

Learning the Wrong Mideast Lessons

Feb. 11 marks two important anniversaries in the Middle East: the ouster of the Shah of Iran in 1979 and the overthrow of Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak in 2011. But the question remains whether the U.S. has learned the right lessons from these events, writes Hillary Mann Leverett.

By Hillary Mann Leverett

Three years ago, Washington experienced its own dose of “shock and awe”, the PR phrase used to sanitize its brutal invasion of Iraq, when hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of ordinary Arabs took to the streets to demand the overthrow of leaders more interested in Washington’s approval than that of their own peoples. But American policy elites’ professed surprise was primarily a function of their own self-imposed amnesia and delusion.

No one in Washington seemed to realize or care that Egyptians forced their pro-American dictator from power on Feb. 11, 2011, 32 years to the day after the Shah of Iran’s military conceded to the will of the Iranian people, giving birth to the Islamic Republic of Iran and bringing down a pillar of American dominance in the region.

On the eve of Iran’s revolution, as a deep and abiding thirst for independence was sweeping through Iran, President Jimmy Carter **toasted** the shah, in “great tribute to your leadership and to the respect and the admiration and love which your people give to you.”

Thirty-two years later, U.S. foreign policy elites seemed to have learned little. When similar revolutionary fervor threatened another pillar of U.S. dominance in the Middle East, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, the Obama administration appeared to be following the example of its 1970s predecessor.

Vice President Joe Biden **proclaimed** that Mubarak wasn’t “a dictator” because he was an American ally and a friend of Israel, thereby highlighting that the only way an Arab leader can be those things is by being a dictator. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had already **declared** “President and Mrs. Mubarak to be friends of my family.”

But with security forces marauding through Tahrir (“Liberation”) Square, killing nearly 1,000 people by the time Mubarak finally resigned, and drawing more people to protest, instead of repelling them, alarm set in among Washington’s foreign policy elite. Could the U.S. really lose the Egyptian pillar it had so assiduously co-opted after its Iranian pillar was tossed out in 1979?

When Washington finally understood that Mubarak's days were numbered, as Carter had finally understood with the shah, the Obama administration tried to orchestrate a "transition" to Mubarak's reviled intelligence chief. Omar Suleiman was the man responsible for "rendering" Egyptians to be tortured for the CIA and for collaborating with Israel to keep the Palestinian civilian population in Gaza under siege.

When that did not work, Washington set out to co-opt and then abort what it termed the Arab Spring, a Western phrase meant to depict movement toward secular liberalism rather than toward participatory Islamist governance.

Unchanging Foreign Policy

Mubarak's departure brought into uncomfortably stark relief a reality that U.S. policymakers had denied since the overthrow of the shah 32 years before.

U.S. efforts to use cooperative autocrats, autocrats willing to facilitate U.S. military aggression, to torture alleged "terrorists" (their own citizens) for the CIA's benefit, and to tolerate a militarily dominant Israel engaged in open-ended occupation of Arab populations, to promote American hegemony over the Middle East were unacceptable to the vast majority of people there.

As protests unfolded in Egypt, large numbers of demonstrators in Yemen demanded that Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, a major U.S. counter-terror collaborator, resign. Three days after Mubarak's removal, large-scale protests paralyzed Bahrain, home of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, underscoring the threat to America's regional hegemony even more dramatically.

U.S. foreign policy elites were not just concerned about a precipitous erosion of the U.S. strategic position in the Middle East. They also worried about what the spread of popular demand for leaderships accountable to their peoples, not to Washington, would mean for the hegemonic house of cards the U.S. had imposed on the region.

It was clear, and has become ever clearer over the past three years, that the majority of population in the Middle East want to vote for their leaders and to have a voice in decision-making on issues affecting their daily lives and social identities. But they also want that to happen in an explicitly Islamic framework not in some secular, liberal "Spring" context, divorced from their identities and ability to assert real independence.

When given the chance to express preferences about their political futures, Middle Eastern Muslims do not embrace the sort of secular liberalism that America might be able to countenance as an alternative to pro-Western autocracy. Rather, they vote for Islamists espousing the integration of participatory

politics and elections with Islamic principles, and with a commitment to foreign policy independence.

