

Allies in Flux

American Policy after the Arab Spring

KHALIL MARRAR, PHD

Developments of the Arab-Spring-turned-winter brought unprecedented changes to the American approach in the Middle East and North Africa. Most notable is the evolution of relationships with three regional blocks: the Arab states, Iran, and Israel. In regards to each, US policy makers had to reorient themselves to a new and perhaps unfamiliar strategic terrain.¹ As demonstrated previously, although American policy remained susceptible to influences from a variety of domestic lobbying and public opinion pressures both before and after the Arab Spring, regional shifts of that period have proven preeminent for conceptualizing the pursuit of American interests.² This article examines how those shifts interacted with American policy.³ To do so, it addresses the following question: why did the Arab Spring and ensuing winter cause American policy, at its heart, to prioritize rapprochement with Iran and recalibrate alliances with Israel and the Arab states?⁴ This question centers on developments that pushed and pulled American strategy in the past and that will anchor the approach to the region in the future.⁵

Regarding the past, for decades, American strategy involved supporting Israel and reassuring the Sunni states against Shiite power in Tehran, Damascus, southern Lebanon, the Persian Gulf area surrounding Iran, and elsewhere in the region. In contrast, after the Arab Spring, the US approach has evolved to become more fluid and less clear cut. Meanwhile, developments in the Middle East and North Africa that brought upheavals and war, rather than being a Western conspiracy as some people feared, have instead presented a great deal to consider for American decision makers for generations to come.⁶ Consequently, the emergence of the foreign policy landscape (see table below) has all but overshadowed withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan as well as much touted developments that presented more pressing concerns than issues in the Middle East and North Africa. These included the “pivot to Asia” and attempts to counter Russia in Eastern Europe by using the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).⁷

Table. Revolts and outcomes

<i>State</i>	<i>Revolt Year</i>	<i>Regime Change</i>	<i>Territory Intact</i>	<i>Civil War</i>
Afghanistan	2010	O	O	X
Algeria	2010	O	X	O
Bahrain	2011	O	X	O
Djibouti	2011	O	X	O
Egypt	2011	X	O	O
Eritrea	2011	O	X	O
Iran	2009	O	X	O
Iraq	2012	O	O	X
Israel	2011	O	X	O
Jordan	2011	O	X	O
Kuwait	2011	O	X	O
Lebanon	2011	O	O	O
Libya	2011	X	O	X
Mauritania	2011	O	X	O
Morocco	2011	O	X	O
Oman	2011	O	X	O
Palestine	2012	O	O	O
Qatar	2011	O	X	O
Saudi Arabia	2011	O	X	O
Somalia	2011	O	O	O
Sudan	2011	O	O	O
Syria	2011	O	O	X
Tunisia	2010	X	X	O
Turkey	2012	O	X	O
United Arab Emirates	2011	O	X	O
Western Sahara	2011	O	X	O
Yemen	2011	X	O	X
X=Yes	O=No			

Arab-Spring-Turned-Winter

When a 26-year-old produce vendor set himself on fire in Tunis to protest police corruption, no one imagined that such an act of self-immolation would result in revolts that overthrew the government. What happened in Tunisia sparked a series of events that altered the political map of the modern Middle

East and North Africa. Changes in the region broadly affected the Muslim world from Afghanistan to Zanzibar. Although the period before the revolts was marked by neither decent governance nor prosperity, it offered students of the region a fixed orientation by which to assess it, especially given the centrality and durability of the prevailing regimes.⁸ Because they ruled for decades with little or no public input, the governments of the Middle East and North Africa were dependable intermediaries for American policy. However, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, reactions to 9/11, including the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, influenced the region in unpredictably irreparable ways.

Similarly, the Arab Spring of the next decade marked a change from which there was no return. In its wake, most people hoped for a world in which they could live freely, even though many of them, particularly in the lawless parts of Syria and Iraq—or Libya and Yemen, for that matter—became mired in a Hobbesian civil war in which life was “nasty, brutish, and short.”⁹ Dreams sparked by the Arab Spring were undeniable, but its results for far too many individuals continued to be morbid. In that turbulent context, the regimes of the Middle East and North Africa tried to govern. Most of them desperately tried to keep their existence and authority intact, but many failed. Thus, American decisions concerning the region had to take that new reality into consideration, particularly given the trajectory of events as its regimes, both new and old, sought to weather the storms of the Arab Spring.

