

Reframing Interests and Policies in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring

Written by Benedetta Berti and Yoel Guzansky

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BENEDETTA BERTI AND YOEL GUZANSKY, JUL 22 2012

The sudden eruption of social and political protests across the Middle East took the world by storm. Despite the widespread awareness that the mix of economic stagnation, sky-rocketing unemployment, demographic pressure, corrupt and inefficient government, and social and political repression represented a serious threat to the stability of the Middle East; still nobody had anticipated the magnitude and impact of the so-called Arab Spring.

On the one hand, the fact that the Arab uprisings had not been accurately forecasted by either scholars or policy-makers is hardly shocking: predicting revolutions is no easy task, and this is especially the case in a region so diverse and complex, such as the Middle East.

On the other hand, this failure of imagination reveals the substantial limits of the dominant paradigm employed by the United States in assessing the quality and reliability of its allies, both in this region of the world and elsewhere. Bluntly put, a leading principle of US foreign policy in this region of the world has been the “it is our bastard doctrine.” Accordingly, regimes with dubious (at best) records in terms of good governance and democracy have been strongly supported because of their willingness to cooperate with the US, helping achieve its national interests.

In judging whether these allies would be able to deliver on their promises and in assessing their reliability, a guiding notion has been that of the stability of the regime and of the robustness of its coercive apparatus. In other words, the discourse has been dominated by the narrow realist prism of national security, equated substantially with the survival of the regime.

However, the ongoing political and social upheaval in the Middle East is revealing the limits of applying the narrow lens of regime security as a tool to assess the viability and reliability of strategic alliances. Instead, there is a need to broaden and shift the focus of the analysis by adopting the lens of human security. The concept of human security, in fact, with its focus on the threats that affect the life and liberty of the citizens instead of the regime as an institution, allows us to formulate a more accurate assessment of the effective stability and reliability of a given ally. Accordingly, there is a need to replace indicators such as regime stability with societal stability and national security with human security, in order to make more solid and accurate assessments of which regimes should be supported. Under this prism, a regime with a strong coercive apparatus but perceived by the population as profoundly illegitimate and where the level of human security is particularly low would not be considered as a strong and solid partner. Consequently it would not be unquestionably supported by the United States, despite its willingness to cooperate.

To illustrate this point, the article looks at the ongoing Arab uprisings through the lens of the human security challenges that had been deeply undermining all the regimes involved in the revolutionary wave. To analyze these social, economic, and political factors that led to the eruption of the protests a particularly useful tool is undoubtedly the 2009 UN Arab Human Development Reports.

The Arab Human Development Reports: Understanding the Context

The Arab Human Development Reports (AHDR) are a series of independent reports written between 2002 and 2009,

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under the auspices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), aimed at engaging prominent scholars and thinkers from the Middle East in a process of analysis of the main challenges and opportunities ahead for this region of the world.[1]

In 2002, the first Arab Human Development Report was published. The report was sharply critical of the Arab regimes and shone a spotlight on the fundamental problems of the Arab world.[2] The analysis presented a bleak picture of individual rights in the Arab world and claimed that the Arab nations suffer a series of substantial structural and institutional shortcomings.

The report was harshly criticized from the regimes of the MENA region, while at the same time stirring up an internal debate—carried out through the media—about the truth behind the claims made in the report.

The fifth and last (to date) Arab Human Development Report published in July 2009 continued to harshly criticize the regimes in the Arab nations relying on the same criteria adopted in the 2002 report. The bottom line of the report was that the situation in the Arab world was seen as fundamentally unstable and, therefore, the authors considered the region at risk of internal strife, given the depth and magnitude of the unaddressed social inequalities and structural flaws.

Despite containing this crucial assessment, as well as a wealth of important information, the 2009 AHDR did not receive a lot of attention in the Arab world: at the state level, there was no particular discussion of the issues raised in the analysis. And while the Arab media gave more exposure to the findings of the AHDR—focusing specifically on the document's criticisms of the anti-terrorism laws, and the widespread authority enjoyed by the security apparatus—still the report failed to grab the spotlight like it had done in 2002.

