

# The Middle East at a Strategic Crossroads: Threat to US Hegemony?

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The Arab world is the beating heart of the overwhelmingly Muslim Middle East, and the Arab masses are angrily moving for a change in the status quo, practically dictated by the military, economic or political hegemony of the United States, which in turn is whipped by the regional power of the Israeli U.S. strategic ally. But any change in the regional status quo would place the Middle East at a strategic crossroads that is not expected to be viewed tolerantly by the U.S. - Israeli alliance, a fact which expectedly would warn of a fierce struggle to come. Despite the U.S. rhetorical defense of the "universal rights" in the region, it is still premature to conclude that this hegemonic alliance will allow the Arab move for change to run its course, judging by the historic experiences of the last century as well as by the containment tactics the United States is now adopting to defuse whatever strategic changes might be created by the revolting Arab masses.

The U.S. war on terror has preoccupied U.S. decision makers and embroiled regional rulers in their preoccupation to overlook the tinderbox of the double digit unemployment rate among Arab youth, double and in some cases triple the world average, according to the most conservative estimates, which under the U.S. - supported authoritarian regimes has been a ticking time bomb for too long. Now, the "demographic tsunami to the south of the Mediterranean," as described by Swedish Foreign Minister, Carl Bildt, has overtaken the west, but in particular the U.S. - Israeli alliance, by surprise, sending shock waves across the Middle East, shaking the pillars of what this alliance has taken for granted as a guaranteed geopolitical stability reinforced by the Israeli 34 - year old military occupation of the Palestinian territories, the Syrian Golan Heights and parts of southern Lebanon and the U.S. invasion then the ongoing occupation of Iraq. But "the Arab world's Berlin moment" has come and the U.S. - supported "authoritarian wall has fallen," professor of Middle Eastern Politics and International Relations at the London School of Economics, Fawaz Gerges, told Reuters.

Unlike in Tunisia, the U.S. regional strategy cannot afford a strategic change of regime in a pivotal regional country like Egypt. U.S. senior officials' appeals for President Hosni Mubarak to respect the "universal rights" of the Egyptian people and their right in "peaceful" protests, for reforms that should be "immediately" undertaken by the ruling regime, and their calls for "restraint" and non-violence by both the regime and protesters are all smoke-screening the fact that the United States is siding with what President Barack Obama hailed as "an ally of ours on a lot of critical issues" and his spokesman, Robert Gibbs, described as "a strong ally" - - which Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wishfully described his government as "stable" on Wednesday, despite the roaring demands on the streets for its change - - at least because "a more representative government drawn from the diversity of Egypt's political opposition will be much more inclined to criticize American and Israeli

policies," according to Bruce Riedel, a former long-time CIA officer and a senior fellow of the Saban Center at the Brookings Institution, on January 29.

The U.S. posturing as neutral, "not taking sides," could appease and mislead American public opinion, but to Arab and especially to Egyptian public opinion even neutrality is viewed as hostile and condemned in the region as a double standard when compared with the U.S. siding with similar moves for change elsewhere in the world, let alone that this neutrality contradicts the western highly valued democratic values at home.

On Friday night, Obama called for "a meaningful dialogue between the (Egyptian) government and its citizens," who insist on staying on the streets until the regime, and not only its government, is changed and Mubarak leaves. On January 28, Vice President Joe Biden told PBS NewsHour that Mubarak should not step down. When asked whether time had come for Mubarak to go, he said: "No. I think the time has come for President Mubarak to begin to move - to be more responsive to some .. of the needs of the people out there." Nothing would be more clear - cut, but nothing would be more counterproductive to both Egyptian and American interests on the background of footages on the screens of satellite TV stations showing protesters condemning Mubarak as a "U.S. agent" or showing live bullets or "made in U.S.A." tear gas canisters, reported by ABC News, which were used against them.

It seems the en masse Arab popular protests in Egypt that no party in the opposition could claim to be the leader are confusing the senior officials of the Obama administration who "have no idea of exactly who these street protesters are, whether the protesters are simply a mob force incapable of organized political action and rule, or if more sinister groups hover in the shadows, waiting to grab power and turn Egypt into an anti-Western, anti-Israeli bastion." in the words of the U.S. commentator Leslie H. Gelb, the former New York Times columnist and senior government official.

The U.S. confusion is illustrated by the stark contradiction between the realities on the ground in Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon and Yemen and, for instance, what the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Jeffrey Filtman, told Josh Rogin of Foreign Policy: "What happened in Tunisia strikes me as uniquely Tunisian. That the events that took place here over the past few weeks derive from particularly Tunisian grievances, from Tunisian circumstances by the Tunisian people." How farthest cut off from reality a senior U.S. official could be! "The White House will have to be forgiven for not knowing whether to ride the tiger or help put him back in a cage," Gelb wrote.

