The Future of Arab Reform: Beyond Autocrats and Islamists

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Brief Analysis

A State Department official discusses why overcoming cynicism and encouraging reform in the Middle East remains a crucial part of America's role as defender of the international system.

On October 19-20, The Washington Institute held a special two-day conference examining the prospects for political reform in the Middle East. The event included a keynote address by Assistant Secretary Tom Malinowski from the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. The following are his prepared remarks.

First I'd like to thank Dave Pollock, David Schenker, and all of the non-Davids who helped organize this conference and invited me to speak here today. I would also like to thank WINEP for hosting this event and focusing us on the very important topic of political reform post-Arab spring.

David P. asked me to offer some reflections about what we've learned from the post-Arab Spring struggles for democracy and human rights in the Middle East and what it means for our foreign policy going forward. He asked me, "How can we revive progress on this vital front?" Trying to answer that question has been a big part of my professional life for the last few years. And the way things are going I may be set for life! So I'll do my best to say something useful about the Middle East today.

But before we go there, I want us to think about what is going on here. This has been a tumultuous year for Western democracy, too. There are two old lessons that I hope we are re-learning from this experience, too.

One of those lessons is that freedom is fragile everywhere. We think we have come so far: a progressive political and economic union in Europe after centuries of bloody warfare; an African American president of the United States after generations of racism; milestone after milestone in extending human rights to racial, religious, and sexual minorities; universal education that teaches children to think critically; magical technology that allows people across every possible divide to know each other. And yet, in country after country, the demons of our past are coming out: We see again how quickly people normalize what was once unthinkable. We are relearning that nothing is unthinkable.

None of this should surprise us. I recently came across an old black and white photo showing a crowd of jack-booted, uniformed men giving the Nazi salute to their leader. It was taken in England in the 1930s, at a rally of the British Union of Fascists, which had tens of thousands of members at its height. Our own American demagogues, from Father Coughlin in the 1930s, to Joe McCarthy and George Wallace, rallied millions by appealing to something ugly in the human psyche that will always be there. What protects us is a system of values, of rules, and of institutions that is built not, as we imagine, on legal guarantees, but on the thin ice of mutual consent. That consent easily cracks when there is fear.

The second old lesson I hope we're re-learning is that we are all connected. The fear that is infecting our politics from Budapest to Berlin to Baton Rouge is in many ways a reaction to problems coming from very far way, including from Baghdad, Damascus, and Tripoli. Now, I don't want to oversimplify this point. There are many reasons, some reasonable, for Americans to fear globalization or for Britons to criticize the European Union. There are many explanations for racism and for worry about immigration. But would we be seeing such a sudden rise of nationalism and populism in Western democracies if not for the sudden emergence of ISIL and the sudden flight of millions of refugees from Syria?

These two calamities, in turn, are the product of a breakdown in governance in two Middle Eastern countries. A government in Iraq abused its Sunni population, to the point where some feared their own army and police more than the men with black flags who rolled into their cities in 2014. A government in Syria opened fire on peaceful citizens, then focused fire on an armed and mostly moderate opposition, while doing almost nothing to stop terrorists who were taking over much of the country. As a consequence, thousands of radicalized youth began to stream to Syria and Iraq; millions of refugees streamed out to Europe; ISIL claimed credit for gunning down people in Paris, Brussels, and San Bernardino. And then in France, a state of emergency; in London, billboards urging Britons to "take back" their country by leaving the EU; in America, demands to ban Muslims.

There are many principled reasons why President Obama announced in 2011 that "it will be the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region and to support transitions to democracy." It's enough for me that it was the right thing to do. But if you need to be convinced by the argument of cold, hard national interest, just look at what has come to us from the places where reform was resisted.

And yet, the argument for democratic reform in the Middle East seems harder to make today, despite the evidence for it being clearer, than it was when the Arab Spring sprung. Perhaps that's because for a moment in 2011 we thought the goal might be easier to reach. Even people who profess to be realistic about how revolutions usually turn out allowed themselves a moment of giddy hope back then. Admit it, Rob Satloff.