The narrow public response elicited by the reports stemmed from several factors. The first report was the object of in-depth scrutiny and criticism because it was seen as an integral part of the largely unpopular policy of the Bush administration to (selectively) “democratize the region”, while the 2009 report, seen as less controversial, also received less publicity. In addition, the 2009 report did not reveal anything dramatically new, the regional regimes were not interested in confronting the problems presented in it; and—finally—the less political and polemical tone of the 2009 report made it less newsworthy.

However, in the aftermath of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ and the massive social, political, and civil protests that have been shaking the Middle East since December 2010, the analysis and warnings contained in the 2009 AHDR seem to offer an incredibly useful framework to help understanding the preconditions and precipitants of the ongoing revolutions, while revealing the usefulness of adopting a broader human security-focused approach when analyzing political stability. Specifically, the authors of the report raise a number of fundamental and intertwined problems of the Arab world, claiming that these structural, institutional, and environmental challenges will only worsen if unaddressed; while also having the potential to lead to increasing instability should the Arab regimes continue to ignore them.

1) An insecure natural environment:

The Arab world faces significant demographic challenges, including rapid population growth combined with intense and unregulated urbanization, with the rate of urbanization likely to hit 60 percent within one decade. In addition, to add fuel to the fire, the region has one of the highest percentages of youth per total population, today representing roughly 60 percent of the Arab world. This “youth bulge” is unlikely to decline, as this segment of the population is the fastest growing within the Arab world.

The collision between this sharp increase in population and the scarcity of available natural resources, especially water-related ones, combined with the rising environmental degradation, desertification, and the effects of climate change all represent a primary threat to the human security of the region.

What's more, without early preparation on the part of the regimes and absent investments in inter-Arab

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environmental and educational cooperation, Arab nations are likely to face severe humanitarian crises, resulting in both a growing number of “environmental refugees” as well as in increased conflict. According to the AHDR, such crises will grow more severe and generate internal social tensions that will, in turn, undermine the internal stability of the Arab states, as happened in Darfur, where the conflict was largely rooted in a struggle over water sources.

In addition, food security also represents another important human security threat faced by this region. For instance, the rate of malnutrition in the Arab world is among the highest in the world.

2) An insecure socio-political environment for the region’s minorities:

The regional level of stability and human security is also compromised by the structural state of discrimination and violence suffered by society’s most vulnerable sectors, like women, children, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDP).

A fitting example of this situation is that represented by the discrimination – both institutionalized and social – against women. In addition to widespread physical violence, women in the Arab states also suffer from social discrimination, often encouraged by the establishment. This phenomenon is manifested in a variety of aspects, including unequal protection under the law, forced marriages of minors, and institutionalization and lack of protection with respect to so-called honor killings. Furthermore, many women are still prevented from working or getting an education. In turn, this state of structural discrimination is not just bad for the women in the region, but it is equally problematic for the Arab states as well, as it hinders their development. In fact, incorporating women into the workforce and allowing them access to education would appreciably raise the productivity of the Arab world and move it significantly toward a more modern and more egalitarian society.

Similarly, refugees and IDPs– and there are at least 9.86 million IDPs in Arab nations, mostly from Sudan and Iraq – suffer from institutional discrimination and chronic neglect. The data reported in the AHDR highlights the deplorable conditions in the refugee camps, as well as the general lack of integration into the workforce. For instance, even though 70 percent of the Iraqi refugees in Jordan are of working age, fewer than 30 percent are actually employed. In addition other indicators of the second-class treatment reserved for both refugees and IDPs can be seen in the general lack of access to health care for both categories, as well as in the low percentage of refugee and displaced children in the schools. In this context it should be noted that the number of refugees in the Arab states is the highest in the world (approximately 7.5 million refugees), mostly because of the large number of Palestinian and Iraqi refugees concentrated primarily in Jordan, the occupied Palestinian territories, Syria and Lebanon. More recently, since the beginning of the Arab Spring, a new influx of refugees—mostly from Libya and Syria—have left their home countries and sought refuge in other Middle Eastern states (as well as in the western world).

