

Egypt Protests Show American Foreign-Policy Folly

By [Stephen Kinzer](#)

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#), [USA](#)

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While popular uprisings erupt across the Middle East, America stands on the sidelines. Stephen Kinzer on why the U.S. should abandon its self-defeating strategy in the region.

Leading figures in U.S.-Mideast policy (from left): Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

One afternoon a couple of weeks ago, I walked into the British Foreign Office for a meeting with Middle East policy planners. "Tunisia is melting down and the Lebanese government has just fallen," my host said as he welcomed me. "Interesting times."

During our meeting, one veteran British diplomat observed that since American policy toward the Middle East is frozen into immobility, change there comes only when there is a crisis. I asked where he thought the next crisis might erupt. "Egypt," he replied.

Events have moved quickly since then President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia has been overthrown, Hezbollah has chosen the new [prime minister of Lebanon](#) and thousands have taken to the streets in Egypt to demand an end to Hosni Mubarak's 30-year dictatorship. The Middle East is erupting—and the U.S. is watching from the sidelines. Unable to guide the course of events, it can do little more than cheer for its sclerotic allies and hope that popular anger does not sweep them aside.

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Washington sees the various local and national conflicts in the Middle East as part of a battle for regional hegemony between the U.S. and Iran. If this is true, the U.S. is losing. That is because it has stubbornly held onto Middle East policies that were shaped for the Cold War. The security environment in the region has changed dramatically since then. Iran has shown itself agile enough to align itself with rising new forces that enjoy the support of millions. The U.S., meanwhile, remains allied with countries and forces that looked strong 30 or 40 years ago but no longer are.

Iran is betting on Hizbullah, Hamas, and Shiite parties in Iraq. These are [popular forces that win elections](#). Hizbullah emerged as the heroic champion of resistance to Israel's 2006 invasion of Lebanon, winning the admiration of Arabs, not only for itself but also for its Iranian backers. Many Arabs also admire Hamas for its refusal to bow to Israeli power in Gaza.

Pro-Iran forces have also scored major gains in Iraq. They effectively control the Iraqi government, and their most incendiary leader, Moqtada al-Sadr, recently returned to a hero's welcome after an extended stay in Iran. By invading Iraq in 2003, and removing Saddam Hussein from power, the U.S. handed Iraq to Iran on a platter. Now Iran is completing the consolidation of its position in Baghdad.

[Postcards From the Revolution](#)

Whom does America bet on to counter these rising forces? The same friends it has been betting on for decades: Mubarak's pharaonic regime in Egypt, Mahmoud Abbas and his Palestinian Authority, the Saudi monarchy, and increasingly radical politicians in Israel. It is no wonder that Iran's power is rising as the American-imposed order begins to crumble.

The U.S. keeps Mubarak in power—it gave his regime \$1.5 billion in aid last year—mainly because he supports America's pro-Israel policies, especially by helping Israel maintain its stranglehold on Gaza. It supports Abbas for the same reason: he is seen as willing to compromise with Israel, and therefore a desirable negotiating partner. This was confirmed, to Abbas's great embarrassment, by WikiLeaks cables that show how eager he has been to meet Israeli demands, even collaborating with Israeli security forces to arrest Palestinians he dislikes. American support for Mubarak and Abbas continues, although neither man is in power with any figment of legality; Mubarak brazenly stage-manages elections, and Abbas has ruled by decree since his term of office expired in 2009.

Intimacy with the Saudi royal family is another old habit the U.S. cannot seem to kick—even though American leaders know full well, as one of the WikiLeaks cables confirms, that "Saudi donors remain the chief financiers of Sunni militant groups like al-Qaeda." The fact that the Tunisian leader fled to Saudi Arabia after being overthrown shows how fully the Saudis support the old, eroding Middle East order.

As for Israel itself, it will lose much if new Arab leaders emerge who refuse to be their silent partners. Yet Israel clings to the belief that it will be able to guarantee its long-term security with weapons alone. The U.S. encourages it in this view, sending Israelis the message that no matter how militant their rejectionist policies become, they can count on Washington's endless support.

The U.S. has long sought to block democracy in the Arab world, fearing that it would lead to the emergence of Islamist regimes. Remarkably, however, the Tunisian revolution does not seem to be heading that way, nor have Islamist leaders tried to guide protests in Egypt. Perhaps watching the intensifying repression imposed by mullahs in Iran has led many Muslims to rethink the value of propelling clerics to power.

Even if democratic regimes in the Middle East are not fundamentalist, however, they will firmly oppose U.S. policy toward Israel. The intimate U.S.-Israel relationship guarantees that many Muslims around the world will continue to see the U.S. as an enabler of evil. Despite America's sins in the Middle East, however, many Muslims still admire the U.S. They see its leaders as profoundly mistaken in their unconditional support of Israel, but envy what the U.S. has accomplished and want some version of American freedom and prosperity for themselves. This suggests that it is not too late for the U.S. to reset its policy toward the region in ways that would take new realities into account.

Accepting that Arabs have the right to elect their own leaders means accepting the rise of

governments that do not share America's pro-Israel militancy. This is the dilemma Washington now faces. Never has it been clearer that the U.S. needs to reassess its long-term Middle East strategy. It needs new approaches and new partners. Listening more closely to Turkey, the closest U.S. ally in the Muslim Middle East, would be a good start. A wise second step would be a reversal of policy toward Iran, from confrontation to a genuine search for compromise. Yet pathologies in American politics, fed by emotions that prevent cool assessment of national interest, continue to paralyze the U.S. diplomatic imagination. Even this month's eruptions may not be enough to rouse Washington from its self-defeating slumber.

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