

MOVING *beyond* RHETORIC

How Should President Obama
Change U.S. Policy *in the* Middle East?



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When President Barack Obama took office four years ago, we at the Project on Middle East Democracy urged him to speak clearly to the people of the Middle East to signal meaningful changes to the policy approach of the United States toward that region. Early on, he did exactly that, promising in his first inaugural address and his major June 2009 speech in Cairo to “seek a new way forward” in U.S. relations with the region, based on “mutual interest and mutual respect.” Such rhetoric was initially received with enthusiasm across a region eager for real change, but soon became viewed as empty words not backed up by substantive policy. Following the historic changes that have swept the region since early 2011, the U.S. administration has responded with similarly lofty rhetoric, again not fully reflected in policy.

As President Obama now embarks on his second term, it’s important to examine what concrete changes to U.S. policy are needed to fulfill the promise of his rhetoric. To this end, we at the Project on Middle East Democracy have asked fifteen leading foreign policy voices to address the following question:

What is the most important policy change that President Obama should make in the Middle East during his second term?

The selected contributors represent a wide spectrum of backgrounds and perspectives: leading American academics, experts, and policy analysts, including former high-ranking officials from both Democratic and Republican administrations, as well as leading Middle Eastern voices from Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates. Unsurprisingly, they have produced an equally diverse set of responses—some focus on a particular policy challenge or on U.S. policy toward one specific country, while others make broader, thematic recommendations that apply to the entire region. Despite this variety, there are a few clear themes that recur throughout the responses:

Take Bold Steps: Avoid the timidity, caution, and “tinkering around the margins” that have thus far characterized the U.S. response to dramatic and historic changes. Take assertive steps to help influence the outcomes of transitions at this critical moment.

Engage More Broadly: Reverse the longstanding tendency of relying primarily on narrow, government-to-government relationships. Strengthen relationships with a diverse set of actors across the region—not just the new faces in power.

Use Leverage and Incentives: Demonstrate a willingness to use leverage and offer concrete incentives to positively influence the actions of key actors in the region, including U.S. allies. Don't just declare a desire or an expectation that governments will take constructive steps—clearly identify rewards and consequences to encourage such actions.

Other valuable advice contained within these responses includes the need for the administration to, on one hand, become more agile and better able to respond quickly to the rapid changes of a dynamic region, while on the other hand, demonstrate patience and not sacrifice long-term progress for the sake of short-term expediency.

On the following pages, all of the responses are presented in full. Each of the individual responses articulates these themes more fully and makes specific recommendations. As the U.S. administration transitions and prepares for President Obama's second term, we believe that this collection contains valuable input and suggestions that could help the policies of the President's second term live up to the rhetoric of his first.



Stephen McInerney

*Executive Director
Project on Middle East Democracy*



“The power of any country lies with its people.”

One of the most important lessons of the Arab uprisings is that the United States cannot rely on its government-to-government relationships alone. Before the revolution, the U.S. relationship with Egypt was based almost entirely on interactions with the Mubarak government, which left the U.S. unprepared for the revolution and the political changes that have followed. Unfortunately, despite those historic changes, the U.S. government appears to be repeating its past mistakes, prioritizing relationship-building with the current government at the expense of its broader relations with the Egyptian people.

The power of any country lies with its people, and the historic Arab revolutions have made clear the need for sustained and meaningful engagement directly with the Egyptian people. This should include much greater direct engagement by the staff of the U.S. Embassy Cairo with a diverse spectrum of representatives of civil society, political opposition movements, community associations, and labor unions. Moreover, direct people-to-people engagement between the two countries is equally important, and this should include the significant expansion of exchange programs between Egyptian and American civil society organizations, trade unions, social service providers, and businesses.