Thus, in early 2011, Washington was anxious that the Arab Awakening would ultimately benefit the Islamic Republic of Iran. For the Islamic Republic is the Middle East's only political system that, since 1979, has actually tried to integrate participatory politics and elections with principles and institutions of Islamic governance. It has also been an exemplar of foreign policy independence, embodied in its consistent refusal to submit to the imperatives of a pro-U.S. regional order.

Three U.S. Goals

Faced with these risks to its hegemonic ambitions, the U.S. could not simply declare its opposition to popular sovereignty in the Middle East. Instead, the Obama administration crafted a policy response to the Arab Awakening that had three major goals.

In the course of pursuing these goals, the administration, with strong bipartisan backing in Congress, has imposed even more instability and violence on the region. It has also set the stage for further erosion of the credibility and effectiveness of U.S. policy in a vital part of the world.

The Obama administration's first goal was to prevent the Arab Awakening from taking down any more U.S. allies. To that end, the administration tacitly (but happily) acquiesced to the Saudi-led military intervention in Bahrain on March 14, 2011, to sustain the Khalifa monarchy. As a result, the monarchy continues to hold on to power (for now) and U.S. naval forces continue operating out of Bahrain.

At the same time, Washington's support for suppressing popular demands for political change there through Saudi Arabia's armed intervention has helped fuel a dangerous resurgence of sectarian tensions across the Middle East. This, in turn, has given new life to al-Qaeda and similar jihadi movements around the region.

The Obama administration's second goal was to co-opt the Arab Awakening for U.S. purposes, by showing that, somewhere in the Middle East, the U.S. could put itself on the "right" side of history. So, when Saudi Arabia offered the Arab League "cover" to intervene in Libya and arm anti-Gaddafi rebels, President Barack Obama overrode objections by his Defense Secretary and military leaders to order U.S. forces into action.

On March 17, 2011, the UN Security Council narrowly adopted a resolution authorizing use of force to protect civilian populations in Libya. In short

order, Team Obama distorted it to turn civilian protection into coercive regime change. The results have been disastrous for U.S. interests and for the region: Worsening violence in Libya, a growing jihadi threat in North Africa, a dead U.S. ambassador, and more polarized U.S. relations with Russia and China.

The Obama administration's third goal was to show that, after the loss of pro-Western regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and near-misses in Bahrain and Yemen, it wasn't just authoritarian regimes willing to subordinate their foreign policies to the U.S. that were at risk from popular discontent.

In particular, Washington wanted to demonstrate that it was also possible to bring down regimes with clear commitments to foreign policy independence, and, in the process, weaken not just Iran's strategic position but that of Islamists across the region promoting participatory Islamist governance.

Soon after unrest started in Syria in March 2011, the Obama administration saw an opening, declaring that President Bashar al-Assad "must go" and goading an externally supported "opposition" to undermine him, if not bring him down.

It was clear from the start that arming a deeply divided opposition would not bring down the Syrian government. Nevertheless, Washington joined with its so-called allies in Riyadh, Paris, and London in an almost desperate attempt to roll back Iran's rising power.

Almost three years on, Iraq, as well as Iran, has been hurt by this misadventure, but the American and the Syrian people have paid a much higher price. Washington has paid in terms of its regional standing, intensification of the regional resurgence of violent extremists, and further polarization of relations with Russia and China; Syria, of course, has paid with over 100,000 Syrians killed (so far) and millions more displaced.

More recently, the Obama administration's tacit backing for the military coup that overthrew Egypt's democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood president in July 2013 has removed any residual doubt that the U.S., intent on clinging to its hegemonic prerogatives in the Middle East, can endorse moves toward real democracy in the region.

Putting U.S. strategy in the Middle East on a more positive and productive trajectory will require Washington to accept the region on its own terms, to deal straightforwardly with all relevant (and authentic) actors, and to admit that trying to coercively micromanage political outcomes in Muslim-majority societies isn't just incompatible with claims to respect popular sovereignty, it is unsustainable and counter-productive for long-term U.S. interests.

