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Loosing the crop? Why the US does not harvest the Arab fall^(*)

An old saying warns us to be careful what we wish for: it might come true, after all. In a way, this is the case for the United States and recent events in the Middle East and North Africa, as it not only reshuffled the cards in a region seemingly static in its constant instability, but by the same token brought to daylight the inherent paradox of American Middle East policy which had called exactly for these events. While this double-track policy existed all along, it is only now that it is challenged as the regional game has changed. The United States, more than any other external actor to the Middle East, is thus now under pressure to rethink its policy, and to choose carefully if it does not want to be sidelined in a region crucial to its security.

Idealist and realist: how to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds

In the last decade, American policy towards North Africa and the Middle East carried two features that were, in practice, at opposed ends: Concerned with terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, trade route safety and Israel's security, the United States choose cooperation with autocratic regimes both in the Gulf and North Africa, ignorant of human rights or democracy, in order to achieve the former. In a Machiavellian sense, the ends justified the means: a realist understanding of security dictated cooperation with states that otherwise had not much in common with the Land of the Free. This in itself is not the paradox, as many states facing hard security challenges choose realism over noble values.

Yet, the United States pursued, at the very same time, a democracy promoting narrative, supporting human rights in the region both with deeds and words, thus remaining true to its self-perception as supporter, and exporter, of democratic principles. This policy, purely idealist and at odds with the realist elements, was reconcilable with the latter only because it remained entirely virtual: as the states in the Middle East remained autocratic as ever, the United States were free to pursue a democracy agenda simply because it never materialized. Only occasionally was this idealist approach challenged, for instance when the Palestinian party Hamas won the majority in an election deemed fair and free by the European observers, and the United States suspended cooperation with the Palestinian authority - Hamas was not an acceptable democratic player to the US, or Israel for that matter. While this dichotomy between discourse and action did not go unnoticed by local and regional publics, it nevertheless remained rather confined,

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Abstract

In the last decade the US policy in the middle east has been based upon an idealist political narrative, stressing the need for democracy and human rights while, at the same time, it actively cooperated with autocratic regimes that routinely violated the most basic political and civil rights for the sake of security. The determination of local regime in maintaining the political status quo coupled with the apparent passivity of the Arab people shielded the American democratic rhetoric from being put to the test, safely relegating it to the realm of ideas.

Now, the Arab spring has brought the coexistence between the two contradictory features to an abrupt end. Not only Arabs are now actively seeking dignity, democracy and human rights, but they are questioning the US self-perception as an exporter of democratic values. The US finds itself at a crossroad, where it needs to reconcile its policy with its democratic narrative.

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() The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.*

and the gulf between realist support for autocratic regimes and idealist democracy discourse remained largely unapparent: while the realist policy was exactly that – real –, the idealist one remained an idea rather than a reality. The contradiction thus remained virtual, too.

A paradox exposed: Kant versus Machiavelli in the Middle East

Events since late 2010 have changed this: faced with an entirely real call for democracy in Tunisia and Egypt (although a long way remains until its real establishment), the United States' policy is suddenly called bluff – or one could say, the Kantian realization that ends do not justify means has set in. As Kant says in his hypothetical imperative, there is no such thing as a moral disconnect between ends and means as advocated by Machiavelli. In other words: the Kantian Arab publics hold the United States accountable for its policy towards autocratic regimes rather than its democratic narrative. The interest-driven, realist policy is now judged, not the idealist discourse.

While the Arab uprisings collectively called for democracy, human rights and dignity – all values cherished and promoted by the United States –, the most famous democracy in the world was not given credit at all during the Arab Spring. The fact that it was the United States who stood strongly by the idea of a democratic Middle East, even raised this point as one of the reasons for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (now arguably one of the few real democracies in the Middle East) was not mentioned once on Tahrir Square. In spite of strong American support for democratic values all over the world, it is thus not seen as the midwife of democracy.

Ironically, the American form of democracy is hailed all over the Arab countries, but the very inventor of it is not. In a sense, the United States seem to have successfully exported a product, yet not only it is not given credit for it; it is shunned for having led a double discourse, a combination of idealist and realist rhetoric, a “having your cake and eat it” policy. The United States thus have to make a difficult choice between realist and idealist policy, essentially between a Machiavellian and a Kantian understanding of foreign policy in the Middle East.