This principle of supporting the Egyptian people should also be applied to foreign aid. Despite much U.S. aid and effort invested in building relations with Egypt, Egyptians resent the perceived dependency relationship with the U.S. and instead seek genuine partnership. The United States can play a critical role in supporting Egypt to develop diverse economic alliances, and the U.S. should first focus its aid on timely economic and social development projects that will have a direct and visible improvement on the day-to-day lives of ordinary Egyptians. This should include greater efforts to support technological advancement, education, youth integration in the job market, housing, and infrastructure development throughout the country. These projects should be led by Egyptian civil society organizations with the support of the state. Achieving tangible success in these fields will provide the United States with much-needed credibility to play a supporting role in Egypt's political transition.



ESRAA ABDEL FATTAH

Esraa Abdel Fattah is currently Vice-Chairman the Egyptian Democratic Academy, a non-profit youth organization that promotes democracy, human rights, and political participation. For her efforts during the Egyptian revolution, she was nominated for the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize.



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Elliott Abrams is a senior fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, DC. He formerly served as Assistant Secretary of State and held multiple positions with the United States National Security Council, including Deputy National Security Advisor for Global Democracy Strategy.

“*It’s a matter of backing those who peacefully seek freedom of speech and press and assembly, the rule of law, and free elections.*”

How about supporting democracy—loudly, from the top, and often? In his first term, President Obama gave very little support to citizens struggling for democracy. This failure began in Iran in June 2009, continued in Egypt and Bahrain, and has sadly characterized administration policy in the region. Hillary Clinton’s famous 2010 speech about her own priorities listed “defense, diplomacy, and development,” and the fourth D was missing.

It isn’t a matter of choosing sides in elections or being for or against monarchies. It’s a matter of backing those who *peacefully* seek freedom of speech and press and assembly, the rule of law, and free elections. It means calling forcefully for the protection of minorities and of the rights of those who (sometimes narrowly) lost an election. Here the lesson is broader: in Latin America, too, (Venezuela and Ecuador are examples) we have seen leaders and parties win a free election then use their offices to undermine the democratic system to keep power. We should make it very clear that an elected leader has no more right to compromise the democratic system than one who seizes power in a coup.

Such an approach does not suggest confronting all Islamist parties, and they will differ in their approach to democracy. But it does mean we should not embrace them until we are sure what that approach is—a mistake we made in 2011 and 2012 in Egypt. Secretaries Panetta and Clinton visited Cairo and embraced the Brotherhood government before any real evidence was in, and by late 2012 we appeared to be recreating the discredited “Mubarak bargain.” the U.S. might be silent about deviations from democracy and the rule of law if Egyptian foreign policy was to our liking. We should have learned our lesson. The most important policy change would be for the administration to speak out with energy and commitment about civil and political rights.



“We fear that U.S. impatience threatens to undermine support for our democracy.”

The most important thing that we in Tunisia want to see from our international partners—and especially from the United States—is a refusal to sacrifice our progress toward democracy for the sake of short-term stability. That is not to suggest that stability is unimportant. But rather, that lasting stability can only be achieved through the emergence of a genuine democracy that respects the rights of its citizens.

We are glad that the U.S. administration has shown an interest in Tunisia’s transition, but too often U.S. policy has focused on strengthening actors in the Tunisian government and working with them to achieve security and stability. This must always be accompanied by pressure on those figures to ensure that they are acting in accordance with democratic principles.

Many of the political forces emerging in Tunisia are not focused on democracy, but instead on securing their own power. As a result, they employ the tactics of the old Ben Ali regime, and often make concessions to individuals from the former regime for political gain. While this is not unexpected, it is essential that outside actors send a clear and consistent message that their support remains with the Tunisian people in our struggle for democracy and not with any forces acting contrary to that goal.

As we have seen in other regions, democratic transitions are long-term processes that are more likely to succeed with consistent international support. For example, the support of the United States and other Western democratic countries for the democratic aspirations of Central and Eastern Europeans has never been in doubt over the past 25 years. But here in Tunisia, we fear that that U.S. impatience threatens to undermine support for our democracy. We hope that during his second term, President Obama will alleviate these fears though consistent pressure on all actors in Tunisia to respect democratic principles.



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Sihem Bensedrine is a longtime Tunisian human rights activist and journalist who is currently the president of the Arab Working Group of Media Monitoring, established in 2011. She is also a co-founder of the National Council for Liberties in Tunisia (CNLT) and the independent news website and radio station Kalima Tunisie.



