

# America and Egypt After the Uprisings

**Marc Lynch**

On 25 January 2011, a week after the flight of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Egyptians took to the streets protesting against Hosni Mubarak. Seventeen tense days later, Mubarak stepped down from power in favour of a military council which promised rapid political reforms.<sup>1</sup> This extraordinary storm of events posed sharp challenges to the Barack Obama administration, which faced a delicate balancing act between demonstrating its commitment to a long-standing ally, managing an inevitable transition in order to protect core interests, and acting on its inherent sympathy with the values of peaceful, democratic protesters. While its cautious and often private efforts enraged all sides, from the Arab palaces to the Egyptian streets, in the end the White House could boast of having played a key role in assisting with the peaceful, orderly and meaningful transition it had laid out as its public objective.

The uprisings in Egypt were both a shock and predictable: an inevitable surprise. Egypt had for years been at the top of most lists of Arab countries most urgently in need of reform. Few could miss the signs of problems, from the stunning crisis of youth unemployment to the increasingly closed political system to the endlessly deferred transition from Hosni Mubarak to his son, Gamal. The United States had been calling for reform in Egypt for over a decade, to little avail. The regime, however unpopular, sclerotic, closed and isolated, seemed firmly in control and well-prepared to meet the

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challenges of new protests. After a decade of failed efforts to spark mass protest, few expected the demonstrations to catch fire as they did or for Egyptian stability to be seriously challenged. As protests mounted, however, the Obama administration quickly concluded privately that Mubarak could not survive and that American policy must be designed to broker a post-Mubarak outcome amenable to core American interests.<sup>2</sup>

The Obama administration's reaction demonstrated a far different sensibility than that manifested by the George W. Bush administration. To the frustration of American pundits, Obama did not attempt to lead a protest movement which neither needed nor wanted his guidance. Instead, he focused American efforts on restraining the Egyptian military from using violence against protesters, demanding respect for universal rights, insisting that only Egyptians could choose Egypt's leaders, and attempting to push for long-term, meaningful reform.<sup>3</sup> The administration's attempt to straddle its competing commitments inevitably enraged all sides: the Egyptian regime and Arab allies railed against American abandonment, Egyptian protesters and Arab public opinion complained of American indifference, and American critics demanded more vocal leadership.

When Mubarak finally stepped down peacefully, however, the first stage of Obama's handling of the Egyptian crisis could only be judged a success. It played an important role in preventing, through constant, private pressure on the Egyptian military, the escalation into brutality which later happened in Libya, and ultimately helped to broker the departure of Mubarak. It also left intact at least the chance that a more representative, accountable and transparent Egyptian regime could be built. A final verdict will not be possible for months or years, when the composition and foreign-policy orientation of a new Egyptian government begins to take shape. But Obama's handling of Egypt has established a template for American treatment of other cases of domestic upheaval in the Middle East, from Bahrain to Libya to Iran.

### **The Egyptian intifada**

The Egyptian intifada began as a conscious imitation of the stunning events in Tunisia, as a group of experienced youth activists designated 25 January (already a national holiday, National Police Day) as a 'day of rage'.<sup>4</sup> In con-

trast to heavily policed Tunisia, where protest had been rare, these Egyptian activists had been protesting for years and had a well-developed network of personal relationships and an arsenal of strategies for protest. Although they had failed in the past to dent the core of the Mubarak regime, the efforts of the Kefaya movement in the early 2000s had already transformed national politics by breaking down the country's wall of silence and fear and introducing a powerful demand for change and recognition of the widespread distaste for Gamal Mubarak into public discourse. The second half of the 2000s witnessed episodic bouts of political and labour unrest: protests organised via Facebook by the April 6 movement (named in support of a 2008 strike in the industrial city El-Mahalla El-Kubra), labour strikes, and protests by lawyers and judges.

By 2010, however, most of these challenges appeared to have been crushed, and Egypt did not seem to be in a democratic moment. Indeed, the Egyptian regime gave off an air of cockiness. Regressive changes to the constitution and the heavily manipulated November 2010 elections had cemented the domination of the ruling National Democratic Party, humiliated opposition parties, and infuriated the politically attuned public. The regime was consumed with its efforts to manage the transition from Mubarak, presumably to his despised son Gamal. Cairo continued to carry out neo-liberal economic reforms, which pleased Western economic institutions and produced startling growth figures, but which left the vast majority of Egyptians behind as poverty grew and infrastructure crumbled. Even Egyptians not actively involved in the protest movement had grown deeply resentful of the perceived corruption and arrogance of the elite, which they understood to be a political and not simply an economic problem.

