

# American Policies

## Debating National Interests

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's remarks to the Human Rights Council at the United Nations European headquarters in Geneva, on February 28, 2011 described the first clear features of the United States' policy concerning the protests that have been pervading many Arab countries. Clinton's statement settled a long debate within Washington about how to best deal with the unexpected changes in the Arab World. It reconciled conflicting internal motions, and classified Washington's support for political transition in the Arab World as a strategic imperative, assuring that American values and interests converge on the issue. Clinton asserted that it was necessary to protect these transitional operations from anti-democratic influences. Which influences did she mean?

Experts say that revolutions go through three stages: the first consists of sloganeering, the second of developing the tools for protest, while the third consists of establishing alternatives. While acknowledging the potential risk of any revolution to run amok, the American administration expressed its concern about the third stage of Arab revolts as it sought to formulate policies regarding the countries that have witnessed – or are still witnessing – protests. On one hand was the fear of seeing the Somali experience repeated: a country plunged into chaos when the political transition failed. In face of the fear that these countries could become safe havens for Al-Qaeda, such an outcome is considered highly undesirable.

The American administration is also worried about the possibility of any of the revolts ending in a one-time election that would replace one tyrannical regime by another – the latter more

likely to be Islamist, as many Arab liberals and the data available to the administration seem to suggest. It's worth noting that Clinton, in her remarks, did not oppose the (potentially

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problematic) participation of Islamic groups in the creation of new governments, provided that they reject violence, and respect participation, equality and democratic values.

The American administration thus appears to have a better understanding of the Arab street, and to be more responsive to its demands, but within a framework that preserves its effective role on one hand, and does not jeopardize its national interests on the other. In its effort to reach a happy compromise, the United States will attempt, in the foreseeable future, to ensure the formation of “moderate and pragmatic” representative councils, or to keep former “accepted” powers in place, thus forestalling any transitional void and enabling dealings with clear political systems. Washington's political positions in the changing countries will be judged according to that equation.

Events in Tunisia caught Washington politicians and the international community unawares. The events even surprised inhabitants of the country itself, which was



**Raed Fakeeh**

Raed Fakeeh is a Lebanese journalist who spent much of his life in Kuwait. He studied law at the Beirut Arab University. He was a reporter for a number of Lebanese and Arab media, including “Sawt ash-Shaab”, Kuwait TV and NileSat. Since seven years he is based in Washington DC. He is specializing on questions of democracy in the Arab world and carried out extensive field coverage in most Arab countries, as well as Pakistan and Afghanistan.

often described as one of the Arab countries with “smartest and quietest” suppression of its citizens. Zine el-Abidine had successfully crafted a set of regional and international equations that satisfied interests and silenced concerns: Foreign investments with excellent terms, and the total suppression of any Islamic activity, whether moderate or radical. This equation, which allowed Zine el-Abidine’s regime to remain in place for many long years, also proved decisive in swiftly eradicating it. The delay in reacting to the Tunisian events made it essential to keep in place a solid structure, which would be proof against the transitional void and its pillar in Tunisia, was the military establishment.

### Washington’s Response to Egypt – A Balancing Act

Protests in Tunisia did not ignite discussions in Washington, and even less in the media. Since day one, the events met American standards for peaceful transition of power. Discussions however were directly unleashed at the first spark of protest in Egypt, the second largest recipient of US economic and military aid. During the first few days, the White House was like a juggler, trying to balance sensitive core issues. The administration attempted to uphold American values such as freedom of expression

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and support for the peaceful demonstrations, which called for democracy, while at the same time distancing itself from the events, bearing in mind the US’ considerable interests in Egypt, a country of vital political and strategic importance in the region.

Alarm bells quickly rang out from the conservative and neoconservative blocs, with warnings and analyses by Henry Kissinger and John Bolton, cautioning against abandoning Hosni Mubarak’s regime. An influential movement within the White House agreed about the risk inherent in upsetting Egypt’s role in the region. Some evoked the unsuccessful attempts at dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood years earlier. Warnings accumulated against offering Egypt, the most politically active Arab country, up to Islamic currents, opening it up to Iranian interventions (Tehran supporting opposition movements), or creating a fertile environment for Al-Qaeda activity in the region.

