

ISSN 2230-8458

***World
Focus***

379

July 2011

**US Policy Responses to Developments
in the Arab World**

Rs. 50

US \$ 10

32nd

Year of publication

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INDOCENTRIC FOREIGN AFFAIRS MONTHLY JOURNAL

American Geopolitical Interests in the Arab World: What Lies Ahead?

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The United States harbors deeply-entrenched geopolitical interests in the Arab World. Arab countries in West Asia and North Africa either by dint of their resources or their geographical locations have long interested the Americans as vital areas for safeguarding US strategic interests in the region. The stretch of landmasses and the corresponding sea-lanes that the Arabs inhabit have been an important factor for US foreign-policymaking in the region. As former United States Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Chas Freeman said, "In foreign policy, national interest is the measure of all things. The United States has important interests in West Asia and North Africa that ensure that our relations with the Arabs can have very large consequences for us. These interests don't go away in response to events or shifting perceptions or changes of Administration in Washington."

The Arab world is currently experiencing a change in the *status quo*. In this globalized world, changes are contagious and that is what happened in the Arab World. Something that started in the North African country of Tunisia led to some of the most significant changes in Arab history. And the advent of new technologies and the speed with which information are shared within a country and across borders have more than accentuated the changes sweeping through the Arab world. This has led the Obama administration to reassess the very basis and nature of American engagements in the Arab world, to reboot the relationships that America had built in this part of the world, since its rise as a superpower in international politics.

The Arab world has always seen the influence of extra-regional powers, be it the British, the Soviets or the Americans in its contemporary history. As America tries to

engage a world in which its continuing pre-dominance is continuously being questioned, the kind of internal struggles that undergoes in different parts of the Arab world, threatens to dislodge or shake the very regimes with which America has entwined its interests with. As some of America's most ardent allies have been dislodged or are threatened to be shaken from their seats of power, how are American policymakers reassessing its ties and how does it hope to reorient its priorities in the Arab countries to safeguard its vital geopolitical interests in the region?

The Arab countries in West Asia and North Africa have long remained a core area of interest for American foreign policy since the advent of the United States as a global superpower. The region is the hub of energy production and many countries possess geostrategic significance for the United States. But, alliances with many of these have been myopic and centred on the ruling clans, thus often discrediting America in the eyes of the populace in many parts of the Arab world. The current upheaval in the Arab world threatens to open that fissure further. In order to better evaluate America's response to the challenges ahead, it is imperative to look at some of the core American geopolitical interests in the region. The article tries to do the same, keeping in mind the dynamics of the evolving revolutions in the Arab world.

American core interests in the region will more or less remain the same, but American policymaking has to undergo a major paradigm shift in order to better grasp the changing scheme of things. To better evaluate the nature of America's response to the evolving situation in the Arab world, one needs to try and understand the nuances of some of America's most entrenched interests in the region that largely shapes the kind of policy responses that Washington decides upon towards the region.

The Oil Factor:

Countries in the Arab world are endowed with natural resources, like petroleum and natural gas. With energy demands increasing by the day, these resources have indeed sustained America's partnership with many Arab countries, in the process overlooking the undemocratic nature of the ruling clan. Now, the Arab revolutions have caused political upheavals in some of the most oil rich countries of the world, with which America has maintained a very myopic relationships based on demand and supply. As the call for popular rule sweeps the Arab world, how would the United States respond?

The importance that oil as a resource counts for this region was made clear by President Obama (during his much-awaited speech on the current imbroglio in West Asia and North Africa) himself when he said, "If you take out oil exports, this region of over 400 million people exports roughly the same amount as Switzerland." US dependence on Arab oil remains unabated and will continue to remain so for the foreseeable future in spite of calls for alternative forms of energy. The West Asian and North African countries are some of the world highest producers and exporters of oil and natural gas in the world and any upheaval in its political, security or social stability is bound to impact the oil, market in the world.

The region's exports account for roughly 40% of oil and 20% of natural gas traded internationally. And a political upheaval in such an important part of the market would have repercussions on the oil prices globally. To give a perspective, the West Asian and North African countries is home to 8 of the 12 countries in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and 5 of the 11 members of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF). Given the impact that was felt because of the Arab oil embargo during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, it sure is understandable as to why the United States should be concerned about any issue that disturbs the status quo in this region. Moreover, some of the countries may produce relatively little but are strategically located transit routes accounting huge amounts of the global oil trade.

Reflecting on the implications of Arab world's oil on US foreign policymaking, well-known American columnist and analyst Thomas L. Friedman once commented, "...Nothing has subverted Middle East democracy more than the Arab world's and Iran's dependence on oil, and nothing will restrict America's ability to tell the truth in the Middle East and promote democracy there more than our continued dependence on oil." "...politics in countries dependent on oil becomes totally focused on who controls the oil revenues — rather than on how to improve the skills and education of both their men and women, how to build a rule of law and a legitimate state in which people feel some ownership, and how to build an honest economy that is open and attractive to investors," he added.