Yet current indications from US officials do not point into this direction. President Obama justified the double-track of idealism and realism in his recent speech as a combination of legitimate interests (countering terrorism, proliferation of nuclear weapons, securing free flow of commerce and Israel) not at odds with what he termed “people’s hopes” – their desire for democracy. In this, he did not depart from the previous paradox. In the same vein, the reaction to the Arab uprisings proved to be rather slow (especially in the case of Egypt); its initial silence towards the Saudi intervention in Bahrain, and later recognition of Iranian meddling in the Bahraini crisis is perceived as linked to a deal on Saudi acquiescence of an intervention in Libya. In addition, passivity towards the Syrian crisis is seen as a double standard running like a red thread through United States Middle Eastern policy which does not practice what it preaches. The fact that the US included Bahrain later on a list of human rights violators (along with Burma, Iran, North Korea and Zimbabwe) at the United Nations does not change this general perception of the Arab people possibly going to the polls soon.

This is not made easier by the fact that the Obama administration's standing in the region was, and is not, significantly different from its predecessor's. Although hopes were high after the President took office in January 2009 and his historical Cairo Speech promising a new beginning in American relations with the Muslim world, the administration's policy towards one of the most volatile regions in the world remained largely in line with the previous decade: no significant progress on the Israeli-Palestinian file, continuous support for undemocratic regimes coupled with an idealist discourse. In no time, frustration and disappointment among the Arab public returned, with the American image at a low underbidding its perception during the Bush administration. Recent polls show that the United States are still seen as a unilaterally acting superpower and a potential military threat; most Arabs dislike the fact that their (mostly non-democratic governments) cooperate with America.

U.S. Favorability Rating

	1999/ 2000	2002	2003	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Indonesia	75	61	15	38	30	29	37	63	59	54
Lebanon	--	36	27	42	--	47	51	55	52	49
Egypt	--	--	--	--	30	21	22	27	17	20
Palest. ter.	--	--	0	--	--	13	--	15	--	18
Jordan	--	25	1	21	15	20	19	25	21	13
Pakistan	23	10	13	23	27	15	19	16	17	11
Turkey	52	30	15	23	12	9	12	14	17	10

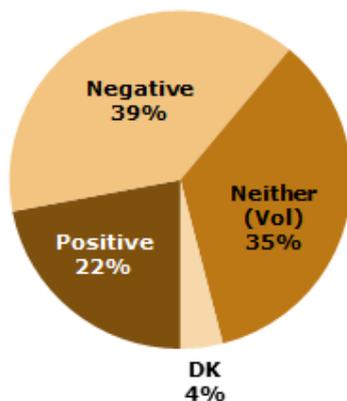
1999/2000 survey trends provided by the Office of Research, U.S. Department of State.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Q3a.

Source: Pew Research Center, *Arab Spring Fails to Improve U.S. Image*, May 17, 2011, <http://pewglobal.org/2011/05/17/arab-spring-fails-to-improve-us-image/>.

It is thus not surprising that up to this point, the United States emerge as the loser of the Arab Spring, as their reaping of the Arab harvest turns out to fall way below what it should, or could be. An Egyptian poll shows that 39% thought negatively of the US response to the situation in Egypt, while 35% thought that it was neither positive nor negative. In other words: the role of the United States in the Arab Spring is negligible to negative, as a direct result of the inconsistent policy the United States have conducted towards the region over the last decade. And while this was incoherent all along, it is now, during the Arab Spring, that the chicken are coming home to roost. Now, the United States have created a Catch-22 for itself: it cannot ignore these revolutions, worse, it has to support them if it wants to remain true to its strongest foreign policy narrative, but what if these democracies turn against the United States?

Impact of U.S. Response on Situation in Egypt



PEW RESEARCH CENTER QEGY10.

Source: Pew Research Center, *Arab Spring Fails to Improve U.S. Image*, May 17, 2011, <http://pewglobal.org/2011/05/17/arab-spring-fails-to-improve-us-image/>.

A zero-sum-game? Undoing it

In light of such considerations, the United States double-tracked Middle Eastern policy, always quite inconsistent but still manageable in light of non-existent democracies, has turned into an apparent zero-sum game, in which one has to choose between idealist support of democratic movements and its realist support of autocratic regimes.

Yet, democracy promotion in a region new to the concept has suddenly turned into a source of anguish; no one knows what a distinct Middle Eastern democracy will look like, as few convincing examples exist. Lebanon with its integrative consociational system has chosen permanent instability over true representation; Iran's theocracy seems to many, in- and outside- the Middle East, a rather grim version of the ruling of the people, so that Turkey with its own shortcomings and *coup d'états* remains as the only role model, not necessarily one that will be followed.