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The dizzying success of protests in Tunisia, one of the most heavy-handed of the authoritarian Arab states, had a clear triggering effect in Egypt and across the region. Al-Jazeera had covered Tunisia heavily, despite being officially barred from the country, capturing the attention of the Arab world and unifying the Arab political space around a single, urgent, common concern. Arabs around the region identified with the Tunisian protesters,

and quickly began to imitate their efforts, language and style. Many who were initially sceptical that Tunisia's revolt would spread to other Arab lands were stunned to see Yemenis and Jordanians shouting the same slogans used against Ben Ali. Above all, Ben Ali's fall inspired protesters around the region to believe, for the first time in decades, that peaceful popular movements could succeed against an entrenched authoritarian regime.

The Egyptians set out to replicate Tunisia by bringing a wide cross-section of society into the streets and avoiding the trap of being easily dismissed as youthful or foreign provocateurs. The size of the crowds on the first day, cleverly chosen to coincide with a national holiday, stunned the protesters and the regime alike. The protesters seized the symbolic space of Tahrir Square

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## *The violence backfired*

in downtown Cairo ('tahrir' means 'liberation' in Arabic) even as massive demonstrations unfolded simultaneously in most other major cities, and the demonstrators were able to sustain momentum even when the regime responded forcefully, shutting down the Internet almost completely, jamming al-Jazeera, and bringing the military into the streets. After initially downplaying the situation, al-Jazeera began its trademark saturation coverage, simultaneously fuelling the protests and regionalising the crisis.

The turning point seemed to come on 2 February, when the world watched, horrified, as plain-clothed thugs swarmed into Tahrir and brutally beat protesters. The violence backfired. The Obama administration, which had publicly warned repeatedly against the use of violence against civilian protesters, quickly escalated its pressure on the Egyptian military to begin an immediate transition. Nor did the bloodshed intimidate the protesters, as the regime had hoped. The horrific scenes, broadcast live on al-Jazeera, solidified Egyptian and international opposition to Mubarak. The military, under direct pressure from the United States and worried about its own future, did not allow a repeat performance, sparing Egypt the feared 'Tiananmen in Tahrir'.

Faced with a rapidly deteriorating situation, the Egyptian regime attempted to deflect pressure through a series of partial measures. Mubarak appointed his intelligence chief, Omar Suleiman, as vice-president, who began listless talks with selected opposition-party leaders and offered a

number of token political reforms. Suleiman attempted to restore a veneer of normality to Egypt, endeavouring to send the signal that the protests had run out of steam and reform had begun. The Egyptian protesters had no confidence in Suleiman, however, and resisted his efforts at division and co-optation, while the Obama administration repeatedly expressed its dissatisfaction with the offered changes. The illusion of restored calm was shattered by massive protests after Friday prayers on 4–5 February. On Thursday, it appeared that Mubarak had decided to step down ahead of expected massive protests the next day, but in a shocking televised speech to the nation he clung to power instead. In the face of popular outrage and a stern statement from Washington, the military stepped in the next day, removing Mubarak and Suleiman from power and promising a return to democratic rule, turning a potentially bloody day into a national celebration.

### **The Obama administration responds**

Obama's initially cautious response reflected the administration's conflicting interests. Siding with the protesters against Mubarak was not an easy position for Washington to take, but one to which it came remarkably quickly, under the circumstances. Egypt had long been a key American ally in the region, with Mubarak and Suleiman serving as trusted interlocutors. Their close relationship with Israel went far beyond the Camp David peace treaty, extending to deep and active cooperation against Hamas and in support of the blockade of Gaza. They enthusiastically supported the American notion of a moderate Sunni Arab camp standing against radical Iran.