That trajectory has spared no country. After a brief experiment with democracy, Egypt, the most populous Arab nation, overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood, only to return to a police state more brutal to its people than it was under former president Hosni Mubarak.¹⁰ Indeed, in addition to suspending political freedoms, the government of Abdel Fatah al-Sisi has engaged in murder, torture, and arrest against every segment of Egypt from which it perceived any threat. Such actions included the extrajudicial jailing and killing of Muslim Brotherhood leaders and their supporters as well as a similar crackdown on liberal parties, especially those devoted to the protection of individual rights.¹¹

In addition, the al-Sisi government curtailed press freedoms and detained journalists for reporting in a manner inconsistent with state-sanctioned narratives. These actions, although similar to those under any other authoritarian regime, have taken violence and infringements against political mobilization and expression to new heights.¹² In that setting, the United States possessed few options for forcing its ally to respect its people and did little to stop the runaway governance of the regime after the coup. In fact, US military aid to Egypt continued unabated. Even though some critics have decried American behavior as a plot to divide Egyptians while privileging the interests of others in the region, most notably

Israel, no one can deny that the peace treaty between them has been a precondition for American support of military rule.¹³

Although a different case from policy toward Egypt and other states in turmoil, the approach to Syria, despite US policy makers' condemnation of Bashar al-Assad's regime and their demands for its ultimate removal, has stopped short of pursuing that goal. This occurred despite the red lines of the Obama administration against the deployment of chemical weapons and the fact that the regime, through conventional means, has murdered hundreds of thousands of its citizens, causing their displacement by the millions. The simple truth is that American action has opted for leaving Assad in power while targeting groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).¹⁴ Like other militant entities, ISIS has long been classified by the US State Department as a foreign terrorist organization and was believed to pose more immediate dangers to national and regional security.¹⁵

As was the case in Egypt, the United States, through its initiatives and inaction, acquiesced to the emerging reality, thus contradicting its stated intentions regarding human dignity or ousting Assad—assuming such a stance may have been the only expedient thing to do. Instead, the American approach privileged mediating regional politics through long-established actors and their power centers rather than new parties—whether the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or the Free Syrian Army—regardless of their track record on rights or repression. State governments received preference, even if they suppressed their people in the face of broad international condemnation. Viewed through the eyes of those living in the Middle East and North Africa, that preference was particularly troubling since in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, many regimes suffered loss in legitimacy and mass defection. Despite those developments, the United States opted for the status quo ante, whether through continuing its assistance to Cairo or dithering on atrocities committed by Damascus.¹⁶

The American approach to both Egypt and Syria, though unsatisfactory to many people, was understandable in light of Western measures in Libya.¹⁷ As a direct outcome of toppling Mu'ammār Gadhafi, the country morphed into a failed state. When the new regime exerted authority, it suffered from political paralysis under a provisional government hampered by ethnic and clan strife and divided between Tripoli and Benghazi.¹⁸ The previous order under Gadhafi was demolished, thanks in large part to Western military intervention. In effect—and regardless of whether the United States led from the front or from behind—the campaign ultimately ensured that Libya's dictator was viciously killed, only to be replaced by several warlords and their militias who disputed power both in acrimonious elections and with bloody street fighting.

The case of Libya, although rare in terms of Western humanitarian efforts, demonstrated the perils of meddling in the Arab revolts.¹⁹ Gadhafi was far from ideal for Western and especially American interests in the region. However, he did at least present policy makers with a politically stationary, albeit emotionally erratic, interlocutor with whom to deal. This fact was particularly significant not only because Libya bordered a vital American partner in Egypt but also because Tripoli guaranteed the relative security of the Mediterranean coast and the flow of energy produced by the country's vast oil and gas deposits—among some of the largest in Africa.²⁰ Even though the aftermath of toppling Gadhafi offered Libyans hope and the opportunity to participate in their governance, the new regime proved incapable of providing basic state functions. Moreover, it has failed to uphold a level of safety deemed vital by Western countries and by the United States, not to mention the Libyan people themselves.

Elsewhere in the region, the situation remained tense and subject to the unpredictable changes seen in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Tunisia. Throughout North Africa, several states have announced reforms aimed at transparency and liberalization that were never earnestly implemented.²¹ Further east, the Persian Gulf countries have largely suffocated protests and demands for democracy through a dual approach of providing generous incentives for those consenting or offering allegiance to their regimes and severe punishments for those who did not.²² In other instances, states like Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon continued to be on the receiving end of tens of thousands of Syrian refugees despite having their own problems with internal discord and popular calls for changes to economic, social, and political conditions. In sum, what were counted as some of the oldest allies in the Middle East and North Africa could no longer be trusted to maintain the established order that much of Western and especially American interests in stability rested on.²³ As the states of the region sought to address the gush of unrest in their midst, they could no longer act as pliable allies willing to please Europe and America for substantial returns but with little or no cost to themselves. Furthermore, as the geopolitical landscape continued to transition after the Arab Spring, an old issue emerged as a direct consequence: relations with Israel and Iran.