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The High Cost of a 'War on Terror'

Despite the declining threat that international terrorism poses to the U.S. homeland, the U.S. government continues to pour countless billions of dollars into counter-terrorism while impinging on constitutional liberties and misleading the public, as the Independent Institute's Ivan Eland notes.

By Ivan Eland

Retired Lt. Gen. James R. Clapper, Jr., the Director of National Intelligence, recently gave testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee on his annual assessment of the threats facing the United States. What little attention was paid by the media, always seeking drama and conflict to get more viewers and readers in order to increase advertising revenues, to the annual ritual focused on Clapper's vitriolic attack on Edward J. Snowden, the National Security Agency (NSA) contractor.

Snowden believed NSA's electronic snooping programs went too far and therefore gave a treasure trove of documents to media outlets about the snooping. Clapper accused him of doing grave damage to the nation's security through such disclosures, because terrorist groups have allegedly changed their behavior to avoid U.S. spying.

The media also focused on the tension at the congressional hearing between Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, and Clapper over Clapper's statement last year, under questioning by Wyden, that intelligence agencies weren't collecting bulk information about Americans. In the carefully scripted kabuki dance that passes for intelligence oversight by Congress, Wyden had even told Clapper he was going to ask that question in open committee session, so Clapper's resulting lie was not because he was caught off guard, as he later implied.

This year, Wyden euphemistically termed Clapper's prior dissembling to congressional overseers, doing at least something to uphold the Constitution's system of checks and balances, as a crippling "culture of misinformation."

In fact, Clapper's seething anger at Snowden is probably the result of Snowden's disclosures, which made a monkey out of Clapper's prior claim to the contrary by revealing NSA's bulk unconstitutional collection of all Americans' phone

records. Of course, the arrogant intelligence chief has stated that he resented talking about classified issues in public, which matches the mentality of an intelligence community that regularly chafes under even the poorly enforced constitutional limits of the republic it is supposed to serve.

So even though some of Clapper's comments about Snowden's giving too much away to foreign countries and terrorists might have some merit, the retired general's own transgressions are far worse for a republic: lying to a congressional oversight panel in violation the Constitution's system of checks and balances and his intelligence community's blatant violation of the Fourth Amendment's implied prohibition against general searches and its stated requirement that to spy on Americans, a judicially approved search warrant, based on probable cause that a crime has been committed, is needed.

In this year's testimony, however, the real news was that Clapper undermined his own argument that Snowden's alleged help to terrorist organizations was so horrific for the country; he did this by saying that international terrorism was only the fourth worst threat to the nation. That's right, Clapper claimed that the threat from whistle-blowing insiders such as Snowden and foreign intelligence services were bigger threats to the nation than terrorists.

And for the second year in a row, he cited cyber-attacks by Russia, China, Iran and North Korea on U.S. defense contractors, financial institutions, water utilities and electrical grids as the number one threat. So after all the hysteria after the 9/11 attacks, drone wars in several developing countries, and two overseas quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan, which allegedly attempted to "drain the swamp" of terrorists, the terrorist threat has been downgraded.

One could make the argument, and U.S. security agencies do, that all of their martial efforts overseas have made Americans safer. In at least Iraq and Yemen (a major venue for the U.S. drone war), hard data indicate that U.S military action has actually increased the numbers of Islamist terrorists. Data don't lie, because what drives radical Islamists to attack the United States is unnecessary U.S. meddling in Muslim countries, just look at the late Osama bin Laden's writings.

And since the chance that international terrorists will kill any American is about the same as an asteroid killing him or her (and the chance of succumbing to such a terrorist is less than being struck by lightning), the U.S. government has long over-invested in the military means to fight terrorists.

Yet despite that over-investment, terrorism as a threat does not justify the mammoth defense expenditures the U.S. makes without a great power enemy to fight (the United States currently expends on defense what the next 11 countries

similarly spend combined).

So a cynic, that is, a person thoroughly familiar with how defense programs are created and sustained but with no vested interest in them, might say that countering the cyber-warfare threat from great powers would bring defense contractors more profits than systems to counter rag-tag, and often incompetent, terrorist groups. Just a thought.

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