

# Gauging Obama's Influence in the Middle East

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VICTORIA ELLIOT, JUL 27 2013

### **To What Extent is President Obama's Foreign Policy Able to Influence the Post-revolutionary Context in the Middle East?**

Eighteen months before Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in a Tunisian marketplace, the newly inaugurated President Obama gave a speech at Cairo University. Calling for a "new beginning" in relations between the US and the Arab states, this President was welcomed with great optimism in the Middle East.<sup>[1]</sup> In the years that have followed, however, analysts have found it difficult to define the foreign policy of the forty fourth President, particularly relating to the situation in the Middle East that began with Bouazizi's self-immolation. Obama has said himself, "When you start applying blanket policies on the complexities of the current world situation, you're going to get yourself in trouble."<sup>[2]</sup> Indeed, the amount and nature of change has varied so dramatically from state to state in recent years that no single strategy could accommodate all the differences.<sup>[3]</sup>

For this reason, Obama's foreign policy will be defined as a pragmatic, variable engagement; a balance between strategic interests and values.<sup>[4]</sup> No President is always a realist or an idealist, and Obama has practiced a mixture of the two with regards to the Middle East.<sup>[5]</sup> Although we consider that his actions vary from state to state, there is still the overall vision to note. He wishes to preserve the great power status of the US, while making it acceptable to the rest of the world. Regarding the Arab world, this has manifested itself in a decisive end to the messianic tone and Freedom Agenda of his predecessor, a declaration that the US is not at war with Islam, and a renewed promise to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>[6]</sup> Nonetheless, democracy promotion remains a central feature of the administration's policy in the region and must be remembered too in an examination of how Obama's foreign policy influences the post-revolutionary context in the Middle East.<sup>[7]</sup>

What exactly is this context? There is the domestic situation in certain states that have clearly come out onto the other side of the revolutions in which they had the greatest fall out: Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain and Yemen.<sup>[8]</sup> These events were unprecedented: Tunisia actually saw the first ever, successful Arab revolution.<sup>[9]</sup> Their political futures remain uncertain and are a central consideration to Obama's influence.<sup>[10]</sup> With these facts in mind, there are three parts to the consideration of Obama's ability to influence the region. Firstly, the domestic constraints on his foreign policy making are vital. Next, the strategic interests of the US will be examined. Finally, the influence Obama has over the internal political situations will be considered.

#### **Domestic Constraints on Obama's Foreign Policy**

The first challenge to Obama's ability to influence the post-revolutionary context in the Middle East through his foreign policy lies in the domestic politics of the US. This comes in two forms: historical and politico-cultural concerns and state apparatus.

A study of Bush and Clinton's decision-making on the intervention in Somalia 1992-1994 concluded that an exploration of presidents' domestic political calculations are an important component of foreign policy decision making since public attentiveness can constrain presidential decision-making in some foreign crises.<sup>[11]</sup> This is true of President Obama's scope for action to influence the post-revolutionary context in the Middle East, in the sense that he has to base foreign policy decisions on domestic political consent. Aside from the state apparatus' influence, this

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is important because the fact that the American public is uninformed regarding global affairs has meant that demagogically formulated solutions have become more appealing and the deepening ideological cleavage has made less likely bipartisan cooperation on foreign policy and further injected this demagoguery into policy conflicts.<sup>[12]</sup> And so, it has become harder to build support for a strategy based on liberal internationalist principles, and any influence Obama wishes to have in the Middle East faces increasing challenge from at home.<sup>[13]</sup>

These issues refer more to the role of public opinion and the media, which build into the practical issue of the US state apparatus. A series of bureaucratic interactions decisively influences outcomes with regards to foreign policy, and can put into practice these problems of polarisation and demagoguery.<sup>[14]</sup> Foreign policy lobbies have a high level of access to Congress, and are actually able to impose some decisions.<sup>[15]</sup> In fact, the US Congress never considered the Arab Spring a major political development because of fears that it might benefit Islamists and potentially weaken Israel. Meanwhile, the Pentagon's influence in such matters is clear: it was the main source of opposition to implementing a no fly zone over Libya because it was considered outside US security interests.

Of course, in the case of Libya domestic constraints were overcome.<sup>[16]</sup> Nonetheless, these constraints are central to Obama's capacity for influence. They all connect with the great constraint of history in American politics: the legacy of previous presidents. Following the Bush years, the American public has entered an isolationist phase, rejecting intervention and fearing over-involvement in the Middle East.<sup>[17]</sup> The influence of Bush's legacy is equally important in terms of its effect on the states in the region and will thus be considered. It is clear, to conclude, that domestic constraints of legacy, practice and politics are an important factor behind Obama's ability to influence the post-revolutionary context in the Middle East.

## Strategic Interests of the United States in the Middle East

For decades, the relationship between the US and its allies in the Middle East has been based on a "pact of silence", whereby US (and others in the West) stayed silent on repression, and in some cases hindered democratic change, in return for security in energy, support in the fight against terrorism, control over migration flows and the renouncement of weapons of mass destruction. These interests and the methods of their upkeep were in place long before Obama's election, and Egypt and Libya were two key beneficiaries before their leaders were ousted.<sup>[18]</sup> While the specific interests vary from one state to another in the region, the problem Obama has faced in the paradox of wanting reform but not wanting to overturn an order of pliant Arab regimes is an important factor in his ability to influence the post-revolutionary context in the region for two reasons: firstly, in relation to Syria as a result of intervention in Libya, and, secondly, in view of abandoning former allies.

