraq. For not following his predecessor policies, Obama was a realist.

Obama and the Transition to Democracy in the Middle East

Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter (2013) argued that the literature on “transitology” or the

study of how autocratic regimes break down and transit to democracy is still in its infancy. There are no theories or concrete guidelines can be prescribed on how to manage the transition process for countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, all claim republican form of government and Bahrain—a kingdom or Shikdom form of government. However, we can identify general themes deal with transitions from certain authoritarian regimes towards an uncertain *something else*. That *something* can be the instauration of a political democracy or the restoration of a new, and possibly more severe, form of authoritarian rule. President Obama, who seemed to be convinced with the aforementioned popular arguments among realists' foreign policy analysts, has pursued four tracks in the region that he believed would set him apart from the Bush administration and ultimately work to the U.S. advantage:

Firstly, he would concentrate on solving the very difficult Israeli-Palestinian conflict that would also bring about a general Arab-Israeli peace, finally removing this chief irritant in the region.

Secondly, he would pursue a major outreach to the Muslim world to improve the U.S. image which had taken a mauling during the Bush years.

Thirdly, he would withdraw the U. S. military forces from Iraq which had been a major source of anti-Americanism in the region.

Fourthly, he would try to negotiate with Iran, labeled by Bush as one of the “axis-of-evil” countries in the Middle East region, to ensure that Tehran would not pursue nuclear weapons and to put the troubled U.S.-Iranian relationship on a different (and better) track.

The Obama administration devoted considerable time and energy to these policies in the first years of his first term, at least initially. The highly respected former U.S. senator, George Mitchell—credited for helping to bring about peace in Northern Ireland—was appointed special envoy for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and President Obama took a very tough and principled stand against Israeli settlement building in the West Bank. President Obama himself delivered a major speech in Cairo, Egypt in June 2009 in an effort to retune U.S. relations with the Muslim world and to dispel popular notions in the Middle East that the U.S. was somehow at war with Islam. He reduced the U.S. military presence in Iraq and applied diplomatic pressure to help bring Iraq's different political groups together to form a government. And he sent messages to the Iranian leadership and the Iranian people to offer better relations while coordinating negotiating strategies with the other P5+1 (UN Security Council permanent members plus Germany) vis-a-vis Iran on the nuclear issue, a process that had already begun in the last year of the Bush administration.

The Unexpected Events of the Arab Spring

While the aforementioned diplomatic efforts were underway and to a great degree promising in the end of 2010, the Arab Spring began unexpectedly and caught the intelligence community and U.S. foreign policy makers by surprise. Popular revolutionary waves started in Tunisia, followed by Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. Obama's response to each one was driven by the size of the country, its strategic importance in the geopolitics of the Middle East region, and the regional rivalry between the Sunni countries of the Gulf States and the Shi'a (supported by Iran).

Michael Cooper (2012) and Aftandilian (2012) described the aforementioned events of the Arab Spring as the most significant governments and political concessions in several decades by authoritarian rulers in the Middle East, and it will impact the region for many years. Consequently, outside countries' relationships including the U.S. with Arab states have changed and will continue to develop in new, previously

unforeseeable ways. In the following six case studies the chronology of events and the U. S. responses are presented and critically analyzed by Michael Cooper (2012) in their seminal work “U.S. Diplomatic Response to the Arab Spring”, and Greg Aftandilian (2012) on “The United States Policy Toward the Arab Spring”, and Fawaz A. Gerges (2012) *The End of America’s Moment: Obama and the Middle East*. Cooper argued that each case of the countries witnessed the Arab Spring is only one of its kind in its own way, but the most obviously unique aspect about Tunisia’s revolution was that it was the first. Although protests occurred in a number of other Arab countries, these countries saw the largest protests, which resulted in regime change or sustained and ongoing conflict.