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“*The sad story of successive administrations has been our failure to use the leverage we have...*”

Despite President Obama’s rhetorical embrace of movements for freedom in the Middle East, the second anniversary of the Arab Spring finds Arab liberals disappointed and even angered by the United States. Their common refrain is that we are not acting on our declared principles, that our historical policy reflex—to flatter and embrace whoever is in power—still reigns. This is the most important aspect of American policy that must change in the second Obama administration.

Being truer to our democratic principles does not have to mean being naïve and self-defeating. In fact, it is the “realist” position that is proving naïve in Egypt, where a Muslim Brotherhood president has been rolling over liberal democratic norms—such as respect for dissent and minority rights—with hardly a word of protest from the administration. President Morsi and his party are seeking to construct a new hegemony in which they will dominate the political and social landscape indefinitely. In Iraq, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has had a long head start on this project and is much further along toward decimating democratic constitutional balances and restraints. Each of these rulers and parties has a long-term agenda that is hostile to American interests, though Morsi did a good job of disguising it by helping to broker a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas last November.

Neither can we be credible with the inevitable forces of change in the region if we keep clinging uncritically to our traditional friends, like the authoritarian monarchy in Bahrain while it imprisons and tortures non-violent advocates of democratic change. Yes, Bahrain has been a valuable strategic partner in hosting the U.S. Fifth Fleet as it ensures against Iran’s mischief and ambitions of dominance in the Gulf. But the Bahrainis (and their chief backers, the Saudis) need the U.S. at least as much as we need them. The sad story of successive administrations has been our failure to use the leverage we have to nudge the region toward freer and more humane governance.



“Offer incentives to Cairo to build democratic institutions and adopt responsible economic and foreign policies.”

President Obama should exert leadership in galvanizing international assistance for the transition in Egypt in his second term and thereby gain leverage over the course of an important regional ally. In the two years since the fall of Mubarak, Egypt has received little assistance from the international community due to the political turmoil inside the country as well as the worry that post-revolutionary governments would adopt populist economic policies. International concern about Egypt’s political and economic trajectory is justified, but the way to deal with it is not to wait and see but to offer incentives to Cairo to build democratic institutions and adopt responsible economic and foreign policies.

When the United States is committed to the success of a new or fragile state—in the aftermath of World War II, the collapse of the Soviet Union, or upon the creation of the Palestinian Authority in the 1990s—it galvanizes assistance from all over the world in order to create an economic environment that supports that government and also constrains it to remain on a sound path. The United States cannot on its own provide the billions in grants, loans, and investments that Egypt needs, but it can become the aggregator and gateway for such assistance from many sources. An internationally agreed upon program can also help to dissuade any Egyptian government from veering sharply in a different direction, for example toward a new form of authoritarianism or irresponsible foreign policies.

The United States has already missed important opportunities, such as its chairmanship of the Deauville Partnership, to galvanize assistance for Egypt. But a new opportunity looms: a likely standby agreement with the International Monetary Fund in the first few months of 2013 is exactly what many donors have been waiting for before deciding how to help Egypt.



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“*If the United States is to have a positive impact on the transitions taking place, it must be agile.*”

The Obama administration has opted for a minimalist approach to the Arab Spring, anchored in a cautious wider Middle East policy. Yet, as the recent constitutional crisis in Egypt and other events illustrate, neglect is not always so benign. If the United States is to have a positive impact on the transitions taking place, it must be agile. Interventions at pivotal moments cannot always take place at the level of Secretary (of State or Defense) or President, reactions must be faster, and sometimes policy will need to be made on the fly. William B. Taylor, the current “transitions czar” at the State Department, is undoubtedly a fine civil servant, but he is not a political heavyweight and is nearly invisible in the region both to governments and to the media. The U.S. does not just need a policy coordinator for the State Department and USAID. It needs a high-octane troubleshooter—one with the credibility that comes with being seen as having the confidence of the president and the authority to act fast—both in dealing with foreign governments and in setting strategic priorities for American policymakers.