Israel and Regional Security:

The US maintains one of the most extraordinary alliances with the West Asian Jewish State of Israel, a relationship that expands through numerous webs of inter-linkages and which is largely seen as unshakable in its comprehensive nature. The alliance is time-proven and crisis-proven, cemented over the years through numerous

deep-seated defence, strategic, economic and socio-cultural linkages. Changing administrations in Washington have not altered the kind of centrality and importance that the security of Israel occupies in US policy-making calculations. Apart from links that are socio-cultural, religious and historical in nature, Israel's security and its predominance as a major regional military power in West Asia, makes strategic sense for the United States. The Israel-America alliance helps in keeping some of the burden off American shoulders.

In the context of a perceived threat from Iran and the concerns regarding its nuclear ambitions, Israel as the only nuclear powered country in the region helps ease American concerns. But, at the same time, an Arab-Israeli peace that still eludes the world is costing the Americans dearly. Many Muslim countries, even outside the Arab world consider that America's unrelenting and somewhat controversial support for Israel at all costs has increased Israel's belligerence vis-à-vis the Palestinians. The condition of the Palestinians and their unfulfilled dream of a separate state clearly stoke anti-Americanism and jihadist ideology inimical to the interests of the United States. Moreover, America's implicit acquiescence to the nuclear status of Israel is often used as a bargaining chip by countries like Iran that is at loggerheads with the United States concerning its own nuclear programme. The American misadventure in Iraq and the failure to locate any weapons of mass destructions there has already dealt a blow to US non-proliferation policy and hence it clearly does not need any further dent in its efforts to deal with the Iranian nuclear issue. This reflects to the importance of a regional power and an all-weather ally like Israel to the American scheme of things. But, as long as the Arab-Israeli peace process is in a limbo, US-Israel proximity, even if unintended, will continue to stoke fear and hatred in the Muslim world. Concern for the Palestinian issue is something that transcends boundaries and ethnicities in the Muslim world and at the hands of jihadists, is an easy tool to flame anti-Americanism.

In the context of military logistics also, the Arab countries play a crucial role. In order for the United States to maintain relative freedom of access to sea and air spaces and move its military hardware unhindered in times of special operations, sustaining its relationships with the Arab countries has been of paramount importance. The current upheaval has caught the Americans in a dilemma, forced to walk a tight rope between realpolitik and idealistic foreign policy values. There is clearly a shift of power in the region, yet it is uncertain as to what the future make-up of these polities would be. After a brief spell of democratic upheaval, will the countries revert back to some other facet of authoritarianism? Or, will things be really different and if

yes, how will a more populist government, respond to American policies. How the United States maneuvers across these minefields, to preserve its pre-dominance in one of the most vital regions of the world is something only time will tell.

War on Terrorism:

Perceptions have endured regarding the US war on terror, specifically the widely virulent view that American fight against terrorism was targeted against Islam. In fact, criticism for American foreign policy had increased manifold, especially in the Islamic world because of its decision to intervene in Iraq. And since the 9/11 attacks, the American war on terror has been a permanent landscape in American foreign policy, at times eclipsing all other issue areas of foreign policy. The perception of threat from anti-American regimes combined with the threat of weapons of mass destruction finally led to the American intervention in Iraq. This extended war on terror has brought a lot of negative dividends, inviting more anti-Americanism around the world, with many in the Islamic world seeing the war on terror as just another pretext of furthering America's unilateralism in world politics. According to analysts, the continued estrangement of Muslim world would provide further recruiting grounds for Islamic extremists detrimental to the security of American interests and make it harder for governments in Muslim dominated countries to side willingly with America in the fight against terrorism. Yemen has become a major spotlight in the American campaign against terrorism. This has been accentuated by the death of Osama Bin Laden, the increasing decentralization of the Al-Qaeda network and the evolving security situation in Yemen as a result of the current protests.

Jeffrey D. Feltman, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, in his testimony to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in early 2010 reflecting on the threat emanating from the Al-Qaeda network in this region had said, "...Recognizing the growing threat emanating from Yemen, the United States has been significantly ramping up levels of both security and development assistance since FY 2008." "In January 2009, the leader of Al-Qaeda in Yemen (AQY), Nasir al-Wahishi, publicly announced that Yemeni and Saudi Al-Qaeda operatives were now working together under the banner of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)," he added. But, by 2008 US diplomats reportedly started warning Washington that Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh was using the US counter-terrorism assistance to quell internal political dissent. And many believed that American aid should have been development and not military-oriented. The United States has been largely associated with the unpopular Saleh

regime and it will be a challenge as to how America preserves its interests amidst the upheavals. Even as President Saleh left for Saudi Arabia reportedly to undergo medical treatment for injuries sustained in an attack, analysts were already looking at a scenario of power vacuum and its implications for the fight against Al-Qaeda, a vital area of interest for the Americans. ABC News "This Week" anchor Christiane Amanpour said. "A power vacuum in a poor, divided, and heavily armed country spells trouble for stability, and troubles specifically for the war on al Qaeda's network there." "It is safe to say what happens in Yemen matters more than what comes next in Libya," Amanpour commented.