Regional Balancing: Past Revisited or “Back to the Future”?²⁴

Shortly before the White House and Congress duelled about invitations to the Israeli prime minister, one phrase summarized tensions between Washington and Tel Aviv as American policy evolved toward the region inhabited by Israel: “chicken---.” The term is not commonly used in the diplomatic parlance of American statesmen, especially in reference to close allies, but it was reputedly uttered by an anonymous US official to describe Israeli prime minister Benjamin

Netanyahu.²⁵ The reason for the name calling was not entirely clear. It may have been related to Israel's continued refusal to take military action against Iran unilaterally. Instead, it repeatedly opted for the United States to do its bidding. Although words do not have the significance of actions, few people doubt that the American-Israeli alliance has lacked the luster it had in the past. Moreover, the change in that relationship is not simply a product of the end of the Cold War rivalry that buttressed it. Nor was it the result of a different administration in the White House. Indeed, if it were left up to any American president, especially given congressional pressure, the relationship between Israel and the United States would be as cordial as ever.²⁶ Hence, on his "stalwart" friendship with Israel, Barack Obama had much in common with his predecessor George W. Bush.²⁷ Similarly, the eight congresses elected during both presidential terms have maintained that Israel remained a central ally of the United States.²⁸ Even though such sentiment has always been a crucial element of the American-Israeli relationship, it did not convey changes in US strategy that, in recent years, have gone against what Israel deemed to be in its interests, especially as expressed by its leadership through numerous prime ministers and other Knesset members.²⁹

One development which drove that fact was highlighted in a speech by Prime Minister Netanyahu to the United Nations. As Iran presented its new president to the world in the figure of Hassan Rouhani, Israel's prime minister condemned him as a "wolf in sheep's clothing" compared to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran's previous president, whom Netanyahu dismissed as a "wolf in wolf's clothing."³⁰ Despite Netanyahu's alarmist zoological rhetoric, the United States pursued a policy of rapprochement with Iran under President Rouhani that yielded a breakthrough in diplomacy between the two nations for the first time since the Islamic Revolution.³¹ White House officials understood that better relations with Iran were valuable despite denunciations of the Islamic Republic and reengagement with it by some key American allies.³² Further, the United States pursued its interests by talks with Iran, just as those allies faced serious challenges to their security.³³ In Washington policy circles, it became manifest that the view of Iran as the quintessential threat by many Sunni Muslim partners and the Jewish state did not mean that the United States had to ignore its vital concern in reengagement to appease its traditional allies.³⁴ This was especially pressing given the fact that most of the relationships with those allies were forced to adapt to the overthrow or reconfiguration of their regimes in light of the Arab Spring, as discussed earlier.

For decades prior to the Arab Spring, two factors anchored US strategy in the region.³⁵ First, numerous presidents and congresses have taken an inimical approach to Iran. Diplomacy with the Islamic Republic occurred through a third party, which frequently involved a Nordic country. Second, in the words of Presi-

dent Obama, Israel has been the “strongest” ally of the United States. Both of those anchors persisted, but they were complicated and even mitigated by an emerging reality: direct negotiations with Iran about its nuclear program. Those negotiations have evolved into a comprehensive discussion about Iran’s role in the region and its place in world affairs. They have also brought about a cooldown in the warmth of America’s relationship with Israel and the Sunni Arab states, which have remained sworn adversaries of the Islamic Republic. While the regional opposition between Iran and its rivals persisted, Iraq presented a wild card—particularly the American invasion of that country and the toppling of its Sunni regime presided over by Saddam Hussein.³⁶

The subsequent nation building that took place in Iraq, though mildly satisfactory to its Shiite majority, unraveled the decades-long US regional strategy. In Baghdad, after civil war and elections swept it into power, the Shiite government closely, but often quietly, allied itself with its counterpart in Tehran.³⁷ For its part, and with the Baathists out of the way, Iran used the opportunity to throw its newfound power around the Middle East. It assisted Iraq’s Shiite majority in consolidating its strength by shutting out minorities—most notably Sunnis, Kurds, and Christians. Iran also supported militant groups like Hezbollah and Hamas against Israel.³⁸ Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic helped the Assad regime maintain its teetering hold on power in Syria and hastened the overthrow of the American-backed regime in Yemen, which threatened bordering Saudi Arabia and startled the rest of the Gulf States. Along with these activities, Iran was able for years to skirt Western sanctions. On the world stage, it benefited from its relationship with Syria, which, despite experiencing repression and undergoing civil war, maintained its client relationship with Russia.³⁹ Consequently, Iran received concessions from Russia that, at best, blunted the American-led sanctions and, at worst, made them ineffective, especially in deterring the advance toward an illegal nuclear program.⁴⁰

