# Lost in the Middle East

How U.S. Policies are Undermining the Arab Spring

*By Amaney A. Jamal*

*They hate what we see right here in this chamber—a democratically elected government. . . . They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble.*

—President George W. Bush, September 20, 2001, quoted in
*The Stakes: America in the Middle East* by Shibley Telhami.

Perhaps nothing is more insulting to Arab societies than U.S. claims that America values freedoms in ways that ordinary Muslim and Arab citizens don't—or even worse, can't. It is one thing to claim that the United States has strong geostrategic interests in the region that render democracy inconsequential; it is another altogether to sell such interest, which has resulted in authoritarian durability, as the result of something inherently undemocratic among the people of the region. Not only has the United States continued to invest in the myth of a civilizational divide but it now designs policies to remedy this clash that miss the root cause of the problem and, indeed, perpetuate it.

Because democratic inferiority is the policy theory *du jour*, we are now confronted with a new set of policies aimed at addressing it. The United States is currently engaged in bolstering liberal and secular elements of Arab societies as a means to counter the influence of Islamists. This strategy does little to address the sources of anti-Americanism in the region. But describing the problem as an ideological one exonerates the United States from culpability because this strategy implies that Islamists are problematic because of their Islamic belief systems and not their anti-Americanism.

▷ President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Sultan Hassan Mosque, Cairo, June 4, 2009. *Sameh Refaat/EPA/Corbis*

In fact, commentators often assume that Islamists are anti-American by default, failing to recognize the significant variation that exists among Islamists in their anti-American sentiments. While Islamists have shown significant levels of moderation on domestic political issues relating to Islam, whether it is human rights, women's rights, or democracy, they have been less compromising on the issues that they are most passionate about, like foreign policy. Islamist groups have shown a remarkable willingness to play within the rules of democratic elections—in part because they can be confident about the level of their support among the voters. According to Muriel Asseburg, "The democratic openings that have been achieved, albeit limited, have encouraged many Islamists to pursue their agendas through the ballot box rather than violence; when and where Islamists have been allowed to do so, they have started to work for change within the political systems."[1]

The United States understands that Islamists, especially those in the Arab world, will not turn a blind eye toward American power in the region. Since the Algerian elections of 1991, which would have brought the Islamic Salvation Front to power, the United States has made clear its stance. According to Fawaz Gerges, "The U.S. administration understood that the Islamist tide emerging in the region was one that pitted future governments in that region against the geostrategic priorities of the United States."[2] Public discourse, however, equated political Islam with hatred for Western culture, a hatred of Christianity, and a hatred of Judaism. This discourse never reflexively analyzed the important role of Christians and Jews as "People of the Book" in these Islamic movements, nor the quite positive outlooks many Islamist movements have for Western European countries like France. Masking the problem as "Islam versus the West" ignored the root cause of anti-Americanism in the region—and continues to do so. By reducing the real grievances of the citizens as delusional constructs incapable of appreciating the civilized norms of the West, the United States continues to inflame the sensibilities of ordinary citizens.

The Algerian (1991) and Palestinian (2006) elections showed that clients not in line with U.S. preferences can suffer unpleasant consequences. There are a multitude of incidents in recent years in which the United States has sanctioned client regimes, including Yasser Arafat's Palestine after the Aqsa Intifada, the economic sanctions against Jordan for not joining the Iraq coalition in 1991, hostility toward the Al-Saud for not doing more to counter the radical anti-American tide, and strong language against [Hosni] Mubarak's regime to do more about anti-Americanism in the Egyptian Republic.

So worried are the actors in the Arab world about the ways in which the United States might respond to Islamist victories that Islamist movements themselves sometimes worry about the consequences of their own success. When a 2007 International Republican Institute poll revealed that Morocco's PJD [Justice and Development Party] was set to win 47 percent of the vote, the senior deputy, Abdallah Kiran, appeared on Al Jazeera TV's Wara' Al-Khabar (Behind the News). In his interview, he proclaimed it wasn't in

the PJD's or Morocco's interest to have such an overwhelming show of support for his own movement. He cautioned that the PJD and Morocco could suffer the fate of other Islamist movements that had made gains through democracy.[3] These same concerns are structuring the strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as well.