“What we, the Palestinians, are asking for is not a management of the crisis, or an easing of the situation, but an actual, just solution.”

Expectations were high when Barack Obama was elected President of the United States of America, as were the hopes for a change in U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. However, in the past four years, none of these expectations or hopes has been met. Thus, as he enters his second term in this powerful position, the challenges are even greater.

For people across the world, President Obama symbolizes change and hope for a better future. In light of Palestine's recent status upgrade, becoming a Non-member Observer State in the UN, it is clear that for any real change to happen on the ground in the Middle East, a change in U.S. policy is crucial. The status upgrade, backed by 138 countries, should be used as a step towards recognition of the Palestinian state by the United States as well.

What we, the Palestinians, are asking for is not a management of the crisis, or an easing of the situation, but an actual, just solution. It is not about making the situation bearable, or calling for negotiations, but actually taking action and making permanent changes to the realities on the ground. Without a change in American policies, no such solution is possible. It takes not only actual change—both in policy and mindset—but also political will to reach a lasting peace that benefits all.

Since President Clinton and the failure of Camp David II, no American president has been personally involved in the conflict. However, the humanity and hope for a better future that are inherent in the image of Barack Obama need to be translated into America's foreign policy.

We are hoping to see “Change” move “Forward” during the President's second term.



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“Provide clear incentives to Arab countries to implement necessary reforms.”

As Arab attitudes toward the United States are “inelastic,” anything short of a major policy overhaul—such as the tinkering on the margins that has so far defined the Obama administration—will not make much of a difference.

The issue of leverage and aid conditionality has become more relevant than ever in the post-Arab Spring era. The Obama administration’s proposed MENA Incentive Fund and the European Union’s Support for Partnership, Reform, and Inclusive Growth (SPRING) programs are both gentle nudges in the direction of conditionality. The problem with both programs is how small in scope they are, totaling less than \$1 billion annually across the region—simply not large enough to influence the political calculations of Arab governments.

With this in mind, there is a need to coordinate the funding of a “multilateral reform endowment” that would provide clear incentives to Arab countries to implement necessary reforms. The endowment would include a minimum of \$5 billion, with the goal of increasing total available funding to \$20 billion by 2022. Receiving aid would be conditional upon meeting a series of explicit, measurable benchmarks on democratization, which would be the product of extensive negotiations with interested countries. The endowment would be funded with contributions from the United States, the EU, allies like Japan, Qatar, and Norway, rising democracies such as Turkey and Brazil, as well as international financial institutions.

For transitional states like Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, benchmarks would include security sector reform, military noninterference in civilian affairs, judicial independence, and ensuring press freedoms. For liberalizing monarchies like Jordan, Morocco, and Kuwait, benchmarks would focus on expanding political space for opposition groups and the gradual devolution of power to elected institutions accountable to the people. Even if certain countries rejected endowment funds, an important message would still be sent to both Arab leaders and publics that democracy assistance is no longer half-hearted and ad-hoc, but part of an institutionalized, multilateral, and long-term effort to hold Arab governments accountable to a set of explicit standards.



“*The United States needs to continue to diversify the portfolio of contacts and leaders it engages.*”

The most important policy change President Obama should make in the Middle East is continuing the effort to build a more sustainable foundation for our relationship with Egypt, the region’s largest country. Egypt is in the middle of a major political and economic transformation that will likely reshape its diplomatic and regional security strategy in the long-term. U.S. policy must change as well. The path Egypt takes will have major implications for the rest of the region. Shifts in the internal balance of power in Egypt, alongside new security challenges and social and economic changes, will be some of the most important strategic dynamics reshaping the Middle East in Obama’s second term.

More than two years into this transition, a great deal of uncertainty remains in Egypt. Multiple centers of power have emerged inside of Egypt, and despite the Muslim Brotherhood’s early electoral successes, the broader Egyptian public demonstrates a strong desire for pluralism and openness to a diversity of views.