In the view of a well-organized Muslim Brotherhood with democratic ambitions, many in the US fear not only the election of a government in contradiction with human rights (which would fall into the idealist realm), but also one that would cancel the peace treaty with Israel, support terrorism or close the Suez canal (which would fall into the realist domain). Suddenly, democracy does not seem like a desirable goal after all, as the outcome could contradict primary security considerations. And other causes for concern exist: the Arab Spring has swept away a network of informers the United States relied on heavily in its war on terror, and it freed prisoners jailed under the real or faux pretext of terrorism. Concerns arise not only over how Arab democratic governments might act towards Israel, but also how American military bases (especially in Bahrain) might be perceived by these. After all, dismantling American and British bases was the first act of liberation Qaddafi committed after coming to power, playing on a popular sentiment of foreign occupation.

Interestingly, this fear is particularly connected to the role of parties which might not necessarily be Islamist, or even Islamist extremist (make no mistake: it is not the same) as doubts continue to exist when it comes to the compatibility of Islam and democracy. Opinion polls showing majorities in Egypt and Jordan favoring the Qur'an as the sole source of laws nourish the scare that democratic elections in the Arab world will eventually bring non-democratic parties to power.

Here, differentiation needs to be made. Not only is this conviction in the minority in other Arab countries (such as the Palestinian territories), it also sheds light on the question why Muslim political parties, claiming to be exactly that, are equated with radicals. As the example of Turkey has shown, a conservative Muslim party in power will not lead to another Iranian revolution. Yet this lack of differentiation between radical parties and those who might be conservative, but still democratic, is rampant and stands in stark contrast to an American political landscape which openly claims Christian influences without seeing any inconsistency with democracy.

Aside the fact that this scenario is possibly worse in theory than in reality, and that Muslim democrats are an imaginable idea just as much as Christian democrats, the very idea is a particular challenge for the United States which in the past has not only promoted democracy rather vocally, but also created for itself an image of Muslim conservatives in power that seems to contradict the very idea of democracy from an American perspective.

But it is here where the zero-sum-game can be undone: by understanding the caveat that the United States themselves have placed on democracy promotion, and by subsequently removing it. There is no mandatory choice between ideals and reality. While American democracy promotion in the Middle East always had a caveat, it is only now, through the Arab Spring, that the United States fully realizes that its idealism was never just that but had some limits. Thus, the democracy it promoted and had it mind is not sure to be the one that will emerge from the Arab Spring, challenging not only the US double-track policy but its very idealist principle. The caveat attached to American democracy promotion might explain why Arab publics find it difficult to perceive the United States as the midwife of democracy it was in other states.

Not only is the strong emphasis on radical Islam exaggerated in the political arena, it is also misleading as it distracts from the real danger emerging: fragile democracies, so-called anocracies, are the most likely to fall into civil war. The transition period is the most difficult to manage, largely because expectations about a democratic system clash with the slow manifestation of its benefits. Looking at the reasons why democracy has become fashionable in the Arab world, there is cause for concern. Democracy (which, overall, seems to be a highly popular yet theoretical model for most) is thus equated with (in order of importance): Economic prosperity, political stability, freedom of religion, free speech and competitive elections. While all of these are noble traits, it is the most important one, a strong economy, that is the most difficult to achieve. A young democracy failing to live up to this expectation might very well be taken down by those who first brought it into being, the people, such as in Germany in 1933. This is particularly worrying considering that there is a tendency in Arab countries to choose economy over democracy when a choice needs to be made: 49% Egyptians, 58% Jordanians, 62% Palestinians would do so.

While this strong socio-economic element of the Arab spring has been understood, it has also to be seen as a possibly spoiling element as it can be easily manipulated by any political party. This is where the true danger for these countries lies, and not in a possibly Muslim conservative party in power. Assisting these countries in this difficult moment of transition, respecting the outcome of elections and ultimately trusting a system that one relied on oneself are thus the elements that a new Middle Eastern policy should carry, both for the United States but also the European states. This is the only way to ensure cooperation with these states, who share security concerns over terrorism, nuclear proliferation and trade routes regardless of whether they are autocratic or democratic. There is only one file where opinions diverge: most Arab states, and publics, desire a fast settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and hold especially the United States responsible for its stalemate. While this was always a concern, it is now more likely to play a prominent role in domestic politics as it is likely to be connected to electoral victory for any party contributing to its settlement. No mistake should be made: the overwhelming concentration on the Arab revolutions does not mean the Israeli-Palestinian issue is off the table. In the context of the Egyptian uprising, demonstrators gathered in front of the Israeli embassy, and once the internal situation has calmed down, it will return to prominence.

The United States is now in a unique position to review its Middle Eastern policy. Unique because at this crossroad, it has the opportunity to follow an idealist policy with realist undertones, rather than, as in the past, a realist policy with idealist undertones. In reality, the two are compatible if Kant's categorical imperative is applied: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law". Should democracy become a universal law, any conditionality should thus be removed. Only then can the United States be recognized as the democracy promoter, and the trusted ally of Arab democracies it aspires to be.

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