3) A weak economic structure, a low level of services and a high rate of unemployment.

The report classifies the Arab nations into four groups on the basis of their incomes:

- 1) High income – Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE
- 2) Medium high income – Lebanon, Libya and Oman
- 3) Medium low income – Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Djibouti and Tunisia
- 4) Low income – Sudan, Yemen, the Comoro Islands and Mauritania

A general overview of the basic foundations of the economic systems in the region reveals their general weakness. This is also the case when talking about countries that derive a large share of their GDP from oil exports. In fact, oil-wealthy nations also hide structural weaknesses, causing economic instability both to the regimes and the citizens themselves. Over the years, the oil exporting countries have relied almost exclusively on the oil sector of the economy. As a result, economic activity in these countries developed a very high dependency on global oil prices, in

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turn resulting in high volatility and vulnerability of their economies and providing the economic system with a rather weak foundation.

The volatile economic structure of many of the regional economies is also matched by a high rate of unemployment, especially in the nations with medium low-income. Moreover, it is especially important to take notice of the extremely high rate of unemployment of the youth sector, which represents approximately 50 percent of all unemployed people in Arab countries.

Given this bleak state of affairs, it appears obvious that job creation is one of the most important challenges facing all nations in this region of the world.

The AHDR also adds that the poverty rate in Arab countries is even more severe than the unemployment rate, because in many nations an individual's income does not necessarily ensure his or her welfare, thus weakening the inverse correlation between employment and poverty. In turn, this strengthens the case for comprehensive reforms, including changes in the private sector, the service sector and the educational system.

To worsen the effects of the vulnerable economies and the high rates of unemployment and poverty, the analyzed countries also score low in terms of providing effective social services. In particular, the level of the health care systems in the Arab world leaves much to be desired. This insufficiency in the quality of health care services stems primarily from the fact that the medical model is based on treating diseases rather than preventive medicine. At the same time, the lack of investment in the public sector, the low technological levels, and the fact that there is no public health insurance, all negatively impact the level of hospital care. A similar lack of investment and modernization can also be seen in the public educational system.

4) A problematic relation between the State and its Citizens

In addition to the other important factors, one of the aspects which deserves special recognition is certainly the problematic relation between the region's regimes and its people. This relationship suffers in fact from a series of substantial problems.

Firstly, the degree of popularity and legitimacy of the main regimes analyzed tends to be low. This is due to a combination of bad governance and exclusionist national identity, based on an ascribed ethnic and sectarian community, which often leaves entire sectors of the population feeling unrepresented and excluded from the polity. In turn, this exclusionary citizenship discourse also results in a failure of the Arab regimes to ensure equal rights for all different groups that reside within their countries.

This differentiated access to social and political goods as well as citizenship rights in turn generates frictions between the different sectarian communities weakening the unity of the nations. This cycle is also self-reinforcing, as the more certain groups perceive the regime as illegitimate, the more the regime tends to respond brutally and take authoritarian measures against them.

Secondly, Arab regimes in the region, despite their formal adherence to the main international human rights conventions, still fall short of meeting international human rights law standards and ensuring basic social and political rights, which in turn further contributes to sharpen the citizens' perception of the regime as illegitimate.

Finally, in order to overcome the overall lack of popularity and legitimacy and the weakness of the national project, the Arab regimes analyzed in the report tend to compensate for this societal weakness by boosting their own power as well as the strength of their coercive apparatus. This then leads to weak internal checks on the power of the executive and in the development of a coercive apparatus aimed at protecting the regime from the people, rather than devoted to ensuring the personal security and safety of its citizens. Accordingly, security is mostly conceived as "regime security," leaving little room for concepts such as human security and investing substantial resources into developing a coercive apparatus capable of dealing with internal threats to the regime.