As for me, well, you are looking at a man who went to Libya in the spring of 2011, and wrote a seminal article about what I saw titled "Jefferson in Benghazi." I'm not too embarrassed -- it was incredibly moving to see Libyan civil society try to build from scratch a civil state on the ruins their dictator left behind. That civil society is still there; it represents most Libyans, far more than the men with guns who pushed them aside; and I still believe it will prevail. But it turns out that what we truly needed were a few more Hamiltons in Benghazi. And the perspective to remember that most successful democratic transitions take many years to bear fruit.

I'm sadder and more sober when I consider this challenge than I was five years ago. But I believe that what Secretary Clinton said in 2011 when the Arab Spring was at its height is now even more plainly true: that "the greatest single source of instability in today's Middle East is not the demand for change. It is the refusal to change." The work of change has not ended -- look at Tunisia, where democracy has endured terrorist attacks and economic stress; look at Jordan and Morocco, which just held elections open to opposition from every part of the political spectrum. Where change has not come, the demand is not going away. The Obama administration has continued to urge governments to meet it.

It's my particular job in the administration to think about how we should do this and to answer those -- including some leaders in the region and in our own domestic debates -- who try to discourage us. Here are some of the discouraging words that most often are heard, and how I respond.

Since we're talking about the Middle East, a common argument is that everything is somehow our fault -- that it was America's promotion of liberal ideals, our statements that governments should heed the demands of protestors, our alleged abandonment of authoritarian allies, that caused the turmoil in the region.

Here is what Vladimir Putin said about the Arab Spring last year to the UN General Assembly: "Instead of the triumph of democracy and progress, we got violence, poverty, and social disaster -- and nobody cares a bit about human rights, including the right to life. I cannot help asking those who have forced that situation: Do you realize what you have done?"

It's a strange idea when you think about it -- that it was the United States that put into a Tunisian fruit seller's head the notion that he should take his life, rather than the corruption and abuse of local officials. Or that it was President Obama who gave people the idea that Bashar al-Assad should go, rather than the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who had already braved gunfire to say those words long before he did. Or that if he hadn't urged an "orderly and genuine transition to democracy in Egypt," a million people on Tahrir Square would have gone home.

At the start of February 2011, hardly anyone in the U.S. government had even heard of the tiny, persecuted civil society community of Benghazi. By the end of the month, after marching on their courthouse, getting shot at, rallying the people of the city to their side, and running Qadhafi's troops out of town, they were in charge of half of Libya. Not because we willed it, but because Libyans desperately wanted it. Only when Qadhafi sent his tanks back to kill them did we and our allies intervene to protect them. If we had not, if we had let Qadhafi crush Benghazi, Libya's civil war would not have ended. As in Syria, we'd probably have seen years of back and forth slaughter. In this situation, the extremists who have shot their way to power in a few parts of Libya might have found genuine support from a desperate population feeling abandoned by the world, rather than the revulsion that they now inspire in the vast majority of the Libyan people.

The reason for the region's turmoil is not that some outside power persuaded people to ask to be treated with dignity; it's because the kind of power those people were confronting never gives way easily. Dictators always dig in and fight, dirty and hard, when confronted with demands for free speech and elections, because free speech and elections are dangerous weapons in the hands of ordinary people trying to get rid of dictators. And because in their world, losing office means losing everything. I think it's usually in our interest to encourage the gradual opening of closed societies so that such confrontations are avoided, and that's what 99 percent of our human rights diplomacy is about. But if that fails, and confrontation comes, we have to decide: to be silent or to follow those who share our values. That's the choice we faced in 2011, and we chose to follow where the people of the Middle East were leading.

A second argument is that we have other interests in the Middle East, particularly counterterrorism, that are always going to trump our ideals. And we shouldn't anger allies with public statements about human rights if we're not going to back them up when push comes to shove.

I agree that we should be honest about this. Of course we have multiple interests. In foreign policy, as in life, equally valid principles can come into conflict, and then we have to make hard choices.