Case One: Tunisia Starts the Arab Spring

The uprising in Tunisia occurred and grew geologically. Outside forces of instability and revolutionary momentum did not affect Tunisia, but Tunisia’s successful revolution would inspire and impact the rest of the Arab world. The second unique trait about Tunisia’s revolution was its effectiveness. A mere 10 days after street vendor Muhammad Bouazizi died after setting himself on fire and local protests in Sidi Bouzid, a small city 190 km south of Tunis, spread across the country, the head of government, President Zine Ben Ali, was gone. And while protestors were met with state repression, there were relatively few casualties and injuries in comparison to Arab uprisings to follow. The cleanliness of the Tunisia revolution might have been the result of the government being caught unaware, President Ben Ali not wanting more of his citizens to die or be injured, or a nationwide feeling that permeated into the state apparatus that government corruption, repression, and unsatisfactory economic performance demanded a change.

Chronology of Events.

2010-12-17: Tunisian vegetable vendor, Muhammad Bouazizi, sets himself on fire, marking the official beginning of the Arab Spring; protests spread.

2011-01-04: Bouazizi dies, protests increase as violent government crackdowns.

2011-01-05: US State Department issues travel warnings to Tunisia.

2011-01-07: State Department declares support for protestors’ freedom to assemble.

2011-01-14: Tunisian President Ben Ali flees to Saudi Arabia, ending his 23-year reign.

2011-10-23: Tunisia holds successful democratic election. Center-right party, Ennhada, emerges victoriously.

U.S. Diplomatic Reaction. The U.S. was slow to react to Tunisia uprising, like Tunisia’s government, major media, and other countries around the world. Few predicted sweeping democratic revolutions across the Arab world and therefore the seeding of the unprecedented movements was hard to identify. The U.S. maintained a good relationship with the President Ben Ali, who was in many ways the “model U.S. client”, secular, stable, and strong. However, US strategic interests were not so great in Tunisia that the US was unwilling to support a strong declaration for liberty from the Tunisian people.

President Obama’s 2011 State of the Union Address demonstrates how the U.S. government saw the Tunisia revolution as an isolated incident that was unlikely to spread—or perhaps just hopeful that it wouldn’t—to neighboring countries. But the American ethos makes the U.S. reaction to Tunisia and the start of the Arab Spring slightly more complicated. On the one hand, the liberal foundation and ideals of America are strong, and Obama was presumably genuine in his praise for the Tunisian people and in his statement that the, “United States supports the democratic aspirations for all people”. On the other hand, while this script read fine

in Tunisia, the United States would not have wished Tunisia's neighbors in Egypt and Libya—crucial for regional stability and counter-terrorism respectively—to topple.

As for the prospects of democracy taking root in Tunisia, it seems that the U.S. government is aware and reasonably comfortable with the fact that “political parties influenced by Islam are inevitable in their prospective democracy. With that as a baseline, the worry is about more extremist Islamic groups, but the calculation is that those groups are more likely to gain traction if the system is perceived as unfavorable to any and all political Islam”. Thus far, U.S. diplomacy was supportive and worked closely with the center-right *Ennahda* party that won a plurality of the seats in parliament by garnering 37% of the popular vote in the October 2011 election.

Case Two: Egypt

According to Jeremy M. Sharp (2016) of the Congressional Research Service, U.S. policy toward Egypt has long been framed as an investment in regional stability, built primarily on long-running military cooperation and sustaining the March 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. In January 25, 2011 and after 60 years of enduring a military regime, Egypt (the most populist Arab country with 90 million) seemed to be finally witnessing a transition. Independence from British occupation gave birth to a militarized autocracy that survived through military and police repression for decades, led by a succession of four presidents coming from the military.

Chronology of Events.

2011-01-25: “Day of Anger” protests around Egypt: the largest in Tahrir Square, Cairo, Egypt, numbers 15,000. In his State of the Union Address, President Obama mentions Tunisia’s “desire for to be free” and states, “The United States of America supports the democratic aspirations of all people”. No mention of Egypt is made. Secretary of State Clinton calls Egypt “stable”. This I believe was misreading and wrong analysis of the U.S. Ambassador in Egypt Ann Paterson of the events on the Egyptian political theater.