However, American president Barack Obama’s personality, and the behavior of Mubarak’s regime towards the demonstrators altered the course of the negotiations that were taking place at the time with (then) Egyptian Minister of Defense Field Marshal Mohamad Hussain Tantawi, current leader of Egypt’s ruling Higher Military Council. He was heading a military delegation to Washington at the height of the protests in Cairo. The White House’s position, which gradually shifted in favor of Mubarak’s resignation, sparked a wave of internal objections from supporters of Israel inside the US Congress, and from other advocates of more stable options (while Egyptian activists were unhappy with the lack of American pressure on Mubarak, during the first days of the revolution.)

The current defending Mubarak was strongly opposed by proponents of his resignation, who called attention to the degree of overlap between American and Egyptian interests, regardless of the shape of government: starting with the annual economic aid, the American factories in Egypt and their effect on the Egyptian economy, and ending with what is perhaps the main factor, namely, the special relationship with the Egyptian military establishment. Would the new Egyptian ruler forsake all mutual economic interests? And would the military establishment forego special American aid and training?

While these questions were being debated, objections within the administration gradually tapered off, aided by the news from across the Atlantic – even if some signals still caused some concern. The first piece of good news was delivered by the Egyptian Military Council, on the day it assumed power: it guaranteed that it would preserve Egypt’s regional accords and maintain its moderate politics. The Muslim Brotherhood also sent a message, internally to the Military Council, and externally to the West, and Washington in particular, assuring that the Brotherhood would not attempt to ascend to the presidency nor would it dramatically increase its participation in parliament. But worries grew, as people tried to comprehend what Egypt would be like after Mubarak’s departure - especially with the release of Abboud and Tarek al-Zumur, both convicted for the assassination of former Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat, after thirty years spent in jail.

Their actual release did not cause as much concern as the special welcome they received, complete with official national television coverage. This worried not only those who sought a civilian (non religious) state, but also, and more specifically, the Coptic community who had been the target of surprising sectarian attacks after the “January 25 revolution”, and of a deadly attack on a church in Alexandria a few weeks earlier. The Copts were also particularly distressed by the Military Council’s decision to keep intact the second article of the Egyptian constitution, which they were hoping to alter, and which states that Shari’a law is the principal source for legislation.

In Washington however, and in light of Arab and Egyptian mobilization, some Republicans took advantage of the internal political confusion, and attributed the uprisings to the success of former president George Bush’s initiatives that promoted democracy in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

In summary it appeared as a peaceful transition that avoided crossing political red lines, or creating a political void. The revolution was carried out with “eyes wide open”, and

as such was given free reign to complete the transition by changing the government, terminating the symbols of the Mubarak era, and putting away its leaders.

### Alarmed Arab Leaders

Most of the events and developments appeared ideal for American politicians, except for one point rarely covered by American media: the message sent by the United States to its Arab allies, regarding their stance on the revolts. Doubtless, some Arab countries are now eyeing their greatest ally with dread. After all, Mubarak’s last meeting with Obama was only a few months older. Jordanians and Saudis are certainly wondering what their relationship with the United States really guarantees. The Saudis expressed some concern, albeit reservedly,

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when the Americans did not comply with King Abdullah’s requests to protect the Mubarak regime. However, the United States’ position on events in Bahrain, and their clear disapproval of the Gulf countries’ decision to restore order in Manama by sending in troops, aggravated Arab leaders’ anger.

Many in American political circles recognize the discontent of Arab governments, but they also realize that there are lines both American and “moderate” Arab parties will not cross, in the foreseeable future, in order to curb Iranian influence to grow in the region. But many see the Arab uprisings as a perfect occasion to pressure America’s allies into implementing the reforms to combat radicalism that Washington had been calling for since the events of

September 11. Some experts in Washington admit that Arab regimes have had pressures eased on them during the last few years of former president Bush's era due to an increase

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in stability, but it's that same stability that requires even wider implementations of reforms to guarantee it.

Within that context, a senior advisor in the State Department stated that Washington's policies in the region do not involve US controlling past, present, or future events. On the contrary, developments demonstrate an advanced model of dispassionate political work based on mutual interests, and removed from the emotion that characterizes the readings of most Arab political activists. The advisor adds that Washington defines its degree of support according to the dictates of popular movements, which also define the shape of American policy: "If people were to mobilize, would we stand in their face? Quite the contrary, we would adapt our policies to the developments." Building on that, Arab leaders should completely review policies within their countries, and put reforms and amendments into effect.

