

Reconsidering the Arab Spring

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Articles

Peter Berkowitz on The Arab Awakening: America and the Transformation of the Middle East by Kenneth M. Pollack, et al.

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Kenneth M. Pollack, et al. The Arab Awakening: America and the Transformation of the Middle East. Brookings Institution Press. 381 Pages. \$26.95.

President Obama entered the White House determined to overcome what he and his supporters regarded as the Bush administration's poisonous legacy in the Middle East. And yet, though loath to acknowledge it, since the advent of the Arab Spring in Tunisia in December 2010 and January 2011 and its rapid spread throughout the region, the Obama administration has been struggling to formulate and implement its own version of the Bush Doctrine, according to which it is in the interest of the United States to promote freedom and democracy in the Arab world.

This unacknowledged reversal came at a time in which the president's major policy initiatives in the Middle East were in disarray, in significant measure because they were ill-conceived and clumsily executed. Touting engagement with the Iranians, Obama's smart diplomacy went nowhere. Tehran mocked him, flouting deadline after deadline set by the president for ensuring that Iran's nuclear program was limited to civilian purposes by subjecting it to international supervision. And while the United States was reduced to silently observing the carnage, Iran brutally suppressed large public demonstrations against the corrupt presidential elections of June 2009. Having lost two years in fruitless efforts to sweet talk the Iranians, the Obama administration has over the last year expanded and intensified sanctions imposed by the Bush administration. By the president's own secretary of defense's estimates, Iran is on a path to developing the capacity to make a nuclear weapon within a year.

The president's June 2009 Cairo speech, intended to open a new era in relations between America and the Muslim world, has led to no discernible improvement in America's standing among Muslims worldwide. Indeed, in many parts of the Arab Middle East Obama is less popular than was Bush. Moreover, by grounding his Cairo speech in a fundamental tenet of radical Islam — that the world is politically divided into Islam and the rest — the president played into the hands of al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the mullahs of the Islamic Republic of Iran while simultaneously undermining the liberal and democratic reformers

throughout the Arab world whose primary political allegiance is not to Islam but rather to the protection of individual rights, democratically accountable nation-states, and generally applicable international law.

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The president's handling of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has foundered on misunderstandings of the region. He seems to subscribe to the view common among progressive intellectuals that the fundamental source of instability in the Middle East is the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians — rather than, say, Iran's exporting of Islamic revolution and drive to dominate the region through acquisition of nuclear weapons. And that the key to resolving it is ending Israel's control of the West Bank — rather than, say, Hamas terrorism and intransigence, and the refusal of the Palestinian Authority to recognize Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people and eliminate from its educational system the teaching of hatred of Jews and Israel. Accordingly, President Obama made the achievement of a comprehensive peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians the centerpiece of his Middle East strategy. At the same time, he injected into the peace process the novel idea that Israel should freeze all building beyond the Green Line (the 1949 armistice lines agreed to by Israel and Jordan), including in East Jerusalem, to lure the Palestinians back to the negotiating table. This unprecedented requirement had never been demanded by the Palestinians themselves over the course of nearly twenty years of direct negotiations with the Israelis and came unaccompanied by the president's insistence on matching concessions from the Palestinians. It greatly complicated domestic coalition politics for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu while forcing Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to adopt a hard line on Israeli West Bank construction, since he could not be seen to be less aggressive on behalf of Palestinian claims than the president of the United States. The predictable result has been the breakdown of negotiations.

In Iraq, President Obama proceeded with the drawdown of American troops and in late 2011 made good on his campaign promise to complete it. Given the fragility of the government left behind in Baghdad, the porous border between Iraq and Iran, and Iran's determination to stir up trouble and perhaps even foment a Shiite takeover, there is good reason to worry that the president has set back America's long-term interests in a stable and democratic Iraq.