2011-01-28/29: Internet access in Egypt is cut and restricted. Number of protesters in Tahrir Square starts to grow to hundreds of thousands as the army imposes a curfew to minimal effect. Violent clashes between protesters and police increase.

2011-01-30: Secretary Clinton brings “orderly transition” into the US message for the first time.

2011-01-31: Obama dispatches Frank Wisner, a former U.S. ambassador to Egypt, to tell President Mubarak he must prepare for an “orderly transition” of power.

2011-02-01: Mubarak pledges not to seek reelection in September elections.

2011-02-01–2011-02-08: US officials publicly condemn attacks on protesters and journalists and increase calls for an “orderly, meaningful, and peaceful transition of power” to begin. Senate Resolution calls on Mubarak to transfer power and Senator McCain suggests suspending aid to Egypt’s military. State Department disavows Ambassador Wisner’s comments that Mubarak must stay in power to manage the transition of power.

2011-02-10: In a much anticipated television address Mubarak says he will hand over power to Vice President Suleiman, but refuses to step down. Obama calls the statement, “not enough to meet the demands of protesters clamoring for democratic change”.

2011-02-11: Mubarak resigns, transferring power to the military, ending a 30-year reign.

U.S. Diplomatic Reaction. Michael Cooper (2012) and Aftandilian (2012) argued that Egypt presented a different case to U.S. policymakers. It is the most populous country in the Arab world, strategically situated in the heart of the Middle East bordering Israel and one which maintained a cold but steady peace treaty with the

Jewish state. Egypt, since the late 1970s, had close military relations with the U.S. and had granted to the U.S. over-flight rights and expedited transit through the Suez Canal, for U.S. military aircraft and naval ships, respectively. Moreover, as the leading intellectual center of the Arab world with its well-known secular and religious institutions like Cairo University and Al-Azhar University, what happened in Egypt was watched closely in other parts of the Arab world. In addition, Egyptian President Mubarak, since coming to power in 1981, generally supported U.S. policy initiatives in the region and was seen as a key U.S. ally.

Soon after the toppling of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia, young democracy activists in Egypt took their demands to the streets by using the new social media tools. Trying to understand the protestors but not wishing to anger longstanding ally, Mubarak, Secretary of State Clinton stated publicly on January 24, 2011: "Our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people". Clinton's comments were not well-received by the protestors who demanded the resignation of Mubarak and pressed on with their protests in the face of increased repression by the Egyptian government's security forces. As the demonstrations increased in late January 2011, the Obama Administration tried to chart a middle course hoping to work with the Mubarak government to accommodate some of the protestors demands but not calling for a change of government. For example, on January 28 after several days of protests and police violence against the demonstrators, President Obama stated publicly that the Egyptian government should respect the people's universal rights but indicated that he wanted to work with the Mubarak government for a more just and a more free Egypt. Kenneth Eliasberg (2016) described Hilary's performance as a Secretary of State, the nation's top diplomat, and foreign policy Czar of President Obama during the Arab Spring as a national security disaster.

Likewise the performance of U.S. Ambassador to Egypt during the Arab Spring Ann Paterson was criticized. Mark Landler (2013), reporting from Egypt argued that, "Ms. Patterson's problems started on June 18 when she was invited, at a time of mushrooming demonstrations against Mr. Morsi's government, to speak to an audience in Cairo about the United States' relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood". It was, she said, a welcome chance to "set the record straight". While the U.S. supported Egypt's democratic development, it still had to deal with those in power, Ms. Patterson said, adding, "I don't think the elected nature of this government is seriously in doubt". Moreover, she said she was "deeply skeptical" that "street action will produce better results than elections". The U.S. was over Egypt—once a crucial strategic ally in the Middle East but lately just another headache. Even as Ms. Patterson sought to distance the U.S. from the Muslim Brotherhood, those words marked her as an enemy of the crowds in Tahrir Square, reviving memories of Mr. Obama's early reluctance to cut loose Mr. Mubarak, a longtime ally of the U.S.