Regional concerns weighed on the Obama administration as well. Other leaders across the region, from Tel Aviv to Riyadh, were watching closely to see how strongly Obama would support this long-time ally. Some feared that if the president were perceived to have abandoned a faithful ally, this could trigger a rethinking of alliances across the region. The fall of a core member of the US-backed alliance system could also create openings for Iran and for the so-called 'Resistance Camp'.

Against these bilateral and regional concerns, the Obama administration correctly understood that successfully brokering change in Cairo could

greatly improve America's image among the Arab public and put it on the right side of history. The administration quickly realised that it could not control events, and that Mubarak's days were likely numbered no matter what America preferred, even if it could not move as quickly towards a public stance against Mubarak as many activists would have liked. It could see that the tidal wave of protest had already neutered the Mubarak regime and that even if it survived it would not likely be a useful ally. Obama placed great weight on its outreach to the Muslim world, launched in June 2009 with great fanfare in, ironically enough, Cairo.<sup>5</sup> It saw the rising youth generation as an opportunity to move beyond the hostile relationship of the past and build a more positive, broadly based American relationship with the region. Ignoring this very same generation as it clamoured for serious change would have gone against the administration's DNA.

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As it confronted the dizzying pace of change, the administration recognised the limits to its influence and consciously refrained from attempting to place itself at the centre of events. Obama instinctively avoided grandiose rhetoric in favour of specific, concrete efforts to achieve an 'orderly, meaningful transition', and consistently put the Egyptian people rather than America at the centre of events.<sup>6</sup> Tactically, the adminis-

tration saw that siding more aggressively with the protesters could backfire by triggering a backlash against an America seen as opportunistically claiming a movement not its own, and by hardening the demands of protesters and thus making a settlement with the military less likely. It focused therefore on restraining violence against protesters and calling for meaningful reform; and then, as the crisis stretched on, on pushing more and more openly for a transition and the departure of Mubarak.

The administration worked vigorously to engage with a wide range of actors, government and opposition, while carefully calibrating its public rhetoric. It paid particular attention to its relationship with the Egyptian military, persuading it to restrain violence and to urge its leadership to step in when Mubarak proved unwilling to reform. While it is impossible to know what the Egyptian military might have done on its own, the Obama

administration spent a great deal of time and effort communicating with it at all levels: at least six phone calls were made by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to the top leadership, and ongoing communication with junior and senior officers took place through all channels.<sup>7</sup> The White House stood back publicly, to the dismay of the protesters, to avoid the appearance that the United States was imposing regime change. American officials reiterated constantly that only Egyptians could choose their leaders. At the same time, Obama made the point ever more forcefully that America's future relationship with Egypt depended on its respect for the universal rights of its people and specifically on avoiding bloodshed. It also repeatedly warned against any attempt to avoid genuine reforms, specifically rejecting 'faux democracy', and laying out a series of specific expectations, such as ending the unpopular Emergency Law, amending the constitution, dissolving parliament, and calling fair elections.<sup>8</sup>

While this approach satisfied few critics, it worked. The worst violence was avoided, the major demands of the protesters were met, and a meaningful, orderly transition was begun under the eye of a military with which the administration maintained a close relationship. The Obama administration saw its handling of Egypt as a template for other regional upheavals, articulating its core principles with increasing clarity as it rejected the use of violence, demanded universal rights, called for urgent and meaningful reform, and placed the Egyptian people rather than America at the centre of events.

### **Egypt and beyond**

The story of Egyptian change is far from complete. The military rulers of the new Egypt may live up to their promises of a rapid return to civilian rule, but they may also follow the pattern of past Arab coup leaders and seek to cling to power. Constant international pressure will be required to keep them to their commitments, and to assist them towards a genuine transition. The best hope may be for the Egyptian military to emulate its Turkish counterparts, brokering a new constitution and then settling into the background as the guarantor of the constitution against either Islamist encroachment or authoritarian revival.



Even if those efforts succeed, elections and a new constitution will not be a panacea for Egypt's woes. The massive economic and social problems that fuelled the uprisings will continue to challenge any new leadership. The first post-Mubarak election may produce a consensus candidate such as Amr Moussa, a more representative parliament, and a national-unity government. But if the East European transitions are any guide, the second election may produce a populist backlash, as frustrated citizens lash out against a government that has failed to solve persistent problems.