Yet key American analysts and policy makers continue to argue that secular and liberal forces have to be encouraged to counter the Islamists.[4] These policies seldom address the issue of implementing strategies that would lessen anti-Americanism. Rather, they appear to be designed to address the problem despite levels of anti-Americanism. Delaying democracy until the right liberal and secular conditions emerge on the ground is a remarkably unrealistic strategy, one that reinforces the status quo even as it misses its realities. Gregory Gause, for example, calls for the United States to hold back its efforts on promoting democracy. Gause writes, "The United States should instead focus its energy on encouraging the development of secular, nationalist, and liberal political organizations that could compete on an equal footing with Islamist parties. Only by doing so can Washington help ensure that when elections finally do occur, the results are more in line with U.S. interests."[5] The assumption here is that secular and liberal forces will necessarily be more pro-American than the Islamists. But this begs the question of why a secular group would be any more pro-American than an Islamist group. Historical and contemporary records show that this is not the case. Secular forces have rarely been pro-American. As Timothy Mitchell reminds us, "As a rule, the most secular regimes in the Middle East have been those most independent of the United States. . . . Egypt under Nasser, republican Iraq, the Palestine national movement, post-independence Algeria, the Republic of South Yemen, and Baathist Syria all charted courses of independence from the United States."[6] Representing the national sentiments of their people, all these countries turned to the Soviet Union for assistance during the Cold War. Shibley Telhami concurs: "In the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, the U.S. saw secular movements as more threatening to U.S. geostrategic interests than Islamic groups and governments."[7] So when and how, and under what conditions, did secularism become pro-American?

This also raises the question of why liberalism should be a precondition to democratic transitions. Liberal values, at least in the Western experience, emerged as a result of democracy; they were not conditions of democracy. Women's rights, gay rights, and the emancipation of the enslaved all occurred more than a hundred years after the democratic experience in the United States. This is not to justify the lack of liberal values in the Arab world but instead to question their usefulness for democracy. On this same point, even if the Arab world were to become a beacon of liberal values, what would guarantee that these liberal values would be accompanied by pro-American opinions? As policymakers continue to figure out how to liberally reform Islam,

they should also be aware that no amount of reform will alter the image of the United States in the region without a direct change of U.S. policies.

To that point, none of America's friends in the region are models of secular and liberal leaderships. For example, Jordan continues to sanction honor killings, and Saudi Arabia's record on human rights is astonishingly bad. The Fatah leadership has become more pro-American, but this is not because it has become more secular or democratic—it has become so because of U.S. aid and security arrangements. There was no miraculous liberal or secular transformation in the ranks of Fatah when it became a pro-American client.

The shortsightedness of the American quest for liberal and secular friends is similar to the debates about whether to accommodate or confront Islamist actors. Advocates of engagement believe Islamists can be won over, while opponents believe that engagement only harnesses support for the movements and that only moderation will leave the requisite room for their accommodation. However, the dilemma is clear: the moderation of Islamist stances doesn't necessarily mean that citizens will follow suit. Engaging elite decision-makers by either accommodation or confrontation is a strategy of cooptation. Even if Islamic movements were to moderate their politics, it does not follow that their societies would stay on board.

Consider Fatah before the Oslo Accords. Moderation was an Israeli and American precondition to engagement of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Fatah conceded and recognized Israel, and the vast majority of Palestinians supported the decision, even while Hamas enjoyed minority support among the population. When the rewards for moderation were not granted—the peace process did not end with the Oslo agreement—Palestinians gradually moved their support to Hamas. Even Hamas could quickly lose its support from the public if it turned to support U.S. preferences on foreign policy. These strategies of cooptation have worked to ensure the status quo but have done little to address the roots of daily grievances.