But we learned a long time ago that promoting human rights and preventing terrorism are not competing interests. Arguably the worst counterterrorism strategy ever invented is Egypt's mass incarceration of thousands of peaceful activists and opposition supporters right alongside the most hardcore terrorists. A recently released Egyptian activist told us that "there are arguments that go on all day [in those prisons] between the ISIL model and the Muslim Brotherhood model -- and the ISIL guys are winning the argument." Let's remember: The terrorists' core argument

to frustrated young men in the Middle East is: "If you think you can get change through elections or protests, you're a fool; you will be jailed, tortured, and crushed; we who use violence, on the other hand, are strong and will be victorious."

We need to cooperate with countries in the region, including with Egypt, to share information about terrorist groups and plots so we can stop attacks before they happen. But it is important that we not confuse good counterterrorism cooperation with good counterterrorism. The former is necessary, but a finger in the dike. The latter -- effective counterterrorism -- is what prevents the flood. It requires political reform that gives all legitimate stakeholders in the Middle East a voice in their governance, including peaceful Islamist parties.

A third argument that we hear more often these days, and not just in the Middle East, is that if we press governments too hard to respect human rights or to do something else they don't want to do, they'll just go to Russia or China for support instead. Some governments deliberately play on this fear -- they'll send a diplomat or general or even a prince or king to Moscow or Beijing, to influence some decision they think we're about to make. Maybe they'll even sign some kind of "partnership agreement" or "memorandum of understanding." But if these governments have a military relationship with the United States, they know that they cannot operate, maintain, and replenish their systems without U.S. support; you can't fix an F-16 with MiG parts. And if they have any sense of history, they know that the United States is the only great power in the world that will use power for something larger than our narrow selfish interest -- to protect their security, to name one random example.

Plenty of small countries tried to play us in this way during the Cold War. Sometimes it worked. In retrospect, I think that in most of those cases we looked foolish. We can be wise enough not to let it happen again.

The final discouraging argument I hear just about every day goes like this: We can't bring democracy to Egypt. We can't stop the war in Syria. We can't heal a religious rift in the Muslim world that goes back a thousand years. We can't, in other words, solve the problems of the Middle East.

All of these statements are 100 percent true. We, the United States, can't do any of those things. But all this proves is that if you make impossible dreams your goal you are going to wake up disillusioned; you will lurch from fervor to fatalism and never achieve the modest but worthwhile gains that are at least within your grasp. So: you can say that the situation in Yemen or Syria or Libya is irredeemable, that there is no one left there with whom we can work, and I will understand your disenchantment, even if I know there are still wonderful, brave people with causes worth championing and lives worth protecting in all these places, even if I remember that one could have said the same about much of Europe just a few decades ago. But the real point is that our aim is not redemption. It is simply to make things better than they otherwise would be. American influence and power is always being felt in the Middle East, for better or for worse, and its absence would be felt, too. We might as well use it for better.

Sometimes, especially if we're patient and consistent over many years, we can help people achieve lasting change for the better. Sometimes all we can do is to help one or two people get out of jail, or prevent the passage of a bad law, or keep people talking who might otherwise be fighting -- but those small gains can eventually add up to much more. Sometimes we can end a war with a handshake on the White House lawn. Sometimes all we can do is to keep a conflict from getting worse, or to manage its consequences -- but that, too, is worth doing. My old friend Phil Gordon has said that no matter what we do or don't do in the Middle East, the result seems to be a costly disaster. But there are distinctions even between disasters -- the delta between mere crisis and outright catastrophe can be measured in thousands of lives saved and millions of refugees averted. Whatever you think about what we've done or should do in Libya and Syria, I hope you'll agree that the test for America in these situations is not whether we alone can solve a problem for good, because nothing is ever solved for good. The question is whether and how we can make things better.

And so, we keep at it. Our rhetoric may not be as soaring as it once was -- maybe we'll talk more about improved governance than freedom and democracy, as in all the work we are doing to ensure that Iraqi cities like Mosul are governed better after their liberation than they were before their fall. We are investing in the fragile success stories -- we boosted our aid to Tunisia by more than a third in the last year, we've provided loan guarantees, encouraged reforms that will attract investment, and kept supporting civil society to guard against any return to old ways. We have continued to press partners -- including Saudi Arabia -- to release political prisoners and open political space. We have urged political reconciliation in Bahrain so that the opposition can run in elections in 2018.