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From this preliminary analysis, the portrait of the region is a worrisome one. This analysis calls for the implementation of extensive reforms in the Arab world, first and foremost strengthening the rule of law and the level of accountability of the regime to its citizens. Important reforms in this sense would include increasing the degree of decentralization and separation of power, moving beyond emergency regulation that grant the regime a virtually blank check to exercise their authority, and introducing serious security sector reforms that boost the level of civilian supervision of the security apparatus. Similarly, Arab regimes should also promote reforms that would result in the recognition of equal rights and in the creation of a plural civil society. The report notes that while there has been some progress in this realm, it is necessary for “the voice of the public to be heard more” in order to continue advancing these reforms.

In addition, it is also crucial to implement broad social, political, and economic reforms, while improving the rights of the marginalized and internally discriminated groups (women, children, refugees, and IDPs). In this context, economic reforms to stabilize the economy are also needed, together with serious efforts to strengthen Inter-Arab cooperation and to boost the role of regional organizations as a potentially crucial role for regional development.

The AHDR and the Arab Spring: Policy Lessons

The AHDR presented a complex and challenging picture of the Middle East and through the lens of human security, it also pointed to some of the main institutional and structural problems this region of the world faces. In light of this report, the recent wave of massive social and political protests in the Arab region appears less like the result of a sudden explosion of generalized discontent brought about by new media and technology, and more the result of a much more profound and radical internal process of change based on long standing grievances and structural inequalities.

In this context, the Arab protest movements, though nourished by material distress, focused their efforts not only on economic grievances. Instead they also focused on producing a radically different discourse, asking for pervasive social, economic and political reforms, calling for a brand new Middle East.

At this stage, many substantial questions remain unanswered: Why did the protests erupt when they did? Will the upheavals affect every state in the Middle East or are some “immune” to the protests? Will models of liberal democracy take root in the “new” Middle East? What is the impact of the Arab Spring on Islamist forces in the region?

Although the findings of the AHDR do not represent a sufficient basis to answer these vital questions, still relying on the report and on its grim portrait of the state of the region can be a useful starting point in reassessing the post-Arab Spring US policy in the Middle East. Doing so seems both timely and urgent, as both the popularity and most importantly the perceived influence on the United States seems to be in a state of decline in this part of the world.

Firstly, the main lesson learned from this should be to reconsider assessing the reliability and stability of America’s partners solely based on the perceived security of their regime and the strength of their coercive apparatus. Instead, there should be a more holistic assessment, one that takes into consideration human security as well. In turn, this would automatically lead to a demise of the “it’s our bastard doctrine,” on the ground that building a stable partnership with a regime that systematically violates the rights and freedom of its citizens is in fact unlikely to last in the longer term. What’s more, such partnership can have immediate negative consequences on the level of popularity of the United States in the region, and it can cause a backlash in the longer term.

There have been signs that the current administration is coming to terms with this notion and beginning to formulate its policies for the MENA region accordingly. For instance, in his May 2011 speech to the Arab world, President Obama declared that promoting reforms in the Arab world is now a primary goal of the administration. Of course these declarations are not enough to eliminate the accusation of applying double-standards with respect to the ongoing Arab Spring, for example by endorsing military force against the Qaddafi regime while refusing to take a clear stance with respect to the protests in Bahrain, but still, they do send the message to the region that the list of priorities is changing.

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In this context, although countries like Morocco, Jordan or Saudi Arabia were not mentioned in the speech, they understood the message, reinforcing their perception regarding the alleged ease with which the US “abandoned” significant allies such as Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt. In turn, this leads to the perception that, if forced to choose again between freedom, reforms and regime stability, the United States could “abandon” them as well.