The result was a comprehensive approach by the Obama administration to engage Iran on three issues: addressing the Islamic Republic’s appetite for energy; ruling out military aggression by either the United States or Israel, given compliance with an inspections regime; and, just as importantly, setting it on course toward normalization and full membership in the international community. Those three issues took less than a decade to materialize, but they began to form the basis of the future American-Persian relationship. To arrive at that stage of reconciliation, the Iranians exercised quite a bit of leverage over Washington, especially as it pertained to stability in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and even Afghanistan. Talks with Iran also opened up the potential for a degradation of Syria’s alliance with Russia, a key factor in preserving American sway in the region.⁴¹ Along with those goals,

Iran would eliminate the nuclear threat posed to its neighbors and, once and for all, would become a compliant signatory of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Adhering to the treaty would allow for a good degree of peaceful nuclear development to fulfil energy demands by Iran's economy.

In addition, Iranian normalization not only might mean an end to sanctions but also might signal that the country has little to fear from its rivals, particularly in terms of an attack on its nuclear facilities. Through a diplomatic breakthrough, Iran would receive a place to partner on key regional and international issues. Like any other major country in the Middle East, the Islamic Republic would be allowed a wide berth in deciding its own affairs. Indeed, the deal with Iran may herald an end to decades of hostility and potential war with other powers in the region—most notably the United States or Israel—something that the centers of power in Tehran had desired since the founding of the Islamic Republic.⁴² Similarly, normalization would present an opportunity for thawing relations with an American archrival that, with its superpower strength and geopolitical influence, had stifled the acceptance of Iran as a country with its own interests in international affairs—not to mention its immediate spheres of influence.

On the other side of the region, talks of a bargain with Iran, regardless of their positive implications for Washington and Tehran, complicated relations between the United States and its traditional allies in the Middle East. Turkey, a substantial member of NATO and a proven ally of the United States, has always maintained some modicum of relations with Iran, but other Middle East allies, with the notable exception of Qatar, viewed any normalization with Tehran as a significant threat to their standing. The American relationship with allies like Saudi Arabia and most other Persian Gulf States, as well as Egypt, Jordan, and especially Israel, had depended on a necessary adoption of their antipathy to Iran. Adversity between the Islamic Republic and the Arab states has a lengthy history, fueled by ideological underpinnings that pitted a revolutionary theocratic Iran against frequently reactionary and highly monarchical or dictatorial secular regimes (except Saudi Arabia, which is a Sunni Arab theocracy mortally opposed to Shiite Persian dominance). Although the latter have been close allies with the United States, a friendship that predated World War II but that thrived after it, the former, after the fall of the Shah and the conclusion of the Islamic Revolution, has been a spoiler to American designs in the region.⁴³

Motivations for American-Arab-Israeli cooperation against Iran were multifaceted. However, it would suffice to note that regional authoritarian tendencies, underwritten by the United States at least since the late 1960s and early 1970s, depended on opposing the overthrow of any regime in the region.⁴⁴ The Shah's government represented the status quo even though what replaced it was equally

authoritarian. However, the religious and anti-American nature of the Islamic Revolution meant that the United States had to rally its partners against the mullahs in Tehran. Those partners in turn loathed the revolutionary Shiite fervor that swept through Persia, one of the largest and most ancient nations in the world. Consequently, their alliance with the United States was predisposed to counter Iran's revolutionary theocratic passions for their own religious, ideological, and/or political reasons that are too numerous and complex to examine in depth here.⁴⁵

Since 1979 containing Iran was the name of the game for American policy makers. Such containment was the case despite the cost of regional uncertainty engendered by this action. In one crucial example, after the dust of the Islamic Revolution had barely settled, the United States assisted Iraq with an invasion its Persian neighbor. Further, even though Saddam had a lengthy track record for brutality that contradicted American values, the choice between a theocratic anti-American revolution and a secular dictator who kept an open mind to his alliances gave the US leadership a clear path.⁴⁶ Hence, during the lengthy and bloody Iran-Iraq war, the United States gave Saddam plenty of material support to assist in his efforts against the Islamic Republic. The war closed with a stalemate that resulted in the death of more than a million men, women, and children, some of whom were killed by weapons of mass destruction; however, both the Baath government and the Iranian clerical leadership survived and went on to create quite a bit of trouble for the stability sought by the United States in the long term. In the short term, however, Washington's alignment with Baghdad realized the goal of checking Iran.