Mona Mohammed, 52 years old, an Egyptian bank employee said about U.S. Ambassador that "She manipulates people and secretly governs the country" at an antigovernment rally. "The ambassador is part of a conspiracy against Egypt and its people", Ms. Mohammed added, clutching a poster with a caricature of Ms. Patterson and the slogan "Hayzaboon, Go Home" (Hayzaboon is Arabic for ogre). At a pro-Morsi demonstration across town, Mohammed Amr-Alla, a professor at Al-Azhar University, said: "The ambassador meets with the opposition and supports them. She should not interfere; she needs to watch from a distance". Both perspectives disprove the reality that the U.S. has far less influence in Egypt than it did a generation ago.

Case Three: Yemen

The absence of *jihadism* and *al-Qaeda* in the early Arab Spring has been well documented. The one place it did have a role, even if not apparently visible, was in Yemen. In the war against terrorism that has greatly diminished *al-Qaeda* and affiliated terrorist organizations' size, strength, funding, and operational capacity, *al-Qaeda* in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has emerged as the primary threat to carry out attacks on American soil. Yemeni President Saleh became a close friend to Washington by giving the U.S. military free rein to conduct drone strikes and overnight raids in his country. That Yemenis viewed Saleh as too friendly with the U.S. was one of a number of grievances: lack of job opportunities, extremely underwhelming economic performance and quality of life, and a failure to address increasingly scarce resources, namely water, were far more immediate concerns for the average citizen. Harsh government crackdowns and repeatedly undelivered promises by the ruling regime fueled the popular discontent.

Chronology of Events.

2011-01-27: 16,000 people protest in Yemen's capital Sana'a and the port city of Aden.

2011-02-25: 180,000 protest across the nation.

2011-03-18: President Saleh declares a State of Emergency as state forces open fire on protestors. Numerous government officials resign or join the opposition.

2011-03-24: Saleh accepts the five points submitted by the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), including "formation of a government of national unity and a national committee to draft a new constitution, drafting a new electoral law, and holding a constitutional referendum, parliamentary elections and a presidential vote by the end of the year". The JMP reject the plan, demanding Saleh's removal from power.

2011-04: The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) drafts several proposals for the orderly transition of power, granting immunity to Saleh and his family in exchange for allowing opposition a shared role with the current regime in governing Yemen. The opposition agrees but Saleh stalls.

2011-05-23: Battle of Sana'a commences after Saleh refuses to sign the transition agreement for the third time. Two weeks of open fighting ensues.

2011-06-03: President Saleh is injured in an attack on the Presidential Palace. He receives treatment in Saudi Arabia. Vice President Hadi becomes acting president.

2011-09-23: Saleh returns to Yemen amid increased turmoil.

2011-11-23: Saleh signs GCC transition plan that he previously spurned, transferring power to Vice-President Hadi, and establishes elections on February 21, 2012. Hadi runs as the only candidate on the ballot. The next elections are due to be held in 2014.

2011-11-24: Saleh leaves for the U.S., ending a 33-year rule.

U.S. Diplomatic Reaction. According to Cooper (2012) and Aftandilian (2012) the US diplomatic response to the Yemeni uprising was quiet and the most supportive of the ruling regime in the entire Arab Spring. While the U.S. did not declare outright support for the Saleh government, neither did it call for Saleh to step down, nor did the U.S. ever condemn the regime. The furthest the Obama administration was willing to go was to urge Saleh to sign the GCC-sponsored political agreement to allow for an orderly transition of power, which was in Saleh's own interest, given that he ultimately had only two options: cede power and gain immunity, or refuse to relinquish power and be killed. After initially choosing the second option and consequently risking death, Saleh changed course and sought refuge in the U.S. after finally signing the

transition plan. Although Yemen's role Arab Spring indeed produced a "regime change," the revolt was not a success, as the election was not democratic and important social issues such as poverty and joblessness remained unaddressed. From the US perspective, Yemen was a case where realism took precedence over idealism.