During the last two years, the Obama administration has made some important tactical adjustments to its Egypt policy—it engaged new leaders in Egypt, offered new forms of economic assistance, and moved to make small adjustments in security cooperation. But it needs to examine more closely whether the current package of military and economic assistance is effective in advancing U.S. interests and supporting Egypt’s transitions. The United States also needs to continue to diversify the portfolio of contacts and leaders it engages—it must avoid being seen in Egypt and the broader region as simply replacing a Mubarak-centric policy with a Muslim Brotherhood-centric policy. Finally, it must outline U.S. interests and values more clearly as Egypt moves through these transitions and have a diplomatic strategy that explains U.S. positions on Egypt to key actors in the broader region.



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“What is needed is a policy of engagement with the Libyan government and more, not less, interaction with all political groups and civil society organizations.”

Due to the violent nature of the Libyan revolution and the militarization of the conflict in its early stages, Libya has had to deal with the challenges represented by the spread of arms across the country and the existence of armed militias and extremist groups who played a crucial role in toppling Gaddafi’s regime. This challenge is compounded by the need for Libya to rebuild its military and security forces almost from scratch.

In light of these challenges, what are the policy options for the American administration? Due to the attack on the American Consulate in Benghazi and the tragic death of Ambassador Chris Stevens and three staff members, it might be tempting for the Obama administration to disengage and scale down its presence in Libya. However, this option will not serve America’s long-term interests, nor will it help the prospects for Libyan stability and democracy. Libya faces a real danger of sliding into a state of instability and lawlessness, which will have serious ramifications—nationally, regionally, and globally. The Obama administration should instead use its political skills and technical expertise to assist in the institution- and capacity-building of the Libyan security forces to increase their ability to confront security challenges that might hinder Libya’s democratic transition. What is needed is a policy of engagement with the Libyan government and more, not less, interaction with all political groups and civil society organizations—without the exclusion of any current or trend.

To be sure, the U.S. and Libya do not see eye-to-eye on many issues. However, the positive and critical American support for the Libyan revolution helped to build a reserve of goodwill towards the U.S. people and government, as proven by the reaction of the Benghazi public against the attack on the American Consulate. It would be a pity if the Obama administration gave up on Libya at this critical moment.



“*American diplomacy should ensure the prioritization of efforts to reform the government’s structure.*”

Like other Arab nations, Morocco was affected by the positive winds of the Arab Spring, but the reforms witnessed in the country have had only a minimal effect upon its society and the function of state power. The Obama administration’s continued support for democratic reform for the next four years—in accordance with established egalitarian relations between the states—would facilitate Morocco’s development and potential to benefit from the dynamics triggered by the Arab Spring. The following domains are key areas in which American diplomacy and influence can have a positive effect:

- The release of all prisoners of conscience in Morocco.
- The defense of freedom of the press, freedom of association, and right to protest.
- The fight against rampant corruption present at the highest levels of the state. This corruption seriously hinders Morocco’s economic development, as the gains of development are not equally shared among all ranks of society, constituting a major handicap to the democratization process.
- The support and empowerment of modernization efforts in the government. Given that the Moroccan state is composed of two tiers—the *Makhzen*, an archaic, authoritarian, and conservative structure that is in its essence entirely un-democratic; and a modern organization comprising electoral institutions, the administration, and government—American diplomacy should ensure the prioritization of efforts to reform the government’s structure.

A final point: The Obama administration cannot be considered credible and accomplish these objectives unless it closes the Guantanamo Bay prison, where grave violations of human rights are committed, and address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a more just, balanced manner, in accordance with international law.



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“The democratic aspirations of Egyptians must be respected; however, a democracy must also protect its minorities and their freedoms...”

President Obama must reassess his administration’s relations with rising Islamist powers in the region. That they were elected democratically is not in dispute; however, many of these Islamist parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, are politically exclusive and have cracked down on media freedoms, in some cases to a degree even exceeding the level of repression under the Mubarak regime. Secularists, leftists, liberals, and minorities feel threatened and intimidated. So far, not only has the Obama administration been publicly silent on these issues, but it has apparently also failed to raise these concerns sufficiently in its many private meetings with the Islamists.