Fast-forwarding to a time decades later reveals that the execution of Saddam eliminated a lynchpin of forces that frustrated American interests in the region. But the power vacuum opened up by toppling his Baath regime in Iraq meant that the country's Shiite majority and their coreligionists in Iran could pursue their interests as never before. Hence, the United States was left with many options, none of them satisfactory to its aims in any decent measure. At worst, to leave Iran unchecked meant a major threat to Israel and the Sunni states because of a nuclear Islamic Republic. At best, it meant unfettered proliferation in the region. Neither scenario satisfied US interests or those of its allies anywhere.⁴⁷

Similarly, military confrontation with Iran to avoid both scenarios, especially in the messy aftermath of invading Afghanistan and Iraq, was an unpalatable position for a war-weary public and its policy makers. Bombing Iran would have brought untold consequences for a region mired in conflict. Along with the repercussions of the Arab Spring, the ensuing war would have had unspecified, unacceptable risks for American interests and those of its allies.⁴⁸ Consequently, the only digestible course of action, however bitter, was negotiating with Iran. The Obama administration pursued that approach despite the dire, often loud criti-

cisms it had received from its detractors both at home and abroad.⁴⁹ Israel and its domestic supporters in and out of the Washington beltway leveled rebukes. In the region, some Arab allies have quietly charged the American administration with betrayal for talks with Tehran.⁵⁰

American interests, however, have overruled all concerns. Having perceived those interests through the difficulties of another potentially protracted entanglement in the Middle East—as war with Iran certainly would have brought—the Obama administration proceeded cautiously down the diplomatic route. Although the end of that route, no matter the outcome, remained elusive, it was one of the few options left after the costly blunders of other imbroglios in the Middle East and North Africa. Indeed, in what has been dubbed by numerous White House and congressional leaderships as a “very tough neighborhood,” American statesmen were left with few options and even fewer partners willing to tackle the tough issues raised by Iran going nuclear.⁵¹

Regardless of the level of development, including how many centrifuges may be possessed by Tehran, and despite caricatures of bombs pondered by the Israeli government as exhibited by Netanyahu’s presentation before the United Nations on the issue (see the figure below), the only remaining option was that of tough diplomacy.⁵² That was precisely why the Obama administration engaged with the Rouhani government at the highest levels. Alternatives to talks remained murky at best, but if Iran continued on the nuclear path, it would have left the United States and its allies few choices other than those involving military action.⁵³ The Iranians knew that well—hence their willingness and even eagerness to engage in talks. Iran had very little to lose, particularly since its nuclear program, despite deafening condemnations to the contrary, remained in relative infancy while its economy suffered under tougher sanctions.⁵⁴ The choice for the ruling elite in Tehran was clear: negotiations eliminated the looming threat of an unwinnable war with the West. They also brought their country an opportunity for acceptance by the international community in return for very little—besides giving up on a nuclear program that was far from a credible threat to any country. In fact, Iran’s nuclear development worked only to undermine the Islamic Republic domestically and on the world stage, as evidenced by opposition at home and abroad.⁵⁵

Conclusion: Interests and Region in Flux

This article’s main argument is that the changing American approach to the Middle East and North Africa has been adjusted to achieve stability and a balance of power between the major regional players, including the Arab states, Iran, and Israel. In the unstable aftermath of the Arab-Spring-turned-winter, losses in legitimacy, authority, and/or territorial integrity meant that traditional allies could

no longer be counted on to be clients of the United States. Moreover, the increasing importance of Iran to regional stability in terms of its influence on Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen, as well the destabilizing potential of its nuclear aims, meant that a crucial piece of the puzzle to regional stability rested in Tehran.

In response to the evolution of the Middle East and North Africa in the aftermath of the revolts, the United States has arrived at a traditional balancing act in which friends and foes were dealt with in terms of their interests and relationship to American designs. Washington opted for a region in which various power blocks checked one another. It did so despite overt pro-Israel or covert pro-Saudi calls for bombing Iran's nuclear facilities, something that would have unhinged an already unstable region and overwhelmed attempts to attain stability in the world's vital oil heartland and an important land bridge between Europe and the Far East.⁵⁶ In a nutshell, diplomacy was the sole antidote to a catastrophic war that surely would have engulfed the region.⁵⁷