Given the presence of AQAP in the country, the U. S. was unwilling to allow a de Facto change of relations. "While AQAP has not been driving the unrest, it is opportunistically seeking to exploit it. Any diversion from targeting terrorist units in Yemen would allow to think and plot... more creative attacks that have become the hallmark of the most lethal al-Qaeda affiliate". In spite of clear U.S. security interests trumping the advancement of political freedom, the U.S. tried to appear somewhat balanced, with the White House releasing information of a phone call of Deputy National Security Advisor John Brennan urging Saleh to resolve the crisis, and Obama publicly supporting Hadi before and after the sham elections. Depending on the success of American operations against AQAP in the next two years, Yemen's 2014 elections have the potential to produce meaningful reform; however, resource and demographic challenges will be huge obstacles to overcome even in the unlikely event of political liberalization.

Case Four: Bahrain

Cooper (2012) and Aftandilian (2012) observed that the Bahrain case is only one of its kind because of the country's demographics and its international relationships. The small island country has a population of roughly 1.2 million, of whom 54% are foreign nationals. Of the 570,000 Bahrainis, around 70% are *Shi'a*, yet King Hamad is *Sunni*. Bahrain is in the GCC, and is a close political ally of Saudi Arabia. However, with the *Shi'ism* being the predominant Muslim denomination, ties also exist to Saudi Arabia's rival—Iran.

Chronology of Events.

2011-02-17: "Bloody Thursday". After four days of protests, Bahraini forces attack sleeping protestors at Pearl Roundabout with live ammunition killing 74 and injuring 600.

2011-02-18: The U.S. condemns the attack. Jennifer Stride, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Fifth Fleet, says there is no "indication the protests will cause significant disruption" for the Fifth Fleet, which is, "not being targeted".

2011-02-22: 200,000 Bahrainis, about 35% of the national population, participated in a Martyr's March to honor the protestors who died.

2011-03-14: At the request of Bahrain's government, the GCC sends in troops of the Peninsula Shield Force, 4,000 soldiers from Saudi Arabia and 500 policemen from UAE. The US calls for restraint, but did not signal opposition to the troop deployment.

2011-03-18: Government demolishes Pearl Roundabout Monument and increases repression to stem the uprising.

2011-06-29: King Hamad, 13 years in power, establishes Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry to look into human rights abuses in February and March. The report, released on November 23, criticizes security forces for using excessive force, blames the government and opposition, and admits to the use of torture. The US and governments abroad welcomed the report's release.

U.S. Diplomatic Reaction. Maintaining stable foreign relations proved more important than promoting human rights in the American response to the uprising in Bahrain according to Cooper (2012) critical analysis. The harsh crackdown on protestors initially drew a strong response from the U.S.. Fearing an all-out assault on

the protesters, President Obama and Secretary Clinton expressed concern and urged restraint. A month later, Washington was biting their fingernails again when Saudi troops were called in to quell the uprising. US diplomacy had to walk a fine line of ensuring a humanitarian crisis did not occur, while at the same time not upsetting a key strategic alliance with Bahrain, home to the U.S. Fifth Fleet, and Saudi Arabia. Attempts by Secretary Clinton and Robert Gates to talk to the Saudis about respecting human rights in controlling the Bahraini uprising were rebuffed. “With the United States voicing concern over human rights violations in Bahrain and elsewhere—half-hearted as they may be—the Saudis appear to have decided that their traditional American allies cannot be fully counted on”. The effective manner in which Bahrain and its Gulf partners squashed the uprising eased the delicate position adopted by the US. Apart from “Bloody Thursday”, relatively few deaths occurred with authorities instead using extremely high rates of arrest and torture. While these tactics prompted criticisms from human rights organizations, the lack of violent images as well as sustained protests with numbers in the hundreds of thousands, that marked the Arab Spring in other countries, meant the Bahraini uprising received very little mainstream media coverage. Saudi Arabia’s eagerness to assist Bahrain was in part motivated by their alliance in the GCC, but also to send a message to Iran. At the outset of the uprising, the U.S. and Iran found themselves in a strange position taking positions not unlike one another; Iran strongly supported the uprising, and the U.S. on the verge of doing so as well. However, once it became clear that an ethnic cleansing of the mostly Shi’a protestors would not occur, the US returned to its familiar position alongside Saudi Arabia.