Another U.S. strategy is to either rid the region of its Islamist problem or shun the Islamists until they acquiesce, but that, too, is limited in its analytical rigor. The Islamist movement is a social movement. Not only is it legitimated by Islamic doctrine but its strength is its nationalist core. So long as Arab citizens think the United States rules their world, Islamism will continue to serve as the vehicle through which citizens voice their protest and their dissent. No amount of U.S. shunning will destroy the movement; if anything, this will only strengthen it. Today's Islamism is yesterday's pan-Arabism. Nationalist movements are difficult to defeat and they are intolerant of collective punishments. Shunning such movements only strengthens their support base. Further, if Islamists like the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood are believed to have become too compliant with U.S. geostrategic interests while ignoring Arab public opinion, then surely

there will be other movements that will grow to champion the voices of Arab citizens. These new movements may be religious, secular, or liberal in orientation.

> *In foreign and security policy, when you deal with a country, you deal with the government of that country. What are we supposed to do? Deal with the man on the street?*
>
> —James Baker, former U.S. secretary of state,
> interview, PBS Frontline, November 15, 2001.

A sounder approach to the U.S. problem with Islamists would involve reducing levels of anti-American sentiment across the region more generally. The United States needs to compete directly for the hearts and minds of ordinary Arab citizens, and should premise its engagements with Islamists on winning over the supporters of these movements and not simply their elite decision-makers.

The United States will probably not be able to alter the political worldviews of Islamist movements. But it can compete with Islamists to win the Arab street—which is not a monolithic mass of people with attitudes fixed in stone. Reducing levels of anti-Americanism in this way will directly mitigate the audiences of these Islamist groups. With a friendly street, real democratic reform becomes possible. The current status quo does not serve this objective. The United States today is at an important juncture—it can no longer only rely on Arab states to win the so-called War on Terror, and it needs the help of the population, which is alienated from U.S. policies to begin with; therefore, it must constructively reevaluate the way it conducts its business in the region.

Even while the United States has proclaimed more commitment toward democracy as part of its Greater Middle East Initiative of 2004 (dubbed the Freedom Agenda), such pronouncements were accompanied by war, devastation, occupation, and authoritarian consolidation. As a result, Islamism has grown in strength. Given these dynamics, many in the policy establishment believed that democratic elections were the route to pro-American democracy. In the current climate of anti-Americanism, free and democratic elections cannot return pro-American platforms. Wars are not conducive to winning support from ordinary people. Citizens reinforce the status quo.

Graham Fuller had noticed growing political apathy in the Arab world that is utterly alarming. Before the Arab Spring of 2011 he wrote:

> This greater surface political passivity in the face of growing U.S. interventionism and imposition of unpopular policies represents a disturbing new trend—the concealment of anger, frustration, and impotence. . . . Part of the

quiescence can be attributed to regime skills in managing repression. . . . But part of it too represents a bitter fatalism that resistance is so essentially futile, that the domestic and international order is so arrayed as to make protest both impotent and impossible. The United States is observed by Muslims to have irrevocably turned a corner in the embrace of naked hostility to Muslims, their interests, honor and dignity. . . . The silent impassiveness is the newest and most disturbing feature of anti-American sentiment. It is dangerous to assume that such Muslim anger is basically transient, manageable, and basically irrelevant to U.S. global strategy and deeper U.S. interests in the region.[8]

The verdict is still out on how the Arab Spring might change these realities. But it is clear that Arab public opinion shouldn't be ignored. However, U.S. policies have done precisely that—they have overlooked the sentiments of ordinary citizens.

The idea that authoritarian tactics could either ignore or manipulate Arab public opinion firmly guided the first Camp David Talks in the 1970s, when key policy makers decided to disregard Arab sentiment. This approach was again adopted in 1991 by the United States as it established its coalition of Arab leaders to attack Saddam Hussein in Iraq.[9] In order for several Arab countries to satisfy U.S. geostrategic priorities, they have had to ignore their own publics and repress public sentiment. It is no wonder that all the major U.S. and Israeli interventions in the region—the First Gulf War in 1991, the War on Terror from 2001 onward, the Iraq War of 2003, Israel's reoccupation of the West Bank in 2000, Israel's Lebanon incursion of 2006, and its attack on Gaza in 2008—witnessed reversals in levels of political and civil liberties across the region.