At worst, the belief was that talking to Iran would have produced stalled negotiations and a country committed to nuclear weapons, as in the status quo. At best, it would have created a sustainable context for American interests: a region free from the uncertainties of nuclear proliferation and one in which reinforcing sovereignty and stability anchored the intended outcome of the political behaviors of all players involved. A major factor that made the diplomatic option an attractive pursuit is the disruptive power of groups like ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the handful of other terrorist militias which have plagued the region since before 9/11 and have gained further notoriety after the Arab Spring.⁵⁸ Those groups have presented serious challenges to states that have long maintained important roles in American hegemony throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Moreover, as governments in the region changed hands and—especially in the case of Libya and possibly Syria and Iraq as well as Yemen—have experienced state failure, the United States sought an approach that would produce the least amount of damage to established regimes in the region.⁵⁹ Thus, it opted for talks with Iran in order to arrive at a point in which stabilizing Syria was a possibility while the security and integrity of Iran's neighbors, most notably Iraq but Afghanistan as well, would be more likely outcomes.⁶⁰ Those results were particularly important during an era of drawdowns and withdrawals on the one hand as well as escalation and intensification in many parts of the region on the other hand, both of which formed the bulk of policy during the Obama presidency.⁶¹

Without bringing Iran to the table, such outcomes would have remained elusive in an approach focused on shunning the Islamic Republic, which commanded a critical position in a region significant for American interests. Despite control of the major issues surrounding Iran, however, the Middle East and North Africa

will never be the same after the events of the Arab Spring and its unfolding consequences. Rather than being a search for an optimal path to realize national interest, American policy has committed itself to a salvage operation in which the rationale has moved away from the pursuit of ideal outcomes to ones that stemmed from more sober decision making. Far from being the sole result of politics inside Washington, catalysts for past and future approaches to the Middle East and North Africa will derive from developments in the region as well.

Khalil Marrar, PhD

The author is a professor of politics and justice studies at Governors State University, Illinois. His research focuses on the intersection of public policy and foreign affairs. The author of *The Arab Lobby and US Foreign Policy: The Two-State Solution* (Routledge, 2010), he is also working on a book entitled *Middle East Conflicts: The Basics*, to be published in 2016 by Routledge. Professor Marrar lectures and researches on Arab and Muslim diaspora, particularly their policy preferences. He also teaches American, global, comparative, and Middle East politics. Special thanks Marvin Bassett, Rémy Mauduit, John Mearsheimer, and Shaiel Ben-Ephraim. The article is dedicated to Mousa Marrar.

Notes

1. Given these changing terrains, American statesmanship may accurately be captured as facing a serious “clash between liberalism and realism.” See John J. Mearsheimer’s “Introduction” to George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 60th anniversary expanded ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), x. For an abbreviation by country, see the table in the text of this article.

2. For two instances, see John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007); and Khalil Marrar, *The Arab Lobby and US Foreign Policy: The Two-State Solution* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

3. On the framework of the present analysis, see Michael J. Totten, “Arab Spring or Islamist Winter?,” *World Affairs*, January/February 2012, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/>.

4. For a synopsis of the evolution of the relationship with Iran, see James G. Blight et al., *Becoming Enemies: U.S.-Iran Relations and the Iran-Iraq War, 1979–1988* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2012).

5. Quite a bit has been written on this subject. For a nice range, please see Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America’s Perilous Path in the Middle East* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004); and Michael B. Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007).

6. For an assessment of this position, see Samuel Helfont, “Tariq Ramadan’s Arab Winter,” *New Republic*, 1 October 2012, <http://www.newrepublic.com/>. Quite a bit of writing is emerging on this topic. For a couple of examples, see David W. Lesch and Mark L. Haas, *The Arab Spring: Change and Resistance in the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2012) for an optimistic hyperbole; and for an Islamophobic diatribe, see Raphael Israeli, *From Arab Spring to Islamic Winter* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2013).

7. For cautionary tales on the issues preceding the “pivot to Asia,” see John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014); and Robert Kaplan, *Asia’s Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific* (New York: Random House, 2014). On Russia’s dealings in Eastern Europe, see Marcel H. Van Herpen, *Putin’s Wars: The Rise of Russia’s New Imperialism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

8. There is a wide-ranging debate on the difference between the authoritarian tendencies of, say, Turkey and Iran. Regardless of the regime type in question and for the purposes of US policy, conversation about privileging stability over all other concerns—if it ever left at all, particularly under the idealisms of presidents

Bush and Obama—has made a return in decision making. Thus, assessing regimes in world affairs remained a well-established practice that the present work has benefited from. For one instance, see Axel Hadenius and Jan Teorell, “Authoritarian Regimes: Stability, Change, and Pathways to Democracy, 1972–2003,” *Kellogg Institute*, Working Paper no. 331, November 2006, <https://kellogg.nd.edu/>.

9. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or the Matter, Forme & Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiasticall and Civill* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1904), chap. 8. For a modern reading, from Syria in particular, see Daniel Renwick, “Hobbes, Syria and the Importance of Stability,” *Palestine Chronicle*, 3 January 2013, <http://www.palestinechronicle.com/>.

10. Mohamed Younis, “Egyptians See Life Worse Now than before Mubarak’s Fall,” Gallup Poll, 16 August 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/>.