While the steps announced by Saudi King Abdullah ben Abdel Aziz to improve economic and social affairs have been hailed by some as reforms, and despite the afore-mentioned tension between Washington and Gulf Council, some politicians, who describe themselves as realists, point to the fact that the balance tips in favor of interests at the expense of reforms, the closer one gets to the countries of the oil-rich Gulf. They also note the activity of Al-Qaeda, in a region adjacent to Iran and with various links to Pakistan. And so, any American role, or call to reform must be preceded by clearly

identifying the demonstrators, or opposition forces and their vision about the three aforementioned factors, especially concerning political alternatives. This explains why some figures have described the American position on developments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria as cautious; while describing their stance on Bahrain as concerned.

### The Stance towards Libya

Returning to the Secretary of State's outline of the American position on current events, few were surprised by the slow decision process about developments in Libya. A country with a strong radical Islamist movement largely unknown to Americans – despite Colonel Gaddafi's exaggerated portrayal of it –, it's also a country lacking a strong, clearly organized army, a cabinet or a parliament that could safely guide the country through parliamentary elections following a transition period. In Libya, there is only the ghost of Colonel Gaddafi who claims he is an honorific ruler of the country. The American administration is concerned that all these factors would bring about a new Somalia: a country divided amongst tribes, becoming a fertile ground for fundamentalism, this time at the Western shores of Africa.

Realizing this, the Libyan opposition hastened to form a transitional councils to lead the revolution, oversee affairs in the eastern part of the country, which it controls from Benghazi, and to prevent a potential void. The formation of these councils mended what the international community what was previously perceived as a weak point in the West's support of the revolution. The Libyan opposition also understood the importance of resuming oil exports, to bring an end to the price increase, which was negatively affecting many countries. One day before the events in Libya began, the United States had recorded its best unemployment rate in two years – a rate that would suffer should oil prices continue climbing, due to Libya's inability to export its oil. While Gaddafi's forces may have managed to disrupt oil export by bombing ports and

facilities only for a short period of time, the (clear) message has been sent.

Along with the lack of “alternatives” in Libya due to the absence of governmental establishments, another source of concern for Washington and the West is the constant focus on inciting figures closest to Gaddafi to abandon him. These figures are offered future positions and roles, in the hopes that they can prevent Al-Qaeda from infiltrating the country and radical Islamist organizations from gaining control of the country after Gaddafi’s ouster. That is how the West is marking the defection of various prominent figures from Gaddafi regime’s, including the “black box” Musa Kusa, former foreign minister, and Abdel Rahman Shalgham, former Libyan ambassador to the United Nations, a close advisor to Gaddafi for 40 years. Symbolic figures from the Libyan opposition outside of the country also notably participated in the London conference on Libya

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carrying a clear message to the West: Al-Qaeda is not part of the opposition, and the new Libya will be a civilian democracy.

The American administration acknowledged that it officially had delayed declaring its position on the events in Libya during the first ten days of protests, and president Obama also avoided any exact mention of Colonel Gaddafi by name in his first speeches, for fear of sparking a hostage crisis. But all indicators unanimously pointed towards the need for a military intervention, which called for more deliberation among allies to find the best plan to successfully complete the mission.

The discussion of the military intervention abounded with concerns that were successively examined. The United States exhibited caution about any military involvement in an Islamic country after the Iraqi experiment, and the effect another war could have on the two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq – an opinion shared by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and a number of generals. The only way to resolve the issue was to invite Arab and Islamic countries to adopt the intervention, and to take part in some of its military missions (as long as they do not involve ground invasions). The deal was secured by Secretary of State Clinton, who was greatly committed to quickly resolving the Libyan matter, she first obtained the cooperation of the Gulf countries, and then of the Arab League, despite Syria’s and Algeria’s reservations. According to experts, these steps were designed to avoid Washington any embarrassment should the need for military intervention arise in another country, to save its civilians from a despotic leader. This elucidates Clinton’s declaration that Washington would not intervene in Syria as it had in Libya, when protests erupted in the Syrian town of Daraa. Her statement dealt with a major concern that kept emerging in the discussion about military intervention: What if a unilateral American intervention in Libya set a precedent that would then challenge American values, should Saudi-Arabia start actively suppressing its people or Shiites in Bahrain (which is what occurred later)? And the – unconfirmed – answer was: If Arab or international cover is provided, the United States will intervene.