The Islamists who have long dominated Egyptian opposition politics have not disappeared. The massive turnout for the Friday *khutba* (sermon) led by Islamist superstar Yusuf al-Qaradawi the week after Mubarak's departure

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*The Palestinian Authority has lost its most powerful patron*

cast doubt on hopeful views that the youth movement was a secular one that had left Islamism behind. The Muslim Brotherhood has already announced its intention to form a political party under the name Freedom and Justice Party, and to participate in elections. While the Brotherhood has vowed to seek neither the presidency nor a parliamentary majority (a wise tactical move intended to reassure Egyptians and the international community), it will certainly play an important role in any emerging multi-party democratic politics.

This should be encouraged, as political inclusion is the best way to steer Islamists in a more moderate direction. But their political role will likely push Egyptian politics in a more conservative direction, both in domestic and foreign policies.

Finally, the transformation of Egypt will have effects far beyond its borders. The country most obviously affected is Israel, which has seen its most trusted Arab partner overthrown and the security of its southern border, long taken for granted, thrown into question. It seems unlikely that the Camp David treaty itself will be overturned by the new Egypt, given the great benefits which flow to Cairo because of it and the risks of such a massive change. But popular hostility to the blockade of Gaza mean it is unlikely that the new regime will continue to enforce it with the same enthusiasm as Mubarak; and it is clear that the Palestinian Authority led



by Mahmoud Abbas has lost its most powerful patron. Another Israeli war with Gaza or Lebanon may well lead to a dramatic and sudden deterioration in Egypt's relationship with Tel Aviv, just as happened with democratic Turkey over the 2009 Gaza war.

Mubarak's removal also affects American strategy towards Iran. Mubarak's Egypt was a pillar of the American-led axis of moderate Sunni regimes united with Israel by a common fear of Tehran. But such fears were never widely shared by the Egyptian public, which viewed Iranian 'Resistance' rhetoric far more favourably. Still, Iran's brutal crackdown on its own people after the botched June 2009 election badly hurt its image among Egyptians, and there were remarkably few takers in the Egyptian street for Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's effort to brand their uprising an Islamic one. Claims that Iran will be the winner from the Arab uprisings are wildly premature. An Egypt that is more responsive to public opinion will likely tilt more towards Turkey, and be less willing to take an active role against Iran. But it may also reclaim the leadership position which had atrophied under Mubarak and emerge as a more vital, potent force in regional politics.

The fate of the Bahraini monarchy will be key to determining how far the effects of the upheaval extend. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) states, like America, were deeply unnerved when the Egyptian example spread to the island of Bahrain. The prospect that the Sunni monarch might be overthrown by or cede significant power to his nation's long-oppressed Shia majority triggered the worst of Saudi fears. Should Bahrain tilt towards Iran, Riyadh worried, then the United States could lose its dominant naval presence in the Gulf, and the GCC itself would be fractured as a regional force. Shia success in Bahrain might also inspire the Saudi Shia minority. While most of these fears are overblown, particularly given the nationalist orientation of most Bahraini Shi'ites, Saudi Arabia clearly saw its tiny neighbour as a bulwark which must not be allowed to fall.

Egypt's example is sure to have deep effects on the behaviour of other Arab regimes as well. The fall of Mubarak, far more than the flight of Ben Ali, has cast fear into the hearts of virtually every Arab regime, just as it has energised protest movements which now believe that success is

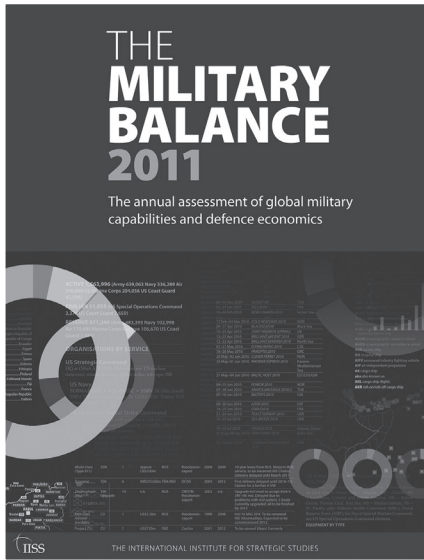
possible. The violent confrontations in Libya which rapidly escalated in mid-February served notice that not every case would end in a Tahrir Square carnival. Obama's careful efforts to build a strong international consensus against the regime of Muammar Gadhafi after it unleashed brutal violence against Libyan protesters demonstrated the White House's struggle to develop a coherent, consistent approach to the regional upheavals.<sup>9</sup> Arab leaders will likely be focused on domestic threats to their own survival, seeing their own people rather than Iranian machinations as the principle threat for the first time in years. This could make them cautious, or it could lead them to a panicked embrace of reckless foreign policies.