And where it is needed, we continue to hold governments accountable. In Egypt, for example, Secretary Kerry has not made the certification of human rights progress this year that is necessary to unlock the final 15 percent of our military aid. And we redirected $108 million in economic assistance for other countries in response to obstructions from the government of Egypt that impeded the effective implementation of this funding.

We are reviewing all of our support to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen because of concerns about civilian casualties, which we have raised with the Saudi government at the highest levels. And since 2011 we have withheld some security assistance and cooperation to countries across the region -- from tear gas, to howitzers, potential training opportunities, or larger military sales. In some cases, our laws prevented us from training units implicated in human rights violations; in other cases we were worried that these specific items could be used by the governments against their people. And in a few cases we have been forced to signal that we cannot proceed with business as usual given our stake in inclusive governance.

I've seen such efforts have impact many times, though we try not to take credit when they do. I also know they have impact because I've seen authoritarian governments lobby us repeatedly not to engage in them! I've also heard from another group of people who are convinced of our influence -- the ordinary people and activists in these countries who keep asking for our help.

In 2012, just before taking this job, I spent a few days in an opposition-held area in Syria, a very conservative area where people weren't exactly enamored of the United States. Yet everywhere I went, when people heard that an American was in town, people came out on the street and surrounded me demanding to know why my country wasn't coming to their immediate rescue. I tried to explain as honestly as I could how after our experience in Iraq, Americans were tired of war, and wary of getting sucked into another complicated mess in the Middle East. They looked at me as if I was crazy. Of course you can do something if you choose, they said.

I've been to plenty of other places where people are in desperate need, and never met anyone who was angry at France or Germany or Russia or China for not helping them. It's always us. Barrel bombs have a way of curing people of the notion that America should always stay out of their business.

Whether we think it's an honor or a burden, our power and sense of purpose has given us this role of defending the norms of the international system. If we don't do it, who will? What would be the consequence if no one did? And that brings me back to my starting point. For there is something that threatens us today more than the turmoil in the Middle East. It is cynicism about democratic government; cynicism about the liberal international order that we have spent decades helping to build. Our adversaries are consciously trying to undermine confidence in these values and institutions. And we've seen how fragile their foundations are.

So that's the most basic reason why I think we have to keep standing up for our values at home and abroad, including in the Middle East. We do it for our own sake. If we somehow were to quit defending our convictions, if we were seen by the world as giving up, imagine how dispiriting that would be to good people around the world who share our values? Imagine how empowering that would be to authoritarian leaders whose one true argument is not that they are better than us but that everyone is equally cynical.

So -- the Obama Administration will keep championing the cause of reform in the Middle East, for the next 92 days. I'm confident that the United States always will -- that the question will always be not whether, but how. And as for the "how," I look forward to hearing from all of you, since I'm told that over the last two days, you figured it all out! Thank you, and I'd be happy to take your questions. ❖

Keynote Address

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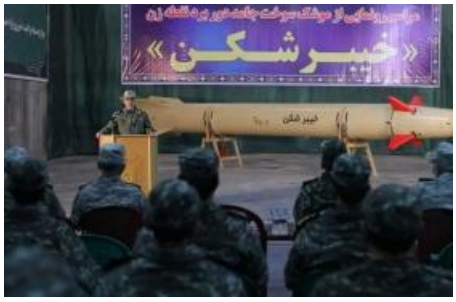

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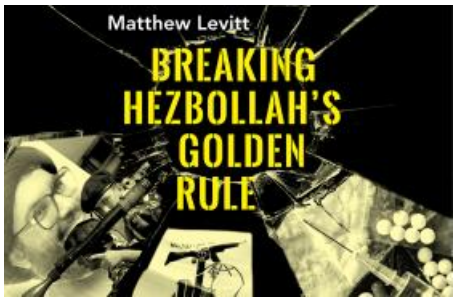

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