Observers were not surprised by the divergence in opinion among the allies, which surfaced after the first day of fighting. The alliance had at least two distinct projects. The first was clarified by Obama in a speech on the second day of the war, and explained in more detail at the end of March: America would like to see Gaddafi removed. As far as American relations with Gaddafi go, experts say that Gaddafi never achieved any real harmony with the West. And although it had re-established

relations with him, the West had never quite forgotten Gaddafi's role in terrorist operations across the world. The prospect of the Colonel remaining in power after the intervention is regarded as detrimental to the region and the West. Thus, Obama showed no compunction in the CIA carrying out covert missions in Libya, which were likely to involve arming rebels. Meanwhile, the official position of the military

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intervention does not clearly state that ousting Gaddafi is not one of its goals. The United States however does not want to send any negative message to the people, or a positive message to the regimes of countries expected to witness demonstrations in the near future. The concerns expressed by conservatives and those who opposed military intervention vary, German reasons diverge from Russian ones, but they meet in their stand against the intervention, with the mildest refusal issued by the Germans and the harshest criticism by the Russians who likened the intervention to a 'Holy Crusade on Libya'.

The regimes surrounding Libya, whether near or far, reacted to the intervention by adopting different measures. The Algerian regime immediately repealed its emergency law, while the Syrian regime is maneuvering around it. Meanwhile, the Yemeni president is fighting his last wars to stay on despite divisions that have hit his own family. Observers note that repealing the emergency law in Algeria does not signal the end of events, the country's complex military-tribal structure and cultural problems will soon emerge, pushed to the surface by the burden of Algeria's economic crisis. In Syria, observers predict that the president's

maneuvering around reforms – based on the principle of “speed but not haste” – will fail to extinguish the people's anger, particularly as he steers clear of his own regime's promise to revoke emergency law, and with the continuing daily arrests of political activists. These events might push Washington to take a stronger position against the Syrian regime, but the American administration will not threaten with military options.

In Yemen, American observers point out that Ali Abdullah Saleh is no longer able to use the Al-Qaeda card to hold the Americans in check. The number of people demanding his resignation has grown to a degree that suggests he will not be staying in power much longer. Thus, observers conclude, Arab uprisings are driving the American administration to follow them, while conceding that no movement would reach its goals without the administration's support.

#### Dealing with Islamic Currents: Watching and Learning

Concurrently, in the hallways of the White House, a discussion is taking place to figure out the American relation to Islamic currents, and more specifically towards the Muslim Brotherhood. Reports point to a study dated February 16, that gauges the mood in the White House. The study draws a comparison between Muslim Brotherhood and Al-Qaeda, regarding issues such as the worldwide Jihad, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, attitudes towards the United States, Islam and politics, democracy and nationalism, and ends on the radical differences between the two organizations.

While reports did not fully disclose the conclusions of the study, some articles leaked draw the following picture: It regards the Muslim Brotherhood and its work in the Arab world positively, while it views Al-Qaeda and its ambition to spread Islam across the world negatively. An assessment of the political positions of the Muslim Brotherhood revealed that while they differ from American positions on politics, they agree on the values. A statement

from a high placed official in the White House to the Washington Post on March 4th, 2011, recently assured that the US boycott of Hamas

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did not stem from its Islamic character, but from the organization's adamant refusal to acknowledge Israeli-Palestinian agreements or to recognize the state of Israel. The new

American policy towards the region will not be influenced by fear, said the official. But experts point out that changes in the relations with Islamic organizations do not entail direct US support in the short term for any member of these groups seeking positions of power. The coming period will be one of watching and learning how to interact with these organizations.

And in Washington, there are those who hold up the Turkish model of government as a successful example of change, a model of which Turkey itself is a guarantor of. But the success of the model will also depend on the role that Turkey will play in the current mobilization.

**Translation from Arabic by Joumana Seikaly.**