Like Yemen, Bahrain was a case in which the costs to the US of upsetting a crucial relationship with Saudi Arabia did not merit support for the protest movement. Protesters did gain economic concessions, the release of political prisoners, small governmental changes, and the symbolic gesture of the state admitting its role in the humanitarian crisis, yet public dissatisfaction ensues, as protests are ongoing.

Case Five: Libya

Timing, momentum, geography, oil, and a dictator overplaying his hand according to Cooper (2012) all aligned in Libya to prompt the strongest international reaction during the Arab Spring. Nine days after Ben Ali left Tunisia protesters gathered in Tahrir Square and four days after Mubarak resigned, Libya became the next country swept up by the revolutionary fervor. Colonel Qaddafi attempted to crush the opposition early, before sustained mass protests could even materialize. The result was that various rebel groups quickly came together under the National Liberation Army, which grew to only 17,000 troops, but had broad support from across the country, especially in the East. Libya’s proximity to Europe, just across the Mediterranean Sea, made responding to Qaddafi’s crackdown an ethical issue, and the EU’s dependence on Libyan oil was a strategic issue. Geography also was important because of the ease with which a potential intervention could be conducted. Therefore, France and the UK pressured the U.S. to join a NATO coalition to respond with an international military intervention to the Libyan Civil War.

Chronology of Events.

2011-02-15: Violent protests in eastern city of Benghazi rapidly spread to other cities. Authorities use aircraft to attack protestors.

2011-02-26: UN freezes Qaddafi’s assets and restricts travel.

2011-03: Qaddafi’s forces push back National Liberation Army.

2011-03-17: UN Resolution 1973 establishes no-fly zone in Libya and forms legal basis for an

international military intervention.

2011-03-23: NATO enforces naval blockade.

2011-04–2011-08: Intensified NATO air strikes help turn the tide against Qaddafi's forces.

2011-07-18: United States recognizes National Transition Council as legitimate authority.

2011-08-20–2011-08-28: Rebels take control of capital after the Battle of Tripoli. Loyalist forces retreat to Sirte.

2011-10-20: Qaddafi is killed and Sirte is captured, marking the end of the war and 40-year reign.

U.S. Diplomatic Reaction. Relations between the U.S. and Libya had been improving since 2003 when Gaddafi gave up weapons of mass destruction, became party to the Chemical Weapons Convention, and cooperated with the International Atomic Energy Association. The U.S. lifted sanctions in 2004 and removed Libya from the list of state sponsors of terrorism in 2006. Given the positive recent trend in relations, it is surprising how quickly the U.S. position changed.

There is some dispute about the nature of the Libyan government's crackdown and whether State forces or rebel forces were the initiators of violence. It is also disputed whether armed international intervention ameliorates or exacerbates government versus rebel fighting. By most accounts, Libya's National Army used excessive force attempting to crush the Benghazi based opposition. Even more disconcerting was Gaddafi's rhetoric, promising to "chase and hang the cockroaches and vermin". He also prophetically claimed, "I am not going to leave this land, and I will die here as a martyr". Based off these remarks, the U.S. joined the NATO coalition to prevent a potential genocide and worsening humanitarian crisis. Despite criticisms of mission based off the mandate of UN Resolution 1973, and the U.S. shouldering a disproportionate load in NATO, the air strike campaign that aided the Free Syria Army was hailed as a great victory by major media and a majority in the West, NATO, and Middle East. NATO's perceived initial success in Libya was reasoned a "seductive precedent" to advocate for intervention into Syria.

