

The War in Libya and the "Arab Spring"

A Reason round table

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Why has there been such a flowering of revolt in the Arab world in North Africa and the Middle East in the past few months? Is there a common root cause to protests and revolts, whether ultimately successful in creating less-oppressive regimes, in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere?

The semi-short answer is that all illiberal governments are based on a shaky foundation, lacking popular support and unresponsive to changing political circumstances. Their ability to retain power depends upon a combination of sticks (intimidation, violence, incarceration of regime opponents) and carrots (economic opportunity, a decent standard of living, or simply co-opting some number of people through bribes). When the latter becomes shaky, as when food prices spike, or unemployment rises, or people rebel against corruption and cronyism (all factors in the recent protests) the regimes can resort to more violence, or make concessions. The different ways that the protests across the Middle East/North Africa region have played out reveals the different policies adopted in response to them. In that sense, I think that some of these protests will ultimately succeed in liberalizing some countries in a region where people have been consistently denied fundamental rights and liberties. But there will also be setbacks, as a few regimes will likely succeed in stifling domestic dissent, and therefore postpone the day of reckoning for at least a while longer.

Is the impulse to challenge repressive regimes likely to spread to other countries in the region and, if so, which ones?

It already has spread quite dramatically from what was considered to be, at the time, a fairly isolated protest in Tunisia. In addition to the countries mentioned above, the impulse to challenge the existing order clearly exists in Iran, Bahrain, and Jordan, or really any country where the regime's lacks the support of a considerable portion of its public, or even—as in a country like Iraq or Lebanon—where a vocal minority is systematically disenfranchised. Whether these impulses manifest themselves into public

protests, or even open revolt, depends on the strength of the protest movements, and the regime's response to them.

What should the role of the United States in the region be as events unfold?

Here, as with most things, we need to draw a distinction between the U.S. government and the United States. If Washington, the White House or Congress, the U.S. military, or any other U.S. government agency, is seen as playing a very public role, the regime and its supporters can too easily claim that Uncle Sam's grubby fingerprints all over the protest movement, deflecting attention away from the root causes of public unrest, and likely causing some people to rally to the embattled regime. In a few cases, the U.S. government might be able to apply pressure on the regime through back channels, but there is always a chance that these efforts can backfire, especially if they become public. So the Obama administration needs to tread carefully, as they appear to have done successfully in Egypt. In the case of Libya, however, President Obama and other senior advisers loudly called for Gaddafi's ouster and openly backed the rebels. Now the United States is a party to a civil war. No one knows the end game. In contrast, the response to private citizens and NGOs doing the slow, patient, and non-violent work of democracy promotion is likely to have a more lasting impact. Liberty should spread organically, from the bottom up, not at the barrel of foreign guns.

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