

# America has a Choice in Tunisia: A Historic “U Turn” in US Middle East Foreign Policy

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The ongoing Tunisian Intifada (uprising) cannot yet quite be termed a revolution; Tunisians are still revolting, aspiring for bread and freedom. This Intifada will go in history as a revolution if it gets either bread or freedom and as a great revolution if it gets both. Internally, “the one constant in revolutions is the primordial role played by the army,” Jean Tulard, a French historian of revolutions, told *Le Monde* in an interview, and the Tunisian military seems so far forthcoming. Externally, the United States stands to be a critical contributor to either outcome in Tunisia, both because of its historical close relations with the Tunisian military and because of its regional hegemony and international standing as a world power, but the U.S. seems so far shortcoming.

While the Tunisian military has made a decision to side with its people, the United States has yet to decide what and whom to support among the revolting masses led by influential components like communists, Pan-Arabists, Islamists, left wingers, nationalists and trade unionists. The natural social allies of U.S. capitalist globalization, privatization and free market have been sidelined politically as partners and pillars of the deposed pro - U.S. Zein al-Abideen Ben Ali’s regime. The remaining pro - U.S. liberalism among Tunisians are overwhelmed by the vast majority of the unemployed, marginalized or underpaid who yearn for jobs, bread, balanced distribution of the national wealth and development projects more than they are interested in upper class western - oriented liberalism. Taken by surprise by the evolving political drama in Tunisia, the U.S. cannot by default contribute to a revolution for bread at a time its economic system is unable to provide for Americans themselves. However, it can play a detrimental role in contributing to a real Tunisian revolution for freedom by making an historic U-turn in its foreign policy.

In June 2005, the then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told an Arab audience at the American University in Cairo that, “For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region — and we achieved neither.” But Rice did not elaborate to add that this same policy was and is still the main source of instability and the main reason for the absent democracy. Her successor incumbent Hillary Clinton has on January 13 in Qatar postured as the Barak Obama Administration’s mouthpiece on Arab human rights to lecture Arab governments on the urgent need for democratic reforms, warning that otherwise they will see their countries “sinking into the sand.” But Clinton missed to point out that her administration is still in pursuit of its predecessor’s advocacy of democracy through changing regimes in Arab and Muslim nations by means of military intervention, invasion and occupation, an endeavor that has proved a failure in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Israeli - occupied Palestinian territories, as well a policy that was and is still another source of regional instability and absence of democracy.

The Tunisian Intifada has proved that democracy and regime change can be homemade, without any U.S. intervention. Ironically any such U.S. intervention now is viewed in the region as a threat of a counterrevolution that would preempt turning the Intifada into a revolution. U.S. hands-off policy could be the only way to democracy in Tunisia. But a hands-off policy is absolutely not a trade mark of U.S. regional foreign policy. However, the United States has a choice now in Tunisia, but it is a choice that pre-requisites a U - turn both in the U.S. approach to Arab democracy and in its traditional foreign policy.

The U.S. risks to loose strategically in Tunisia unless it decides on an historic U - turn, because politically the Tunisian Intifada targeted a U.S. - supported regime and economically targeted a failed U.S. model of development. On November 13, 2007, Georgetown University Human Rights Institute and Law Center hosted a conference to answer the question, "Tunisia: A Model of Middle East Stability or an Incubator of Extremism?" But Tunisia now has given the answer: Tunisia is neither; it is an indigenous Arab way to democracy and moderation.

Indeed the U.S. has now a choice in Tunisia. The Arab country which is leading the first Arab revolution for democracy is now a U.S. test case. Non - U.S. intervention would establish a model for other Arabs to follow; it would also establish a model U.S. policy that would over time make Arabs believe in any future U.S. rhetoric on democracy and forget all the tragic consequences of American interventions in the name of democracy. But this sounds more a wishful thinking than a realpolitik expectation.

A U.S. long standing traditional policy seems to weigh heavily on its decision makers, who are obsessed with their own creation of the "Islamist threat" as their justification for their international war on terror, which dictates their foreign policy, especially vis - a vis Arab and Muslim states, to dictate a fait accompli to their rulers to choose between either being recruited to this war or being condemned themselves as terrorists or terrorism sponsors, and in this process exclusion policies should be pursued against wide spread representative Islamic movements. The U.S. perspective has always been that Arab Democracy could be sacrificed to serve U.S. vital interests and Arab democracy can wait! But the Tunisian Intifada has proved that Arab democracy cannot wait anymore.

Exclusion of popular Islamic movements while at the same excluding democratic reforms until the war on terror is won has proved a looser U.S. policy. The U.S. exploitation of the "Islamist threat" now is not convincing for Arab aspirants for democracy, who still remember that during the Cold War with the former Soviet Union the U.S. exploited the "communist threat," then "Pan-Arabism threat," to shore up autocratic and authoritarian Arab regimes. In Tunisia, the prisons of the pro - U.S. regime were always full long before there was an Islamic political movement: "In the 1950s prisons were filled with Youssefites (loyal to Salah Ben Youssef, who broke away from Bourguiba's ruling Constitutional Party); in the 60s it was the Leftists; in the 70s it was the trade unions; and in the 80s it was our turn," leader in-exile of the outlawed Islamic Nahda movement, Rachid Ghannouchi, told the Financial Times on January 18.

"When Nahda was in Tunisia ... there was no al-Qaeda," Ghannouchi said, reminding one that in the neighboring Algeria there was no al-Qaeda too before The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was outlawed. In the Israeli - occupied territories, outlawing and imposing siege on the Islamic Resistance Movement "Hamas," which won a landslide electoral victory in 2006, should be a warning that the only alternative to such moderate Islamic movements is for sure the extremist al-Qaeda like undergrounds. Jordan proved wiser than the U.S. decision

makers by allowing the Islamic Action Front to compete politics lawfully. Recruiting fake Islamic parties to serve U.S. policies as the case is in Iraq has not proved feasible impunity against al-Qaeda. The United States has to reconsider. Exclusion of independent, moderate and non - violent Islamic representative movements, unless they succumb to U.S. dictates, has proved U.S. policy a failure. U.S. parameters for underground violent unrepresentative Islamists should not apply to these movements.

The U.S. decision makers however still seem deaf to what Ghannouchi told the Financial Times: "Democracy should not exclude communists ... it is not ethical for us to call on a secular government to accept us, while once we get to power we will eradicate them." This is the voice of Arab homemade democracy; it has nothing to do with the U.S. - exported democracy.

*Nicola Nasser is a veteran Arab journalist based in Bir Zeit, West Bank of the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories.*

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