11. These actions have been well documented. See Patrick Kingsley, “Worse than the Dictators: Egypt’s Leaders Bring Pillars of Freedom Crashing Down,” *Guardian*, 26 December 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/>.

12. Jennifer Bremer, “Challenges to Governance Reform and Accountability in Egypt,” in *Public Administration and Policy in the Middle East*, ed. Alexander R. Dawoody (New York: Springer, 2015), 83–101.

13. For this thesis, see Mazin Qumsiyeh, “Israel and Western Countries Playing the Game of Divide and Conquer in the Middle East,” *Al-Jazeera*, 11 July 2013, <http://www.ccun.org/>.

14. For a synopsis of the approach of ISIS in particular, see Eric Schmitt, “In Battle to Defang ISIS, U.S. Targets Its Psychology,” *New York Times*, 28 December 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/>.

15. Justin Sink, “ISIS Threat ‘a More Immediate Concern’ than Assad, Obama Says,” *Hill*, 28 September 2014, <http://thehill.com/>.

16. This position is consistent with past policy practice. See Fawaz A. Gerges, “The Obama Approach to the Middle East: The End of America’s Moment?,” *International Affairs* 89, no. 2 (2013): 299–323.

17. See Rami Khouri, “Arab Regime Change Is Best Left to Arabs,” *Guardian*, 25 January 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/>.

18. “Libya: The Next Failed State,” *Economist*, 10 January 2015, <http://www.economist.com/>.

19. Peter Beaumont, “One Year On: Chaotic Libya Reveals the Perils of Humanitarian Intervention,” *Guardian*, 18 February 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/>.

20. For a decent assessment of Libyan oil production and its security, see Maher Chmaytelli, “Guard of Libyan Oil Port Calls in Strikes on Islamist Militias,” *Bloomberg*, 30 December 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/>.

21. Inmaculada Szmolka, “Political Change in North Africa and the Arab Middle East: Constitutional Reforms and Electoral Processes,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (March 2014): 128–48.

22. Zoltan Barany, “Revolt and Resilience in the Arab Kingdoms,” *Parameters* 43, no. 2 (2013): 89–101.

23. There is a lively debate on the matter. For a nice take, see F. Gregory Gause III, “Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

24. John J. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future,” *International Security* 15, no. 1 (Summer 1990): 5–56.

25. Tom McCarthy and Dan Roberts, “Kerry Says US Official’s [‘Chicken----’] Jibe at Netanyahu Was Disgraceful and Damaging,” *Guardian*, 30 October 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/>.

26. Mearsheimer and Walt, *Israel Lobby*, 5–6. For the partisan nuances of Congress pressuring the White House on Israel and Iran, see Jeremy W. Peters, “G.O.P.’s Invitation to Netanyahu Is Aiding Obama’s Cause on Iran,” *New York Times*, 28 January 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/>.

27. “Obama: Israel’s Security Sacrosanct,” *Jerusalem Post*, 27 February 2008, <http://www.jpost.com/>.

28. This point is captured quite nicely by Helene Cooper and Ethan Bronner, “Netanyahu Gives No Ground in Congress Speech,” *New York Times*, 24 May 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/>.

29. For a summary of those interests, see Benjamin Netanyahu, “PM Netanyahu’s Remarks in the Knesset on Iran,” Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 24 November 2014, <http://mfa.gov.il/>.

30. Guy Taylor, “Israel’s Benjamin Netanyahu: Iran Leader Hassan Rouhani Is a ‘Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing,’” *Washington Times*, 1 October 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/>.

31. Jay Solomon and Maria Abi-Habib, "U.S., Iran Relations Move to Détente—Interests Align over Fight against Islamic State, Other Policies," *Wall Street Journal*, 28 October 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/>.

32. For a response to critics, see "Obama Condemns Critics of Newly Brokered Interim Nuclear Deal with Iran," *Haaretz*, 25 November 2013, <http://www.haaretz.com/>.

33. Although some individuals, especially political surrogates from the Democratic Party, have proclaimed that American statesmanship operates under a doctrine of a "New Realism," I contend that US foreign policy has been operating under the same old realism in which the least worst option is chosen among, as will be seen below, a bunch of terrible options. See Bill Richardson, "A New Realism: A Realistic and Principled Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2008, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

34. This is precisely the cautionary note proposed by think tanks like RAND. See chap. 2, "Sectarianism and Ideology in the Saudi-Iranian Relationship," in Frederic Wehrey et al., *Saudi-Iranian Relations since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), 11–43.

35. On the complexities of these two factors, see Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

36. Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of Its Neoconservatives: The Politics of Tehran's Silent Revolution* (New York: I. B. Tauris & Co., 2007), 99–100.