Case Six: Syria

According to Gregory Aftandilian (2012) of the Middle East Center for Peace, Development, and Culture of the University of Massachusetts, and Cooper (2012), after the international joyousness at the effective multilateral intervention into Libya, there was a strong sentiment that NATO success would prompt a second intervention into Syria. The Libya mission had relatively low economic and human costs to NATO, and the situation in Syria began to worsen soon after the Libya operation's conclusion. From the start of protests in March to December, roughly 5,000 people had died. As the opposition unified and organized, Syrian forces increased the scale of their attacks, flouting the international community. Since December, the casualty rate has doubled, instability has spread to Damascus and Aleppo, and Syrian citizens are running for their lives to Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. The Kofi Annan Peace Plan is having minimal effect on the growing violence.

Chronology of Events.

2011-03: Protests in the city of Daraa are met with strong government repression.

2011-04: State of Emergency in force since 1963 is lifted.

2011-05: Army tanks enter several cities to quell uprisings.

2011-06: President Assad pledges to begin "national dialogue" on reform.

2011-07-29: Disparate opposition forces unify under the Free Syria Army.

2011-08-18: Obama calls on Assad to step down.

2011-08-23: Syrian National Council formed, eventually recognized by 17 UN member states, and

officially supported by eight states, including the US as of December 5.

2011-11: Arab League suspends Syria.

2011-12–2012-05: UN fails to pass resolution amid growing violence and unrest. The US and EU increase sanctions against Syria. A non-binding UN peace plan gains support despite skepticism and both sides breaking the cease is “on track”.

U.S. Diplomatic Reaction. Thus far, Aftandilian (2012) and Cooper (2012) argued that, the U.S. has come out strongly against the Assad regime only in rhetoric. There are many differences between the intervention in Libya and a potential operation in Syria. Libya’s proximity to the U.S. Sixth Fleet made air strikes feasible, and Libya’s oil reserves held a strategic interest that does not exist in Syria. Furthermore Syria’s support from Iran and Hizbullah, Russia and China in the Security Council, and its proximity to Israel are important factors working against intervention. “Public opinion polls show that about two thirds believe that the US should take a neutral position relative to the government and the demonstrators in Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, Saudi Arabia or Jordan. However, among those who want the US to take a side, they overwhelmingly favor the US siding with the demonstrators in Syria”.

American public support for the opposition is matched by official U.S. policy, which is supporting the Free Syria Army with non lethal weapons. In his 2012 State of the Union, President Obama said, “I have no doubt that the Assad regime will soon discover that the forces of change can’t be reversed, and that human dignity can’t be denied”. Absent a major change, verbal attacks will be the only kind President Obama will launch at Assad. Syrian humanitarian toll is to be determined.

Conclusion

Studying the aforementioned case studies and its consequences on the Middle East Theater of geopolitics, and U.S. Diplomatic reaction to each country may indicate that in a broader sense, much of Obama’s foreign policy and diplomacy in the Middle East has been a movement away from his predecessor G. W. Bush neoconservative idealism—an ideology which was especially prominent in Bush’s first term, when he “liberated” Iraq and talked tough to Mubarak—and toward a realist assessment of U.S. aims. Obama, however at least in his first term, has shown in his foreign policy in the Middle East more continuity with the past than real change. He adopted a centrist-realist approach toward the region even during and after the unexpected events of the Arab Spring—an approach consistent with the dominant US foreign policy orientation including the unwavering support for the state of Israel. Obama consistently refrained from offering a liberal foreign policy vision generally and in the Middle East particularly, and has preferred to be guided by practical considerations and shifting tides. His White House aides emphasize that he is a nonideological, pragmatic politician interested in what works.