This perception coming from the “moderate” Arab regimes is also heightened by the notion of America’s growing weakness and declining interest in the MENA region, both fueled by the ongoing battle with Iran, as well as by the shaky post-withdrawal situation in Iraq, all of which lead the Gulf States especially, to question whether the United States appears in fact to be abandoning the arena to Iran.

This notion of decline of American influence and power, combined with a certain growing skepticism towards the state of the partnership with the US is certainly no cause for celebration, and as such “traditional” US allies in the region should be reassured.

It is neither easy nor convenient to break off relations built over the course of many decades and deeply grounded on strong material interests of both sides. For example, if we look at US-Saudi relations it is easy to argue that the partnership is very much mutually advantageous. The Americans still need access to the Gulf and its economic and energy resources, while countries like Saudi Arabia still need effective security support. Similarly, it is also true that an assertive Saudi policy, especially if aimed at Iran, is consistent with Washington’s interests. Finally, a serious wedge between Washington and Riyadh would likely limit even further the United States’ ability to wield influence in the region.

However, a just balance has to be found between breaking old and advantageous alliances and turning a blind eye and providing a blank check to authoritarian regimes. In the cases of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, for instance, preserving the current status quo and ignoring the growing protests can be incredibly expensive for the US in the longer term. In this context, a more cautious approach would argue to maintain the alliance but insert growing “conditionality,” insisting for gradual internal reforms.

This same approach had been previously advocated with respect to Egypt under President Mubarak: however the notion of creating a more serious conditionality between providing aid and implementing substantial social and political reforms was basically ignored. Now, after the regime has collapsed, it is time to revive this notion and take it more seriously.

What’s more, this conditionality clause should not only be employed when dealing with traditional allies with problematic human rights records, but it should also become part of the US’s policy with respect to the new post-Arab Spring regimes. This principle was recently put to the test, albeit unsuccessfully, in the post-Mubarak Egypt with a Congressional requirement creating conditionality between the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF)’s protection of basic liberties and the USD 1.3 billion in military aid. In the end, however, the executive decided to waive the human rights clause, asserting that Egypt was both a leading partner and a pillar of regional stability and that delaying or conditioning the aid would impair the relationship. In other words, again it seems that the United States might be prepared to turn a blind eye with respect to domestic human rights violations in the name of regime stability. However, one of the main lessons of the Arab Spring is that this “stability vs. freedom” tradeoff is shortsighted. Instead, a better approach would have been to partially withhold the aid—allowing some of the assistance to begin— as a way to both preserve the relations with the new political authority while showing that there is a real commitment to supporting human rights and locally-determined democracy.

Secondly, moving beyond the narrow notion of regime survival and state security allows us to clearly grasp the depth and magnitude of the challenges ahead for this region of the world. In turn, this leads to an important—albeit grim—assessment: regime change is not enough to truly address the problems of the region and bring about new stability. The Arab uprisings, in removing old despotic regimes, have only begun to scratch the surface of the problem, indicating that the post-revolutionary phase will be particularly challenging and require deep structural reforms, if the problems analyzed in the previous section are to be effectively addressed. This also means that in the short-term, it is fair to expect continued upheaval and instability.

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In addition, this leads us to expect further protests to continue across the region, perhaps affecting countries that we have so far thought of as immune to the upheaval.

One such example is that of the Gulf countries: one year after the onset of the Arab Spring, the Gulf monarchies have proven to be notably resilient. With the exception of Bahrain, where the tensions between the ruling Sunni minority and the Shiite majority have been unfolding for at least a decade prior to the Arab Spring, the rest of the Gulf States have not faced serious threats to their regimes and have had little difficulty suppressing the few protests that have erupted.

The conventional explanation for this outcome is of course money. Throughout the Gulf, governments have used their petrodollars (perhaps as much as \$160 billion) to fund generous new subsidies of goods and services. As a result, the masses in the Gulf have mostly sought to influence the regimes' conduct rather than to replace them outright. This is unlikely to change in the short term as long as Gulf citizens continue to enjoy the benefits of huge oil revenues.