The United States has done well in its tactical responses to a wave of Arab uprisings that has challenged the foundations of its decades-old imperium. It helped to broker positive outcomes in Egypt while avoiding costly mistakes in a turbulent and unpredictable environment. But it is only just beginning to recalibrate its broader regional strategy to take into account the rapidly changing structure. Whether the Arab uprisings usher in a more stable, positive network of US alliances or lead to the collapse of the American imperium is not entirely in Washington's hands. But the administration will clearly now have to take more into account the views and interests of empowered Arab publics who have conclusively and profoundly rejected the status quo upon which American grand strategy has been based.

## Notes

- 1 For background on these regional events, see Marc Lynch, Blake Hounshell and Susan Glasser (eds), *Revolution in the Arab World: Tunisia, Egypt and the Unmaking of an Era* (Washington DC: Foreign Policy eBooks, 2011).
- 2 This account of the Obama administration's views of Egypt is based in part on personal discussions with senior administration officials over the course of the crisis.
- 3 The administration's evolving response can be seen in its statements of 28 January 2011 (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/28/remarks-president-situation-egypt>), 1 February (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/01/remarks-president-situation-egypt>), and 10 February (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/10/statement-president-barack-obama-egypt>).

- <sup>4</sup> For a useful overview of the course of events in Egypt, see International Crisis Group, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East: Egypt Victorious?* (New York: ICG, 24 February 2011).
- <sup>5</sup> See Obama's 'A New Beginning' speech, delivered in Cairo, 4 June 2009, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/NewBeginning/>.
- <sup>6</sup> See Obama's statement on 11 February 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/11/remarks-president-egypt>.
- <sup>7</sup> Josh Rogin, 'Gates and Mullen in Close Contact With Egyptian Military', *Foreign Policy*, 11 February 2011, [http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/02/11/gates\\_and\\_mullen\\_in\\_close\\_contact\\_with\\_egyptian\\_military](http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/02/11/gates_and_mullen_in_close_contact_with_egyptian_military).
- <sup>8</sup> Secretary of State Hillary R. Clinton, interview with NBC's David Gregory, 30 January 2011, available at <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2011/January/20110130140152yggepo.9475018.html>.
- <sup>9</sup> Obama's efforts to apply the Egyptian template to Libya can be seen in his 23 February 2011 statement at the White House, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/02/23/president-obama-speaks-turmoil-libya-violence-must-stop>.



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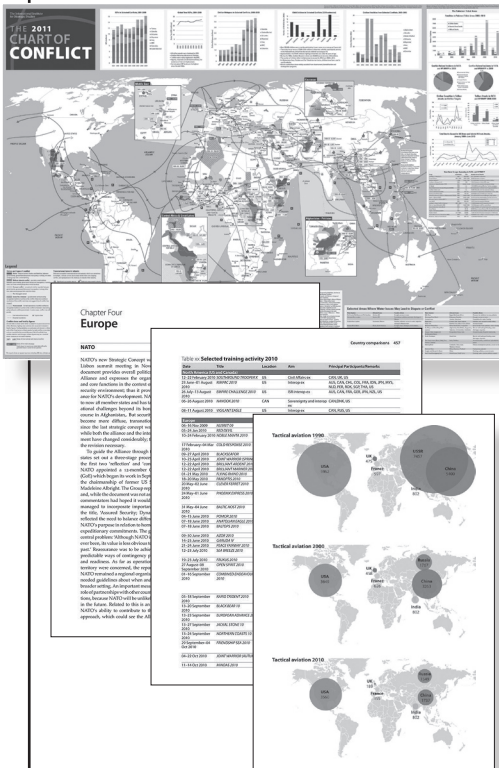
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