

TIME TO RE-THINK: WHY THE ARAB SPRING IS GOOD FOR SECURITY

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Conventional wisdom in the West is that while we admire some of the aspirations behind the Arab Spring, we should not get carried away, because the reality is far more messy: Islamists risk coming to power, semi-authoritarian militaries seek to reestablish dominance, old security relationships are in turmoil, the Egypt-Israeli peace settlement may come undone, and broader conflicts among Arabs and Jews, or among Sunnis and Shias, may drive even further conflict.

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This leads to a cautious, case-by-case, reactive approach to each of the individual Arab uprisings as it occurs. People see a trade-off between values and security, and opt for security.

- In Tunisia, Ben Ali was gone before the West knew what happened. So it was easy to get behind the change after it occurred. We are now pleasantly surprised that we can work with an Islamic-based party in government that is for the most part behaving with tolerance and respect towards the wider population.

- In Egypt, fearing both the rise of Islamists and threats to the Camp David accords, the West backed Hosni Mubarak until it became entirely untenable, leaving a population deeply skeptical of Western motives. In the aftermath of his departure, the West has again been remarkably tolerant of military authorities in Cairo.

- In Libya, the UN and NATO were at first only willing to “protect civilians” while avoiding direct intervention, as though it was possible to protect civilians without weapons against a heavily armed Gaddafi regime. The UK, France, Qatar, the UAE, and –from behind – the United States later opted to help the rebels with regime change, while Germany and others stood on the sidelines. Now that Gaddafi is gone, we are again extraordinarily passive as city-states with militias struggle to reintegrate into a stable nation and other groups seek to exploit the chaos.

- In Bahrain, we look the other way at repression, judging that the strategic imperative of a bulwark against Iran –

including a major US naval base – takes precedence over popular demands for greater freedom and justice.

- In Syria, we are on the sidelines while Bashar al-Assad murders over 10,000 of his own people. Despite UN Secretary General Kofi Annan’s efforts, in truth the international community has no plan.

The Arab Spring continues to ripple, whether in prompting governments such as Morocco and Jordan to continue push forward with reforms, Qatar to modernize while spotlighting regional demands for justice, or other less liberal regimes to hold on tight and hope the tide demands for reform will somehow pass them by.

But about this we can be sure: the old order of the Middle East, one where entrenched authoritarian regimes maintain power by repressing people politically, economically and religiously, is going away and never coming back. The people of the region are demanding change, and one way or another, they will get it.

The western response thus far has been one of clinging to this disappearing past. In the face of fear about what change might mean, we been frozen in the headlights – and by inaction, we have continued *de facto* to support regimes long after their actions have become indefensible, and we have been extremely reluctant to step in to support the people when those regimes use brutal violence against them. We do this not out of dedication to these regimes, but because we do not want to face the costs of change – the potential instability,

increased Islamism and extremism, ethnic or religious violence, or conflict even among nations.

But if change is coming anyway, we will face the costs no matter what. We may delay the departure of such regimes, but we cannot prevent it. And indeed, the costs will be higher if we are seen by the people of the region as hypocritically standing against them – mouthing support for freedom and democracy, while doing nothing to stop those who are doing their best to prevent the realization of these very values. Moreover, through inaction, we leave the playing field open to those who have their own agenda to impose on the Arab world: intolerant Islamist extremists, who seek to hijack change; Iran, which seeks to extend its influence; military establishments representing the fading order, and which seek to re-impose control through force; and outside powers, such as Russia, who seek to play for influence, rather than the interests of the people. Yet again, though we fear the costs of change, the costs will be higher still if those who do not support the democratic aspirations of people are the ones to shape the outcomes.

Finally, we must simply recognize that if our security is fundamentally linked to the staying power of the old order and old regimes, then our security is on very shaky ground indeed. We had better start making alternative plans, before it is too late. Sorting all of this requires a fundamental rethinking of where the region is headed, and where U.S. and western interests truly lie. It requires understanding that rather than facing a conflict between our security interests and our values, we face a situation where

the only way to assure our long-term security is through supporting our values.

To do this, we must come to grips with a few basic things.

First, there is no simple dichotomy between authoritarianism and Islamist extremism. There is a vast, diverse space between the two, a space that the overwhelming majority of people in the region long to occupy. With the majority unwilling to accept either extreme, there will never be stability and long-term security as long as one extreme or the other is allowed to dominate. On both extremes, there are well-financed and well-armed actors seeking to impose either authoritarian or extremism in the immediate term. In this situation, the people need support wherever they can get it.

Second, Islam is a part of society in the broader Middle East and North Africa, just as Christendom is part of Europe or Judaism is part of Israel. It would be wholly undemocratic to attempt to separate people from their faith – and indeed only lead to future instability. Rejecting Islam as a legitimate force on Middle East politics, would paint the West as hypocritical (what would we say about the “Christian Democratic parties of Europe, for example?”), and motivated by anti-Islamic fear, rather than support for democratic rights. Instead, one needs to stress values of peace, tolerance, and respect for democratic institutions independent from, and not inconsistent with, religious belief. Again, this is the space where the majority of the populations of this region would like to be. To the extent Islamist parties do come

to power, they will immediately be challenged with delivering for the people. It is easy to rally support when one is the lone, courageous organization standing up to a dictator. To retain support as a government, however, one must address the needs of the people. Either Islamists will adapt and do so, or their hold on power will be short-lived. In no case is it in the interests of the West to allow Islamists to provoke the population, while escaping the disciplines of governance.

Third, Iran is one of the most serious strategic threats faced by the West and Arab countries alike. But rather than seeing a bulwark of cooperation with strong-arm regimes as the only way to contain this threat, we should think about the effects that reform in the Middle East can have on eliminating the Iranian threat from within. Today, Iran exerts influence in the Middle East through proxies such as the Assad regime in Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas. Removal of Assad and continued counter-pressure on extremists already would deal a heavy blow to Iran's influence.

But even more profoundly, a Middle East that provides a space for all things – Islam, justice, tolerance, democracy, and economic development – would be a far greater influence on Iran, than Iran is on the Middle East. In the face of the power of democratic ideals – ideals for which the Iranian people themselves yearn – the regime in Iran will find itself facing another Persian Spring. The threat of Shia-Sunni conflict, propelled by well-armed authoritarians, can be replaced by Sunni and Shia alike asserting their common human and democratic rights.

Fourth, the demand for greater freedom, justice and democratic rights does not stop with the Arab world or Iran. One can equally see the waves of “Arab Spring” in Central Asia, Russia, and China. Those who struggle for freedom and justice in their own societies take heart when outsiders stand for core human values – just ask Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma, Mikhail Khodorkovsky in Russia, widows of the disappeared in Belarus, or Chen Guangcheng in China. To the degree we see democratic values take root and expand in these wider swathes of the world, we will all be safer and more secure. It is a big leap to let go of the habits and security structures of the past, and move on to something new. What we need to recognize is that sooner or later, we will have to make that leap, and the sooner we do it, the more favorable the outcome will be for our own interests.

It is a mistaken framework to think of the Arab Spring as a question of values versus interests. Instead, it is a question of short-term versus long-term. In the long-term, democratic change will indeed be better for both our values and our interests. The problem is how to manage the dislocations this will cause in the short-term. Other actors are actively competing in this short-term environment, with a view towards shifting the long-term outcome. Surely the West should become more engaged in these short-term crises and dislocations – not less – in order to foster the best outcomes for the people of the region, and our own long-term values and interests.