Democracy Promotion:

Dominoes have been falling in the Arab world. The pent-up emotions and the people's anger were out in the streets, catching the impulse of the Arabs and the international audience alike. A debate has been raised between authoritarian stability and democratic chaos. But, the journey is far from certain, the more important question is how the changes are institutionalized and made entrenched in legitimate organs of the government. Different countries have dealt with protestors in different ways. Oman raised minimum wages by 43 percent for national private sector workers. Saudi King Abdullah unveiled benefits for Saudis worth some \$37 billion. And other regimes have tried to quell protests with violence like in Syria and in Libya where a civil-war situation ensues. One of the major spotlights of the Libyan conflict will be regarding the tussle between the liberalist agenda of protecting civilians and the more hardcore realist issue of how far one can go to help the rebels in putting an end to Gaddafi's regime.

America has also been accused of resorting to acute selectivity as it provided only a guarded rebuke on the Bahrain's monarchy decision to call in Saudi troops to quell protests. Washington has urged Bahrain (home to the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet) to use restraint and repeated the call to other Gulf nations but said it did not consider the entry into Bahrain of Saudi security forces an invasion. Is democracy in the Arab World an American interest? The answer would depend on which country one is talking about, and democracy to what extent and what cost? If the cost is US strategic interests, the response will most likely be subdued and rhetorical at best. Association of democracy promotion with the policy of regime change has led to discrediting America's promotion of freedom and human rights and rendered it just rhetorical and double standard, as America chooses to ignore various dictatorial regimes for getting support on its war on terrorism.

The Arab uprisings have posed a serious dilemma for US democracy promotion policy. What is the nature of these protests? It is highly complex to give any pattern to the dissident movements sweeping across the Arab world. Democracy is an arduous process and movements for political freedom are only trailers to a lot more complex journey that history proves is often uncertain. So, where should the United States stand and whose side should it take? It is indeed a difficult choice. A calculation of hardcore strategic interests would demand siding with time-tested ties based on stability minus freedom for the country's own people.

But, in this case, even if the regime survives, America will be seen as enemies of the popular choice. This will not be wise for America's long term interests given the fact that the Arab world, despite the existence of many American allied Muslim countries often serve as breeding grounds for anti-American "jihadists". Now, if America were to side with the people's movements and if the populist governments decide to disentangle itself from the United States, where does that leave American foreign policy and the sustenance of American interests in the region? This issue will grapple American policymakers for the foreseeable future and the Obama administration needs all the adroitness in the world to survive this turmoil and emerge with American interests intact in the region.

American support for democratic alternatives have to be pro-active, not a default position. Support for the protestors in the Arab world came almost when it was quite apparent that Tunisia's Ben Ali and Egypt's Mubarak had to go. In fact, according to Pew Research Centre, as President Obama prepared to make his recent speech on the current Arab situation, a new survey found that the rise of pro-democracy movements has not led to an improvement in America's image in the region. The results of the political realignments in one of the most vital regions of American foreign policy are just evolving and one needs to wait and watch to as to how America tries to restructure its policymaking in order to secure its interests in this region.

Conclusions:

The evolving situation in the Arab world also has to be seen in the context of the kind of changes that the Obama administration expressed was his determination to bring in America's relationship with the Muslim world, launched with much fanfare in the Cairo speech. Have substantial changes been made in the much debated relationship? Has President Obama's huge popularity at the start of his career led to changes in this aspect?

US foreign policy towards the Arab world has been also made more complex by the very fact that American policymakers deal with a set of countries identified as belonging to the pan-ethnic identity of being Arabs, speaking the Arabic language and largely characterized by the Islamic religion, but nevertheless divided by different nationalities, sects and different political entities. The United States has followed a selective country-to-country strategy when it comes to the Arab revolutions and not a regional strategy. Different countries in the region have had different forms of relationships with the United States. As such, some were dispensable and others were not. So, it would be naïve to expect the United States to apply the same fit-all yardstick towards the Arab world.

Something very significant about the Arab revolutions was the discernible absence of all so familiar "anti-Americanism". Also the movement was not dictated by any overarching ideology. Indeed, the movement by and large was identified as anti-regime, anti-corruption, against unemployment, and cronyism and all the inefficiencies that has plagued many of the Arab countries, for which the protestors blamed the ruling regimes. But, there is no guarantee that the movement, being extremely contagious, will not turn "anti-American". The upheavals have been and will serve as a real test of how America walks the tight rope between idealism and realism, of how the United States will keep alive its rhetoric and still sustain some hardcore strategic interests in the region. The silver-tongued President Obama, true to his form, has delivered quite a brilliant speech on the current situation. But, only time will be the real judge of his policy projections: visionary or just plain ad-hoc?

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