37. This relationship has engendered quite a few unintended consequences in the region. Some are welcome while others are not. See, for instance, David Romano and Mehmet Gurses, eds., *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

38. James Rothrock, *Live by the Sword: Israel's Struggle for Existence in the Holy Land* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2011), 148–49.

39. For more on the Russo-Syrian alliance, see Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis," *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 795–823.

40. For instance, see Fred Weir, "Nuclear Curve Ball? Russia Inks Deal with Iran for New Reactors (+Video)," *Christian Science Monitor*, 12 November 2014, <http://www.csmonitor.com/>.

41. For its part, Russia has ramped up its regional engagement. See Vitaly Naumkin, "Russia Steps Up Its Middle East Policy," *Al-Monitor*, 11 December 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/>. It even bombed anti-Assad secular, nationalist militants. See Associated Press, "U.S. Warns Russia against Striking Non-Islamic State Groups in Syria," *Chicago Tribune*, 30 September 2015, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/>.

42. For more detail on the Iranian desire for normalization, see Seyed Hossein Mousavian, "Ten Reasons Iran Doesn't Want the Bomb," *National Interest*, 4 December 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/>. For the agreement, see "Full Text of the Iran Nuclear Deal," Vienna, 14 July 2015, *Washington Post*, <http://apps.washingtonpost.com/>.

43. On these complicated relationships, see Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance*.

44. For an important look at American policy toward the Islamic Republic, see Ali M. Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Next Great Crisis in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

45. For a number of perspectives on this subject, see John L. Esposito, ed., *The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact* (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1990).

46. Seymour M. Hersh, "U.S. Secretly Gave Aid to Iraq Early in Its War against Iran," *New York Times*, 26 January 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/>.

47. For a seminal outline of this position, see Eric S. Edelman, Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., and Evan Braden Montgomery, "The Dangers of a Nuclear Iran: The Limits of Containment," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

48. For a prediction, see Geoffrey Kemp and John Allen Gay, *War with Iran: Political, Military, and Economic Consequences* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013).

49. For the range of criticism of dealing with Iran, see Dov Zakheim, "Obama's Dangerous Deal-Making with Iran," *Foreign Policy*, 6 November 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/>.

50. Saudi Arabia's position is outlined here: Sigurd Neubauer, "Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Envy: Washington Should Help Riyadh Keep Up with Tehran," *Foreign Affairs*, 16 November 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.
51. For the Israeli perspective, see Yaakov Lappin, "Defense Minister Says 'Special Relations' in Place between Pentagon and Defense Ministry; Says Middle East a Tough Neighborhood Experiencing Chronic Instability," *Jerusalem Post*, 1 September 2014, <http://www.jpost.com/>.
52. Harriet Sherwood, "Netanyahu's Bomb Diagram Succeeds—but Not in the Way the PM Wanted," *Guardian*, 27 September 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/>.
53. Michael Wilner, "War Threat on Iran 'Heightened' If Nuclear Talks Fail, Obama Warns," *Jerusalem Post*, 16 January 2015, <http://www.jpost.com/>.
54. The currency collapse was the height of what the Islamic Republic was able to tolerate. See Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran's President Ties Recent Drop in Currency to U.S.-Led Sanctions," *New York Times*, 2 October 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/>.
55. Dina Esfandiary, "Why Iranian Public Opinion Is Turning against the Nuclear Program," *Atlantic*, 16 March 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/>.
56. Ian Black and Simon Tisdall, "Saudi Arabia Urges US Attack on Iran to Stop Nuclear Programme," *Guardian*, 28 November 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/>.
57. For a nice perspective on this topic, see David E. Sanger, "Quick Turn of Fortunes As Diplomatic Options Open Up with Syria and Iran," *New York Times*, 19 September 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/>.
58. For a case of the direct relationship between the Arab Spring and ISIS, see Kevin Sullivan, "Tunisia, After Igniting Arab Spring, Sends the Most Fighters to Islamic State in Syria," *Washington Post*, 28 October 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/>.
59. For a brief assessment, see Zaki Samy Elakawi, "The Geostrategic Consequences of the Arab Spring," *Open Democracy*, 22 November 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/>.
60. This position has been an ongoing conversation. See Farideh Farhi, "NAIC Memo: US-Iran Dialogue Key to Regional Stability?," National Iranian American Council, 12 December 2007, <http://www.niacouncil.org/>.
61. See Fawaz Gerges, *Obama and the Middle East: The End of America's Moment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). For Obama's ISIS policy in his own words, see "President Obama on the Authorization for Use of Military Force," C-Span, 11 February 2015, <http://www.c-span.org/>.