



## **After the celebrations, Arab Spring a challenge for Obama**

Lesley Clark and William Douglas / September 12, 2012

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Nearly two years after President Barack Obama welcomed the Arab Spring uprisings as a historic opportunity akin to the American Revolution, attacks on U.S. posts in Libya and Egypt underscore that Islamic extremism, a lack of law and order, and dire economic conditions have combined to roil the region and leave its future uncertain.

"For all the progress we've made, challenges remain," Obama conceded in his speech last week at the Democratic National Convention.

Middle East analysts warn of a tough slog ahead.

The transition to democracy for any country is rarely without upheaval, said Allen Keiswetter, a scholar at the Middle East Institute and a former deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs.

"It's going to take time for the Western idea of freedom of speech and religious tolerance to take hold in these countries," he said.

Libya in particular, he noted, had no tradition of democratic governance. "Democratizing countries are among the most violent as they work through their systems," he said.

Stabilization could take years "and as much as a generation," said P.J. Crowley, a former State Department spokesman under Obama and a former special assistant for national security affairs under President Bill Clinton.

"This is about developments inside Libya," Crowley said. "The U.S. had a hand in Libya – it will be vitally important for the U.S. and other countries to help Libya develop."

In May 2011, Obama likened the uprisings in the region to the onset of the American Revolution and the American civil rights movement. He committed U.S.

assistance to the fledgling governments in Egypt and Tunisia, where longtime dictators were ousted after popular protests, despite worries in the U.S. and elsewhere that militant Islamists could pose a threat to potential democratic rule.

The administration has resisted efforts to be drawn too deeply into a civil war in Syria, restricting U.S. support for rebels there to non-lethal aid and intelligence as it tries to build international pressure to convince President Bashar Assad to step aside as part of a United Nations-backed plan.

But Obama pressed for a limited U.S. role in a rebel- and NATO-led effort to topple Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi, despite worries of a political vacuum once he was gone.

“It was clear when Moammar Gadhafi was overthrown and the U.S. and NATO assisted in that effort that Libya was likely to be a very unstable place that radical Islamist elements were going to exploit,” said Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute. The Obama administration isn’t the first to “barge into regions” without understanding all the players and their motivations, he added.

Carpenter said he doesn’t believe it was clear that the administration “understood the probable consequences” of getting rid of Gadhafi.

“There’s been a tendency both with the Bush administration and Obama – and Clinton in the Balkans – to be overly optimistic about the probable aftermath of getting rid of obnoxious regimes,” he said. “There’s a significant risk that the situation may become very chaotic and be worse than the status quo. You have deep divisions in that society; it’s still very much uncertain whether Libya will remain cohesive.”

Anthony Cordesman, a national security analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a center-right think tank, warned in a blog posting against drawing conclusions too rapidly, saying the U.S. can only serve its interests “if it understands that it may well face a decade of diplomacy and aid efforts” to help the countries develop functioning democracies.

“We in the West need to remember that the ‘European spring’ that began with the French Revolution (or 1848 depending on your choice of historians) triggered upheavals that lasted until at least 1914, and did not end in anything approaching stability,” he wrote.

James Carafano, director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies at the conservative Heritage Foundation, said it’s unclear whether

the Libya incident reflects an Obama foreign policy failure.

"We just don't know," Carafano said. "Something like this could have happened to any president at any time. There's a lot of points that need to be addressed at some point: What kind of intelligence did we have? Did we make the right risk assessments?"

Michael O'Hanlon, a senior fellow with the 21st Century Defense Initiative and director of research for the foreign policy program at the Brookings Institution, said the deaths were tragic but don't mean the U.S. approach is misguided.

"This is neither a failing of the Obama administration or an excuse to disengage from the Arab world," O'Hanlon said. "What it does underscore is that we're nowhere near done with Libya and there's no asserting that Libya is yet a permanent and lasting victory. It's going to be an ongoing challenge for whoever is president."

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