

# Uncertainty and the New Middle East

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March 1, 2011

The first few months of 2011 have been a good reminder of the role of uncertainty in international politics and foreign policy. The overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, possible ouster of Moammar Gaddafi in Libya as well as widespread demonstrations in Bahrain, Tunisia, where this all started, Morocco and elsewhere in the Middle East will likely be among the biggest issues and challenges facing American policy makers for quite a while, and will almost certainly dominate foreign policy questions for the duration of Barack Obama's time as president.

It is extremely unlikely anybody could have seen these events coming even as recently as late 2010. Accordingly, it is likely that foreign policy planners in Washington, Brussels, Beijing, Moscow and elsewhere will have to revisit assumptions, plans and priorities for the region. For example, the complex question of U.S. policy towards Iran as it seeks to become a nuclear power is very different with Mubarak out of power, an uncertain future in Egypt, a potentially unstable Libya and an empowered Shia majority in Bahrain.

The rapid changes in the Middle East will clearly be a major test of the flexibility of American foreign policy and of the ability of policy makers and thinkers to integrate new information into their strategic thought and to recognize changed realities. It is also a reminder that presidents who may be elected for one set of reason, or based on a specific platform, often see their presidencies dominated by events that could not have been foreseen at the time of the election.

Just as nobody could have foreseen that President George H.W. Bush's presidency would be taken over by the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, or that President George W. Bush's presidency would be redirected due to a terrorist attack in the U.S. during his first year in office, President Obama did not run for the office or base his campaign around a potentially new Middle East. Nonetheless, to a real extent, his presidency will be evaluated by how he responds to this.

The end of the Cold War and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 radically changed the entire foreign policy orientation and priorities of the U.S. It is not yet apparent that the changes in the Middle East will be of a similar scale, but a number of American interests and concerns including peace between Palestinians and Israelis, a potentially nuclear Iran, access to oil, Iraq, the war in Afghanistan and fighting terrorism may be directly affected by these events. American policy regarding any of these questions now needs to be reexamined and largely depends upon the evolving political situation in Egypt and elsewhere.

Despite the looming deficit problems and possible declining popular support for international engagement, the U.S. will likely seek to become deeply involved in post-

Mubarak Egypt and elsewhere in what may be a new Middle East and the [possibility of U.S. intervention in Libya](#) seems bigger every day. The success or failure of these endeavors may be at least as important for the Obama administration, and for the future of the U.S. in global affairs, as the seemingly endless war in Afghanistan which has hitherto been this president's top foreign policy priority.

President Obama has so far approached the extraordinary changes in the Middle East with great caution. His administration did not take a strong stance against President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt until he was on his way out and only spoke out firmly against Gaddafi after several days of violence in Libya. It is easy to view this as evidence that the Obama administration is unequipped to address these developments, but that would be a little premature.

While the Obama administration has been far from perfect in foreign policy, they have been reasonably successful in focusing on outcomes rather than bluster. It is significant that while Obama's predecessor spoke with great bravado, and occasional eloquence about democracy in the Middle East, the breakthroughs that could lead to democracy occurred during Obama's presidency. Obama's policy in the new Middle East will not simply be a reaction to unforeseen and inspiring events, but will lay the groundwork for the U.S. role in the region for probably several decades. Accordingly, the administration is not unwise to move carefully and try to think things through before acting. We have seen the consequences for not doing this.