The Muslim Brotherhood has started a project to Islamicize various sectors of the Egyptian society beginning with the media, cabinet, trade unions, governors, and judiciary, with their eyes set on military and police forces next. While doing so, they have become adept at shifting their rhetoric with respect to their audience. In English, their statements are full of assurances largely targeted at the international community; in Arabic, their rhetoric is exclusionary and threatening. Late last year, a controversial constitution was passed that allows military trials for civilians as well as restriction of freedom of speech in numerous articles; the abolition of both powers were demands of the non-Islamists who initiated the Egyptian revolution. If there is no repercussion for such behaviors, these methods could serve as a blueprint for other rising Islamist forces in the region to follow.

The democratic aspirations of Egyptians must be respected; however, a democracy must also protect its minorities and their freedoms—something we have yet to see under Egypt’s Islamist government. The United States, as a significant financial backer of the Egyptian government, must remind Egypt’s leaders that financial aid is not unconditional and that respecting the rights of those with whom they disagree is a necessity.



“Take decisive steps to protect as many Syrian civilians on the ground as possible.”

The single most important policy shift the Obama administration must make in its second term is to stop the killing in Syria. It must gain the support both of its NATO allies and of a majority of the members of the Arab League for a collective military operation to destroy Bashar al-Assad’s Air Force and to tip the war decisively in favor of the opposition forces as quickly as possible, before tens of thousands more Syrians die of bullets, bombs, hunger, and cold.

Over the past 18 months, Bashar al-Assad has killed 60,000 of his own people with complete impunity from the international community, making a mockery of U.S. power and values and transforming Syria into a boiling caldron of ethnic conflict and radical Islamic extremism in the heart of the Middle East. In addition to de-stabilizing Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan, the ongoing Syrian conflict has also stopped a region-wide revolution for democracy and freedom in its tracks, sending a clear message that if a regime is willing to be ruthless enough, the U.S. will not back up its fine words of support for Arab peoples with deeds.

The U.S. and many of its allies have already recognized the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. The next step is to support that coalition by taking decisive steps to protect as many Syrian civilians on the ground as possible. In addition to massive humanitarian assistance, we must make clear that military action is *on* the table. Only then will Assad’s supporters conclude that support for a transitional government is a better way out than clinging to an Alawite mini-state. Only then will the U.S. have any real leverage in brokering a peace settlement. And only then will the U.S. have any hope of being on the right side of history in the Middle East.



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“Embrace the fact that transitions to democracy are not just procedural, but rather intensely political processes.”

The fundamental insight in President Obama’s embrace of the Arab Awakening was that the region’s autocracies have revealed themselves as fundamentally unstable in an era when citizens were demanding dignity, freedom, and accountable governance. In his second term, President Obama must hold to this insight and recall that while democratic change is inherently uncertain and unsteady, it is also the necessary path to regional stability—a prerequisite for the achievement of all other American interests in the region. Security cooperation and economic assistance cannot alone stabilize countries suffering from the unchecked exercise of power, a lack of political dialogue and compromise, weak political parties and institutions, and/or arbitrary laws. To advance stability and reliable partnerships, the United States must be diligent both in criticizing these flaws where they emerge in transitional governments and in working to advance the realization of democratic rights and values region-wide.

Second, the administration must embrace the fact that transitions to democracy are not just procedural, but rather intensely political processes. The United States has much advice and support to offer emerging democracies in the Arab world, as well as keen interests at stake in their success. The inevitable fact is that, in a transitional environment, any American engagement or assistance is likely to be viewed as politically tinged. This is not cause to be reticent about engagement—rather, it is reason to engage broadly, on the basis of clear principles, and with a clear view of what American interests are in that country and the choices its people are making.

Finally, President Obama and his team should continue to engage the American people about what is at stake for our country in the Arab world’s dramatic upheavals and why it’s worthwhile for Americans to invest in the advancement of human freedom and dignity not only at home, but globally.