White House Press Secretary, Robert Gibbs, said the U.S., in view of the protests, will "review" its two - billion annual assistance to Egypt. This "threat" is understood among Arab and Egyptian audiences as targeted not against Mubarak to pressure him on reforms, but against whatever anti - U.S regime might succeed him.

Arab en masse protests, especially in Egypt, are cornering the United States in a bind, tortured between maintaining "an ally" and respecting his people's "universal rights" in expressing their "legitimate grievances," according to Obama. What message would the United States be sending to the majority of Arab allied or friendly rulers if it opts to dump the most prominent among them? Would AIPAC and other American Jewish and Zionist lobbyists allow their government to facilitate the ousting of the 30 -year old guarantor of the Egyptian peace treaty with Israel? It's almost a forgone conclusion that Obama's decision is

already made to once again give priority to the stability of U.S. “vital interests” in Middle East while in public giving lip service to Americans’ most cherished democratic values.

This translates into a naïve American recipe for preserving the status quo by some cosmetic reforms. But “Those who stick to the status quo may be able to hold back the full impact of their countries’ problems for a little while, but not forever,” Clinton warned in Qatar on January 13, otherwise, she added, the foundations of their rule will be “sinking into the sand,” but she did not announce the fears of her country that the pillars of the U.S. hegemony would be then crumbling too, anti - Americanism exacerbated and in turn fueling the only alternative to democracy in the Arab Middle East, i.e. terrorism. Egyptian former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei, whom some of the protesters have chosen to head a delegation to represent them on Sunday and who is seen as a potential presidential challenger to Mubarak, warned in Newsweek before his return to Egypt last week, that it was too late to believe reforms were still possible under the 82-year-old Mubarak, who has held “imperial power” for three decades and presides over a legislature that is a “mockery.”

Similarly, Israel was taken by surprise. On Tuesday, January 25, the Egyptian popular tsunami flooded the streets of Cairo on the Police Day. The coincidence was highly symbolic. The U.S. - supported police state was unable to honor its police and within a few days police simply “disappeared,” army was called in to protect vital state and public property while protection of private property and safety was left to the “popular committees,” which sprang up of nowhere. On the same day, the new chief of the Israeli Military Intelligence, Maj. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, was telling the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that the Egyptian President’s rule was not under threat, his regime was stable and Mubarak was able to rein in the protests. In no time Kochavi was proven wrong. Ordering his government’s spokespersons to shut up on Egypt and, like Obama, holding urgent and high level meetings with his senior security and intelligence officials, Israeli Prime Minister sent a clear and brief message on January 30: Israel will “ensure” that peace with Egypt “will continue to exist.”

The Egyptian shock waves have already hit Israel and the Israeli possible reactions are potentially the most dangerous. “An Egyptian government that is less cooperative with Israel .. could make Israel more prone to unpredictable unilateral actions, creating greater instability throughout the region,” warned Jonathan Alterman, director of the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Israeli mainstream media is already crying wolf. “If Mubarak is toppled then Israel will be totally isolated in the region,” said Alon Liel, a former director-general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry and a former ambassador to Turkey. “Without Egypt, Israel will be left with no friends in Mideast,” a story in Haaretz was headlined. Similarly, “Israel left all alone,” Itamar Eichner headlined his column in the Yedioth Ahronot online. The Egypt - Gaza Strip borders is now under Israeli spotlight. The Egyptian army which was called into cities west of the Suez Canal could not deploy in Sinai east of it, especially on those borders, restricted by none other than the peace treaty with Israel; the Egyptian security vacuum in the last few days was no evident more than in Sinai. The statement by the Hamas government on January 29 that the borders between Egypt and the Israeli besieged Gaza Strip, already declared an “enemy entity” by Israel, were unilaterally and “fully under control” was not good news in Tel Aviv. Hence the Israeli media reports about a possible Israeli reoccupation of the Gaza - Egypt borders.

On the surface, the Arab world representing the status quo is no less confused and undecided; its heart is with the Egyptian regime, but, like its U.S. ally, it has to speak with

tongues. Example: "The Saudi government and people stands with the Egyptian government and people," the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) quoted Saudi King Abdullah as telling President Mubarak in a phone call; earlier the king told U.S. President Obama there should be no bargaining about Egypt's stability and the security of its people, according to SPA. In view of the U.S., Arab and Israeli thinly veiled determination to save the moment in Egypt, it was a forgone conclusion that Mubarak will cling to power, thus setting the stage either for a long battle of instability with his own people that for sure will deplete the country's meager resources or cutting this battle short by a bloody crackdown that would make the repression which created the present people's uprising look like a mercy.

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