This raises the question of where Arab public opinion stands on issues related to the United States. Significantly, the crux of Arab resentment for America relates to U.S. policies in the region. Arab citizens have little faith in the United States and believe that it will never advance the interests of the people. A Program of International Policy Attitudes survey of citizens around the world found the Middle East region to have the lowest levels of enthusiasm for Obama's presidency.[10] In fact, a Pew 2008 poll found very small percentages across the region had confidence that Obama would do the right thing in international affairs.[11] According to that poll, only 7 percent in Pakistan and Turkey, 23 percent in Egypt, 20 percent in Jordan, and 22 percent in Lebanon believed that Obama would do what they thought was right in international affairs. Arab citizens feel threatened by U.S. military power, and significant majorities are uneasy with the hegemonic domination the United States now has in the region.

A 2007 Pew poll found that majorities in eight Middle Eastern countries were worried that the United States could become a military threat.[12] In fact, significant majorities in a World Public Opinion poll showed that large numbers support the

United States removing its military bases from all Islamic countries; 72 percent supported this view in Morocco, 92 percent in Egypt, and 71 percent in Pakistan.[13] Another World Public Opinion poll found that majorities across the region supported the following statement: "America pretends to be helpful to Muslim countries, but in fact everything it does is really part of a scheme to take advantage of people in the Middle East and steal their oil." This statement found support with 87 percent of Egyptians, 62 percent of Moroccans, and 56 percent of Pakistanis. Further majorities believe that the U.S. goal in the region is to maintain control over Middle Eastern oil, with 91 percent of Egyptians, 82 percent of Moroccans, 68 percent of Pakistanis, 87 percent of Jordanians, 89 percent of Palestinians, and 89 percent of the Turks supporting this assessment of U.S. influence in the region.[14]

Attitudes toward the United States are also structured by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. When Telhami conducted a six-country poll in 2008, he found that the most-often cited response to improving the U.S. image in the region was finding a resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.[15] Majorities across the region—86 percent of Egyptians, 77 percent of Palestinians, and 58 percent even in Azerbaijan—felt that the United States was not doing its part to resolve the conflict. Further, majorities in Arab states don't believe the United States is genuinely seeking the creation of an independent, economically viable Palestinian state. Ninety-one percent of Egyptians, 64 percent of Moroccans, 63 percent of Jordanians, and 52 percent of Turks support this position.[16] In Saudi Arabia, which witnesses some of the most vehement anti-American stances, a poll of elites found that 66 percent said their frustrations with the United States would be significantly reduced if they were able to strike a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians.[17] Telhami puts it concisely when he writes, "Only peace between Israelis and Arabs can significantly reduce the challenge to America's interests in the region."[18]

*For sixty years, the United States pursued stability at the expense of democracy . . . and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspiration of all people.*

—Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, speech at the
American University in Cairo, June 20, 2005.

Stability will remain the central concern of the United States in the Arab world for the foreseeable future. The global economy will continue to rely on Middle Eastern oil for several decades into the future. Oil accounts for 40 percent of the world's energy consumption, and its levels will not fall in the next twenty years. It is estimated that the European Union (EU) will need to import 70 percent of its energy needs by 2025.

In 2008, it imported 50 percent. The United States will also be importing 60 percent of its energy needs, mostly from the Persian Gulf. Further, estimates hold that by 2035, the global energy consumption will be double of what it was in 2005, with China and India demanding larger stakes of the world's energy reserves.[19]