However, the concern that more profound unrest will arise in the future is not totally unfounded, as some of the ingredients behind protests elsewhere – corruption, skyrocketing youth unemployment, and a profoundly distorted relation between the citizen and the state – are also present in the Gulf, and because of the seemingly contagious character of the turmoil.

A similar case is that of Jordan, where the ramping economic crisis and the growing influx of refugees escaping the violence in Syria can also potentially threaten the stability of the regime, and reignite the protests. Political and social protests in Jordan in fact did spark during the early stages of the Arab Spring in 2011. Since then, a combination of partial political and economic reforms, as well as a massive influx of funds from Saudi Arabia has all, so far, helped to diffuse the internal tensions and pacify the protesters. In the longer term, however, Jordan's economic and political problems are far from resolved, while the ongoing violence in neighboring Syria represents a potential source of instability for the Hashemite Kingdom.

In other words, although until now the Arab Spring has not "hit" some of the main American allies in the Middle East, still this does not mean that the storm has permanently passed. Over time, the monarchs and emirs will not be able to avoid accelerating the pace of reforms, and they will have to respond to the pressures exerted from without and within by going beyond merely cosmetic change. In this sense, it would be in the United States' best interest to play an active role in promoting reforms and increased pluralism.

Conclusion:

Despite the fact that the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring came largely as a surprise for much of the international community, it is indeed true that an analysis of the economic, environmental, political, and social challenges faced by the Arab nations leads to the understanding that the revolutions were the result of a long-standing and deep state of regional crisis.

In turn, this understanding somewhat casts a light on the traditional criteria so far employed by the United States to both choose and assess the stability of its allies in the MENA region. Put simply, the notion that shared interests and willingness to cooperate with the US are the only valid criteria to be employed when assessing the strength and feasibility of an ally are put into question by the ongoing turmoil in the MENA region. Similarly, the notion that a state with a seemingly strong leadership and an effective coercive apparatus will prove solid is equally questioned by the Arab Spring.

Instead the recent events invite us to broaden the narrow spectrum of regime stability and to also assess the level of human security when crafting alliances in this region of the world.

A consequence of this approach would be the demise of the "it's our bastard" policy and the end of the unwavering support for unpopular regimes with problematic human rights records and distorted relations with their own citizens.

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This new outlook should be reflected when engaging with new allies, and it should also permeate in the US' relations with its traditional allies in the region, like Saudi Arabia or Bahrain. While weakening or putting these partnerships into question does not seem feasible or convenient, in the long term the US would be better served by making a concrete effort to push these countries into implementing serious internal reforms.

A second important lesson emerging from a deeper understanding of the Arab Spring and its preconditions is that, given the depth and magnitude of the challenges that the MENA region is facing, it is highly unlikely that this process of internal reform will be either quick or immediately effective. In the short term, one should then prepare for prolonged instability, while attempting to play an active role in stirring the post-revolutionary phase towards democratization and pluralism.

In sum, the realist tradeoff between morality and national interests in foreign policy is redefined and challenged by the ongoing Arab Awakening. The crumbling of traditional allies considered as stable but yet profoundly unpopular and illegitimate within their own society calls for a drastic rethinking of the paradigm. Turning a blind eye to human rights violations and despotism is not just morally questionable; it is also a bad policy.

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Benedetta Berti is a Research Associate at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) at Tel Aviv University (TAU), a lecturer at TAU and a member of the Atlantic Council's Young Atlanticist Working Group. **Yoel Guzansky** is a research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University and a former member of Israel's National Security Council.

[1] *Arab Human Development Reports* <http://www.arab-hdr.org/>

[2] The Arab region is usually equated with the 22 countries that are members of the Arab League: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the Palestine Liberation Organization (for the Palestinian Occupied Territories), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. UNESCO