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Navigating Chaos: U.S. Principles in Unsettled Arab World

by J. Michael Barrett

Throughout the Middle East, we are bearing witness to multiple, simultaneous struggles among disparate voices vying for power in a heavily theological and sectarian society. The U.S., as a nation, deliberately chose this outcome by trading stability for a shot at messy self-governance.

Whether you agree with the policy or not, when the Obama administration chose to ignore longstanding alliances with stable but ruthless dictators in the Middle East and aggressively embraced the so-called “Arab Spring,” it was a conscious decision with predictable outcomes now coming to fruition.

And while tragic, the recent death of four Americans in Libya was all too predictable and is only the beginning. We are likely to see many more direct strikes against our interests as the local populations fight it out about who will be in power, and attacking the West continues to be a convenient outlet for pent-up frustrations.

Let’s be honest: It should not be a surprise to our foreign policy establishment that with revolutions come periods of instability, and that means some conflict is inevitable. Removing brutal regimes and all of the associated power structures within the society — the forces that kept whatever semblance of peace there was on the streets — unleashes chaos.

In that sense, this is not so different from the invasion of Afghanistan and the toppling of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, both of which led to similar internal fights that continue to this day.

And so it was entirely predictable whom and what we would face: In Egypt, where the rulers are the Muslim Brotherhood, the economy is in tatters, and anti-Western and anti-Israeli sentiments run high, we face the regime itself, as well as even more radical non-regime Sunni elements; in Libya, the new regime likes us, but we still face threats from the dispossessed sects and from radical non-regime Sunni elements tied to al-Qaida, many with experience fighting in Iraq; and Yemen has long been and remains a very tough challenge, lest we forget it is the ancestral homeland of the bin Laden clan.

Then there is Iran, which, although Shiite and non-Arab, will still look to exploit the chaos by finding common cause with the Sunnis in their shared antipathy for Israel.

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In the near term, we should expect lots of random attacks on embassies but also foreign companies, Western tourists and business people, including kidnappings, car bombs and the like. Such is the nature of instability amid well-armed factions engaged in de facto civil war and any number of internecine clan-versus-clan conflicts.

In the medium to long term, however, the situation will eventually settle down. The risk is that it could take decades of intermittent and low-level violence before that happens, or the situation may boil over into all-out direct war between the Arab Street and the Israelis.

So, what should we do, given the facts as they are? Our policies must address three constituencies at the same time, which is no small feat:

- Be honest with the American people. We chose the uncertain path of more political freedom in these nations without being able to control or even directly influence the outcomes. As a result, the future across the region will involve low-level attacks on our interests, both government and nongovernment.

Vitriolic anti-American rhetoric and mass demonstrations will be common, and we will have to counter them with exhortations that individual rights, equality of the sexes, and freedom of thought and expression are universal values — a message we know many in the region will reject, but which represents what we believe.

- Support the fledgling pro-American governments in places such as Libya, where it is the non-state groups that threaten our interests.

Our involvement in that country should be to support the national government and offer training and assistance in the development of modern civil institutions such as secular courts, a free press, and effective but accountable law enforcement and military systems.

- For those places where the new government is somewhat or mostly anti-American, such as Egypt and Iraq, we must tread carefully but balance our long-term interests against immediate gratification.

Yes, cutting off aid monies feels right, but it also removes our leverage with the strong and influential military. Yes, we want to demand a more public accounting of those who choose not to defend our interests, but we also need to maintain our leverage over their adherence to peace with their neighbors.

This will be a long war, and we need to focus on winning over time, not on immediate gratification or the false hopes that this war-torn region will convert over-night into a peaceful, democratic utopia.