These realities make the geostrategic utility of the Arab world indispensable to the global economy and will structure U.S. engagement with the region. Islamists could harm U.S. energy interests by disrupting oil flow to the United States,[20] but they could also favor other countries, like China. China now imports 60 percent of its oil from the Persian Gulf. In the next two decades, that number is likely to climb to 90 percent.[21] Islamists have threatened to sabotage oil fields as a means of retaliating against the United States. The Saudi government spent a billion dollars to protect its oil fields from Islamist extremists right after the Iraq War of 2003 began, and it then deployed 30,000 troops to protect Saudi oil infrastructure. Another concern is the potential Islamist access to the oil fields of the Persian Gulf. Many analysts worry that if Islamists were to seize control of the oil they would be less likely to adjust production to keep prices low, as do many current Gulf leaders. Recognizing the increasing need for security, between 2000 and 2003 the Bush administration increased military aid to the top twenty-five oil suppliers in the world, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Iraq. Central Asia is also a growing region coming firmly under U.S. patronage, with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Azerbaijan receiving large amounts of military aid. The EU has signed bilateral energy partnerships with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan that circumvent the democracy and human rights strictures of the European Neighborhood Policy. In fact, the 2001 Defense Review (a panel established by President Bush to evaluate U.S. energy security) explicitly noted the possible deployment of U.S. armed forces where energy supplies might be impeded. In 2007, the Bush administration established a new Africa command for the sizable relocation of naval forces to protect Nigerian oil fields, and defined Western African oil as a "strategic national interest." As the United States protects its oil needs, so does it compromise its stances on democracy.[22]

The heavy buildup of the U.S. military in the Gulf is not simply to maintain U.S. access to oil supplies, but also to guarantee that enemies do not seize these fields. According to Telhami, for more than half a century a central drive behind the American military strategy in the oil-rich region is "to deny control of these vast resources to powerful enemies."[23] This was the logic that the United States employed against Saddam Hussein's Iraq when it invaded Kuwait. If Saddam were not pushed out of Kuwait, the reasoning went, he would have doubled the capacity of Iraq's oil supply and would have become the most significant power in the Middle East.[24] Since Iraq's foreign policy was radically at odds with that of the United States, there was all the more reason for the United States to sanction Iraq.[25]

*We seek broad engagement based upon mutual interests and mutual respect. We will listen carefully, bridge misunderstanding, and seek common ground. We will be respectful, even when we do not agree.*

—President Barack Obama, speech in Ankara, Turkey, April 6, 2009.

President Barack Obama may work for a better Middle East strategy, yet there are reasons to remain skeptical. The same strategic facts remain in play now as under the administrations of former presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton. The Obama administration is preoccupied with Afghanistan and Pakistan, as the fear of those states turning Islamist is paramount—all the more so because Pakistan possesses nuclear capabilities.

But studying the trajectory of Middle East foreign policy from Clinton to Bush, it makes clear that in many ways Bush was simply continuing a U.S. foreign policy that very much characterized the Clinton years. True, Clinton and Obama are savvier interlocutors than was Bush. Nevertheless, Clinton's policies can't be seen as improving the position of the United States in the region. The Clinton administration placed the devastating sanctions on Iraq, resulting in the suffering of ordinary citizens. With children denied basic medicines like antibiotics, the death toll mounted in Iraq prior to the U.S. invasion of 2003. The Clinton administration shunned the Palestinians after the Camp David fiasco, and the subsequent international condemnation of Arafat and the Palestinians for not accepting a peace treaty that would not have guaranteed a territorially contiguous Palestinian state on the West Bank. The Clinton administration enacted democratization reversals, and U.S. policy became readily clear about its refusal to deal with Islamists—all while the sources of anti-Americanism continued to grow.

Officials in the Clinton administration admitted that if the Islamists did not have an international agenda, the United States would not resist their coming to power. In other words, the theological or potentially non-democratic character of the Islamists is not the driving force behind U.S. rejection of them. The United States rejects Islamists because they are anti-American. According to Fawaz Gerges, "The Clinton administration would not oppose Islamists if they . . . kept their focus on domestic issues."[26] In other words, it appears that the United States is far more likely to tolerate conservative, nondemocratic rulers, like the monarchy in Saudi Arabia and the Taliban in Afghanistan (before they became more internationalized through Al-Qaeda), than a democratic state that is not friendly toward the United States.

One official affiliated with Clinton's administration was more blunt: "We are prepared to live with Islamic regimes as long as they not endanger or be hostile to our vital interests."[27] Under Clinton, U.S. policy toward Islamists became more crystallized. Government officials worried about the implications of Islamists because of

their foreign policy agendas. And while it is not necessarily the place for the world's superpower to take this stance, the rhetorical commitment to democracy makes the democracy-promotion establishment seem hypocritical at best. Worse, however, this hypocrisy injures the potential for democracy in the region.

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