Captive to its misconceptions about the Middle East, the Obama administration was caught by surprise by the Arab Spring. Then again, the uprisings sparked by the self-immolation in December 2010 of Tunisian street vender Mohammed Bouazizi that swept the Arab world last year seemed to have caught just about everybody by surprise, including Arab people themselves, Arab rulers, the Israeli security establishment, and diplomats and foreign policy experts in the region and around the globe. Throughout 2011 and into 2012, the Obama

administration has had to improvise. It watched as Tunisia swiftly replaced President Zine al-Abidine ben Ali. When beginning in late January 2011 hundreds of thousands of protesters gathered in Tahrir Square in Cairo, it dithered, at first giving Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak whole-hearted support, and then flatly demanding his ouster. It “led from behind” in Libya, eventually supporting a UN Security Council resolution authorizing the imposition of a no-fly zone over the country that officially aimed at protecting civilians but which in reality was directed at the overthrow of dictator Muammar el-Qaddafi. In Syria, as protests have steadily spread since the spring of 2011, the Obama administration seems to have slowly come around to the view that President Bashar al-Assad must go, but even as Assad has stepped up the killing it has yet to formulate a clear policy on how to hasten his departure or ease the transition.

In short, the Obama administration is desperately in need of serious and informed thinking about the Middle East, and in their new book, Brookings Institution Senior Fellow Kenneth M. Pollack, who serves as lead author, and seventeen of his Brookings colleagues provide it. Their illuminating volume offers, as they intend, a “sober analysis” of the momentous events of 2011 in the Middle East and sensible recommendations concerning how the Obama administration might most effectively respond. A product of Brookings’ Saban Center for Middle East Policy, which Pollack directed from September 2009 through February 2012, the book is not, despite its eighteen authors, an edited volume presenting a variety of viewpoints on a common theme. Rather, it advances a well-organized and sustained analysis of the Arab Spring by drawing on the specialized expertise of a group of affiliated scholars, based in both the United States and the Middle East, who share a sensibility and perspective. The view that unites them might be described as a hard-headed liberal internationalism.

Understanding the Arab Spring, Pollack explains in the Introduction, begins with understanding the “stagnation of the Arab economies.” Economic stagnation in turn is connected to the failure of education in the Arab world to transmit knowledge, cultivate critical thinking, and develop skills necessary for success in the contemporary economy. And the deep defects of both Arab economies and educational systems are inseparable from the costs of Arab autocracy, which has been for the most part repressive, inefficient, and corrupt.

Accordingly, Arab peoples’ frustration with the status quo was understandable, as were the initial demands, when that frustration exploded early last year, for government that provided greater economic opportunity and showed real responsiveness to the will of the people. Nevertheless, those who initiate revolutions often cannot control their outcomes. Large questions loom — in relation to Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and throughout the region — about the balance of power between the young secular democrats who gave the revolutions their initial impetus, and the traditionalists and Islamists who are seeking to take advantage of the overthrow of dictators to advance their visions of political Islam.

To be sure, the revolutions, Pollack observes, embody an enticing promise of progress:

If Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia eventually emerge as stable democracies — perhaps joined by a similar kind of state in Iraq — they will exert a profound influence on the internal politics of the region, by demonstrating successful alternative models to the autocracies and theocracies that have previously been the only choices on offer.

However, as Pollack knows, that's a big "if." It is characteristic of the book as a whole to both generally understate the prospects for the hijacking of the revolutions by Islamists and, should they prevail, the dire consequences for the region and for American interests, while at the same time giving the assiduous reader adequate information to conclude that that the threat is considerable and the results would be extremely destabilizing and constitute a dramatic setback to American interests.

Shibley Telhami, a professor at the University of Maryland and a Saban Center nonresident senior fellow, gives reason for optimism. He notes that the transformation of the regional television market and the rise of the internet and social media have dramatically diminished the ability of the regimes to "control the narrative." Polls in Egypt show that large majorities support freedom of religion and speech, and somewhat smaller majorities support freedom of assembly, even though much of the population regards the United States as a hostile threat inclined to prop up Arab dictators and to provide cover for Israel to pursue expansionist policies at the expense of the Palestinian people.

Saban Center fellow Stephen Grand reiterates that "more than anything else, the Arab Spring has been about a yearning for democracy." But he argues that a long, hard road lies ahead. Democracy involves much more than free and fair elections, which in themselves would be no small feat for peoples who have known only despotism. It also involves the establishment of democratic political institutions and the creation of a democratic political culture which, Grand emphasizes, is the work of many years.