On the conduct of Obama’s diplomacy and his diplomats during his first term in office, there are strong points and weak points. Critics point to slow responses to Tunisia and Egypt during the early revolutionary waves of the Arab Spring, poor performance of Secretary of State Clinton according to Kenneth Eliasberg (2016) and Ann Peterson the U.S. Ambassador to Egypt, and poor performance of Secretary Clinton in Libya which led to killing of the U.S. Ambassador in Libya and other personnel.

The inconsistency of Obama’ foreign policy led to spurning freedom to support dictators in Yemen and Bahrain, conducting an intervention that was not in US strategic interests in Libya, and not taking a definitive stance with respect to Syria. Russell Mead (2017) says that argument that the White House made “five big

miscalculations” is correct: “It misread the political maturity and capability of the Islamist groups it supported such as the brotherhood in Egypt; it misread the political situation in Egypt; it misread the impact of its strategy on relations with American two most important allies (Israel and Saudi Arabia); it failed to grasp the new dynamics of terrorist movements in the region; And it underestimated the costs of inaction in Syria”. As a result, Obama’s foreign policy and diplomacy seemed to have no clear geopolitical strategy for achieving both stability and democracy in the region. For example, a stable Egypt is crucial for maintaining peace in the Middle East and ensuring Israel’s security. But a stable Egypt may require supporting military leaders who overturned the results of their country’s democratic elections. And according to presidential adviser Benjamin Rhodes, “The President made a decision to side with democratic change”, but “we made it clear that it is not our place to dictate the outcomes in any given country”. In Syria, President Assad’s dictatorship brought stability but was a crucial link in the region’s “Shi’a Crescent”, which included American and Israeli adversaries—Iran and Hezbollah.

In his second term in office, President Obama’s understanding of the geopolitics of the Middle East seemed to be more realistic, pragmatic by identifying the major issue in the region which is the Arab-Israeli conflicts with its spell over effect on the Islamic world whether *Sunni* or *Shi’a*. Both *Sunni* and *Shi’a* agree on one issue which is the Palestinian right of their own statehood. Also, the relatively good performance of his Secretary of State—first diplomat John Kerry compared to his predecessor Hillary Clinton—helped the Obama Administration’s foreign policy and diplomacy to undertake two significant actions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Firstly, it refrained from vetoing resolution 2334 of 2016 at the U.N. Security Council that detailed the devastating impact that Israeli settlement expansion is having on the prospects for a two-state peace agreement. Secondly, in a landmark speech, Secretary of State John F. Kerry (2016) warned that the trend toward a one-state reality is becoming increasingly entrenched, and he set out principles for a lasting peace based on a two-state solution. Kerry said that “If the choice is one state, Israel can either be Jewish or democratic. It cannot be both”.

However, for all of those criticisms of the Obama Administration’s foreign policy and diplomacy in his first term as President, the opposite could be argued. The U.S. was pragmatic in its careful response to Tunisia and Egypt, placed vital strategic interests first in Yemen and Bahrain, prevented genocide and removed a ruthless dictator in Libya, but retained its freedom whether or not to intervene with respect to Syria. Therefore, the point is not so much whether U.S. diplomacy was good or bad during Obama’s Administration, which is subjective, but what lessons can be learned for the U.S. response to the Arab Spring. It is early to delineate any concrete lessons as of today 2017. The process of democratization remains contingent on national factors in each state in the Middle East region and will at best prove difficult. The Arab and Muslim world can no longer rely on the sort of support for democratization that the Obama administration seemed to promise in his first speech in Cairo in 2009. Finally, as President Obama’s national security advisor, Susan Rice (2016) concluded, “We can’t just be consumed 24/7 by one region, important as it is”. Democratization in Egypt and elsewhere in the region would have to take a backseat to overcoming the Israel-Palestinian dispute, ending the Syrian civil war, dealing with Iran’s nuclear ambitions, engaging China, and curbing Russian ambitions in Central Europe and the Middle East.

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