The perennial clash in US foreign policy of national interest versus democratic values was greatly evident in reactions to Egypt and Libya. They eventually concluded that democratic reform would lead to regimes favourable to them, although how true this is will be examined in the following section.<sup>[19]</sup> Therefore, Obama called loudly for the stepping down of Mubarak and "build an international coalition to stop a massacre in Libya."<sup>[20]</sup> However, transitions need the continued support of the international community and we can see a hindrance on US influence in the area now as a result of Libya. The UN Security Council resolution confirmed for Russia and China (and the other BRICs) that the West would distort intentions of UN resolutions for their own purposes, and now a Syrian intervention seems highly unlikely to be passed. Thus, US influence in this way has lessened as the BRICs are no longer willing to countenance UN Security Council Resolutions that may lead to interventions to overthrow others.<sup>[21]</sup>

Meanwhile, in Egypt and Libya, autonomous regimes may mean an abrogation of the pact of silence and thus jeopardy for US strategic interests. The US has shown itself to be a decreasingly reliable ally for the autocratic regimes with which it held up the pact of silence, as Obama's role in the ousting of certain leaders has shown that his foreign policy is not always in favour of the status quo anymore.<sup>[22]</sup> Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Israel did not react favourably to Obama's decisions about Egypt, in particular, and thus his verbal intervention there may have lessened his influence elsewhere in the region.<sup>[23]</sup> One of the key strategic interests in the region for the US is the Arab-Israeli conflict, in which US influence could fall as a result of Israel no longer needing to rely on the US. Meanwhile, if the old regimes are replaced by anti-American regimes,<sup>[24]</sup> the ability of Obama to influence those states declines sharply.

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## Internal Political Situation in Post-Revolutionary States

When understanding the extent to which Obama's foreign policy can influence domestic politics in the post-revolutionary context of the Middle East, there are two key points to make. Firstly, the rise of Arab public opinion has great implications for American influence in the region. Secondly, comparing the calls for democracy in revolutionary states with the democracy promotion on the part of the US is illuminating.

The existence of Arab public opinion in Arab-American relations following the high levels of participation in the revolutions is a likely truth, given the opening up of Arab political systems. With Arab governments forced to take into account their public's views and expressing more desire to control their own public funds, the external powers – such as the US – face a great upheaval in their relations with these states, so comfortable during the years of the pact of silence.<sup>[25]</sup> The growing influence of public opinion over governments and the absence of old autocratic strong leaders will make it more difficult for the US to push their traditional policies in certain parts of the region.<sup>[26]</sup> In fact, the very occurrence of the revolutions is symbolic of a failure of the US to control the region; Arabs waited for a long time for America to change its policy, support those on the streets and end its upholding of dictatorships, but when the US's democracy promotion efforts were clearly not achieving their proclaimed aim, the people of Egypt, Tunisia and Libya took to changing their states themselves.<sup>[27]</sup>

Indeed, none of the developments in Egypt seem to have happened because of US democracy promotion efforts, which stressed freedom underpinned by economics and neglected to incorporate social justice and human development.<sup>[28]</sup> This vital difference in concepts of democracy, indeed in the fundamental cause of the protesters in those post-revolutionary states, can undermine American influence in the region politically. There is a dual basis of political desires in the protests: freedom and autonomy from the west. The concept of freedom has been constructed around that of citizenship and the nation state, the possibility to have a governing body free of external [American] control as well as open to the opinion of its people.<sup>[29]</sup> Indeed, for most Arab constituencies, democracy means independence from the West, more assertiveness against Israel, and an assertion of national identity and national values rather than the ideals of civil and political rights espoused by the West.<sup>[30]</sup> This poses clear problems for the possibility of Obama's foreign policy to influence the political side of the post-revolutionary context in the Middle East.

## Conclusion

Upon examination of the post-revolutionary context in the Middle East, two things become clear with regards to Obama's ability to influence the region through his foreign policy. He faces great constraints from domestic political considerations that sometimes prevent him from even being able to enact his foreign policy in the region, and when he does there are two broad concluding points to make.

Firstly, he has, almost by default, a huge influence in the region. This is because of the previous position of the United States in bolstering autocratic regimes in return for their strategic help in a number of aforementioned areas. Thus, when the US pulls this support, as in Egypt or Libya, they can influence the outcome of events greatly. Meanwhile, the US history in the region means Obama's foreign policy has the ability to inspire protesters and influence their movements.

On the other hand, the second point that has become clear is that the future for American influence in the region is uncertain, despite Obama's evident personal popularity. The protesters calling for democracy explicitly wish to loosen the hold of the West over the region and create autonomous states with fully functioning public opinion. If the democratic revolutions are fully realised, Obama's ability to influence the region will continue falling.

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