Shadi Hamid, Saban Center fellow and director of research at the Brookings Doha Center, argues that the overthrow of Mubarak has brought the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt "newfound power and responsibility." What Islamist parties want — and most such parties in the mainstream Arab world are branches or descendants of the Muslim Brotherhood — is in one sense clear and in another uncertain. They all want "the promotion of Islamic values throughout society." The huge question is whether, or to what extent, they regard democracy as consistent with Islamic values. Hamid worries that the rise of Salafist groups in Tunisia as well as Egypt will push the Brotherhood toward more extreme interpretations of Islam. Given the electoral successes enjoyed by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists in Egypt over the past year — between them they took three quarters of the seats in the recent parliamentary elections — Hamid concludes that political Islam is here to stay and that the United States has no reasonable choice but to learn to do business with its representatives.

One particularly valuable feature of the book is its demonstration, by means of chapter-by-chapter analysis of the particular challenges arising out of the Arab Spring, that the Middle East is anything but monolithic and that it is therefore a serious error to attempt to address the Arab people of the region under the single rubric of Islam. The authors divide the countries of the Arab Middle East into three categories: those — Iraq, Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya — which have experienced regime change; those — Saudi Arabia, the small Gulf monarchies (Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, the uae, and Bahrain), Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria — whose regimes appear to be intact but now find themselves under substantially increased pressure to adopt liberalizing and democratizing reform; and those in immediate crisis, specifically Yemen and Syria, which face anarchy and civil war. In addition, the authors survey the changing reality confronting other regional actors — Israel, the Palestinians, Turkey, and Iran. And they review how the Arab Spring has affected the regional interests and ambitions of external powers — Europe, China and Russia, and the United States — and the organization of the international order more generally. The reader is left with a refined understanding of, and sense of foreboding for, the region.

In the concluding chapter Pollack, who before moving to Brookings served as director for Persian Gulf affairs at the National Security Council under President Clinton, distills the grand strategy that undergirds the book:

We believe that to secure America's interests in the Middle East, the United States must embrace a long-term commitment to help the countries of the Middle East pursue a process of political, economic, and social transformation. One that grows from within, rather than being imposed from without. One that reflects the values, traditions, history, and aspirations of the people of the region themselves, not a Western guess at them. One that recognizes that change and stability are not mutually exclusive, but mutually reinforcing — and ultimately mutually essential. But one that also acknowledges that change is most likely to be constructive, rather than destructive, when it is deliberate, planned, and properly resourced. This will be a difficult course to pursue, but it is ultimately the only good path to follow.

Pollack's formulation leaves hazy two crucial matters that while also undergirding the book deserve greater highlighting. The "process of political, economic, and social transformation" that he and his colleagues believe it is critical for the United States to support in the Arab Middle East is not any old sort of transformation but a transformation, however gradual and incremental, to greater freedom and democracy. And encouraging and sustaining that transformation will be a daunting task because of the complex and varying relation between Islam and various Arab peoples of the Middle East. Pollack's hard-headed liberal internationalism could stand a few degrees more of hardheadedness.

Admirable in scope, ambition, and timeliness, the book would have profited from addressing a few more issues. Oddly, in a volume in which most Arab states are so honored, the authors omit a chapter on Lebanon, where Iran-backed Hezbollah threatens an Islamist takeover and could at any moment drag the country into another ruinous war with Israel. In addition, the

book suppresses the extent to which the Arab Spring itself, the Obama administration's developing response to it, and the Brookings scholars' own grand strategy reflect concerns at the heart of the Bush administration's freedom agenda. And, the authors fail to grapple with the substantial changes that must be made in the United States domestically to cultivate the kinds of policymakers, diplomats, and holders of high office with the understanding of the culture, history, and languages of the region necessary to carry out Saban Center-style policy recommendations for the Middle East. One place to begin would be with proposals to encourage the study of critical foreign languages such as Arabic and Persian, much as the federal government did with Russian and Chinese during the Cold War.

It is rare to combine rapid response to unfolding events with scholarly care and depth as does the Saban Center's substantial contribution to understanding the seismic shifts set in motion by the Arab Spring. The framework it has developed and the case studies it has undertaken can serve as a sound basis for advancing the systematic and reasoned inquiry so critical to understanding the elusive and strategically vital Middle East.

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