

THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST:

THE NEW POLITICAL LANDSCAPE



SUMMARY OF A ROUNDTABLE
(Including Policy Recommendations)

NEW YORK CITY
MAY 24, 2011

Our Mission

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) was founded in 1974 by Professor Hans J. Morgenthau and others. It is a nonprofit activist organization dedicated to the resolution of conflicts that threaten U.S. interests. Toward that end, the NCAFP identifies, articulates, and helps advance American foreign policy interests from a nonpartisan perspective within the framework of political realism.

American foreign policy interests include:

- preserving and strengthening national security;
- supporting countries committed to the values and the practice of political, religious, and cultural pluralism;
- improving U.S. relations with the developed and developing worlds;
- advancing human rights;
- encouraging realistic arms control agreements;
- curbing the proliferation of nuclear and other unconventional weapons;
- promoting an open and global economy.

An important part of the activity of the NCAFP is Track I½ and Track II diplomacy. Such closed-door and off-the-record endeavors provide unique opportunities for senior U.S. and foreign officials, think-tank experts, and scholars to engage in discussions designed to defuse conflict, build confidence, and resolve problems.

Believing that an informed public is vital to a democratic society, the National Committee offers educational programs that address security challenges facing the United States and publishes a variety of publications, including its bimonthly journal, *American Foreign Policy Interests*, that present keen analyses of all aspects of American foreign policy.



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Dear Reader,

The Arab world is in tumult, and no one knows when and how it will end. The suddenness with which the Arab Spring erupted in Tunisia in December 2009 and rapidly spread to much of the Greater Middle East came as a surprise.

As we all remember, the turmoil was sparked by Mohamed Bouazizi setting himself on fire after he was banned from selling fruit to earn a living. This self-immolation ignited the youth-driven Arab Spring that demanded the termination of dictatorial rule, the right to jobs, education, social security, and greater freedoms. With variations, the revolutionaries in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, the uprisings in Syria and Yemen by considerable segments of the population, and the demand for change in much of the region in general all aimed at bringing about governments that are transparent and responsive to the needs of the people.

But the youth-led and leaderless revolution created vacuums that soon brought to the fore long-suppressed and well-organized radical Islamist movements. In Egypt, for example, they are inserting themselves into the Arab Spring and exploiting the power void in the hope of hijacking the revolution and eventually establishing a government based largely on conservative and even radical theological tenets. As radical Islamists are bitter foes of everything the free world stands for, they constitute a potential threat to the region and the world and must be fought by supporting the liberal democratic forces struggling to achieve human dignity for all.

However pernicious radicals are, their current geopolitical threat does not constitute an immediate peril to the world at large. This cannot be said for non-Arab Iran. Although its own hegemonic quest has been checked by the Arab Spring and by Turkey's own hegemonic ambitions, the country's quest for nuclear weapons with all that that implies – especially Iran fulfilling its threat to wipe Israel off the map of the earth and of becoming a nuclear proliferator – is an immediate and existential threat to the region and much of the world.

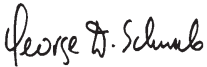
Given the leadership of Iran's theocratic government and the support it enjoys from the army and the Revolutionary Guards, it is in the security interests of the United States and much of the world to stop the irresponsible Iranian leadership from committing its

people to a course of action that can bring destruction to Iran and cause havoc in the region and beyond.

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) thanks the presenters and other participants as well. Their informed and provocative remarks sparked almost instantaneous and continuous debate.

The NCAFP is especially grateful to Mutual of America, the Bialkin Family Foundation, the Eugenie Fromer Endowment, Mrs. Sheila Johnson Robbins, Nina Rosenwald, and the George D. Schwab Family Fund for providing support for the 2011 Middle East Roundtable.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "George D. Schwab".

George Schwab
President

THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST: The New Political Landscape

I. The Middle East in Turmoil

The first presenter observed that the so-called Arab Spring is only a beginning, and no one really knows how long it will last nor the direction it will take. Whereas we in the West look at the upheaval through the prism of democracy, the indigenous people have no such frame of reference. The exception may, perhaps, be Tunisia, because of its long association with France. The concept of democracy, the speaker noted, has to be understood, taught, and nurtured and this usually takes time. The countries in Europe that had obtained their freedoms following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the speaker noted, had at least a frame of reference for democracy, President Wilson's Fourteen Points, in addition to democratic European neighbors that readily extended their hand to the countries that had recently won their freedoms.

The presenter characterized Israel, a genuine democracy, as a "house of glass in a neighborhood that likes to throw rocks at it." In short, this island of tranquility in a stormy sea is not immune to what is happening. Because of changes taking place in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, Israel is left with no choice but to be concerned first and foremost with security.

This question brings to the fore the issue of borders that, in fact, are not borders but armistice lines that were drawn in 1949 following the defeat of the invading Arab armies by Israel in the wake of its establishment as a sovereign state in 1948. To the credit of Palestinians and Arabs, the presenter noted, they have succeeded in articulating a now widely accepted narrative that holds that these armistice lines were turned into borders; in addition, the Palestinians and Arabs have successfully characterized the 1967 invasion and occupation of the West Bank by Israel as a violation of the sovereign state of Palestine when, in fact, no such state has ever existed. The ignorance of UN diplomats of facts, for example, has resulted in the Palestinian issue hijacking the UN and holding Israel to a double standard. Even worse, the UN has largely been politicized by the Palestinian issue, which is, for example, often inserted into discussions where it is, in fact, totally out of context. Hence, on the multilateral level, Israel at the UN is a convenient scapegoat, whereas in bilateral relations Israel fares well.

The first question asked by a participant following the presentation was whether Arabs are succeeding in driving a wedge between the U.S. and Israel? The presenter replied that this was not the case, notwithstanding the fact that “there always have been differences” and frank exchanges of views are at times overblown by the media. Fundamentally, the bond between the two countries are unshakeable, according to the speaker, who added that Prime Minister Netanyahu had been invited to address Congress for a second time -- something unprecedented. The support for Israel is bipartisan and should remain so. Were Israel to become enmeshed in a fight between Republicans and Democrats, with the result of becoming a partisan issue, neither country would be served, according to the speaker.

Another participant asked how the so-called Arab Spring is being financed? The presenter pled ignorance but assumed that some moneys may be coming from Iran and that other interests are probably at play as well. The second question was how could Israel’s story be better communicated? The presenter replied that there is no quick fix for Israel’s public relations. The problem is that Israel has lost the initiative and it is always “better to lead than be led.” Another participant noted that during the Cold War the United States carried its message by establishing hundreds of information centers all over the world and by the Voice of America. Why could not Israel do likewise if it felt misunderstood? The presenter replied that Israel radio, for example, has a very successful program that is beamed to Iran, with proof of its success being the large Iranian call-through to the Israeli station. Another presenter noted that Israel also has a TV station that broadcasts programs in English, French, and German that are becoming very popular in the Middle East and in Europe.

Another participant wanted to know when would Israel finally raise the question of the actual facts about how Palestine was split with the eastern part becoming Transjordan and subsequently Jordan, on the one hand, and the expulsion of Jews from Arab countries, on the other. On the first part of the question, the presenter noted that the issue has not been raised since the 1970s and is not in the cards to be raised at this time for reasons of Realpolitik.

II. The Arab Spring: “Something New Is Happening”

Before focusing on Syria, the next presenter made some comments on the so-called Arab Spring. According to the speaker, it is The Arab Spring and not the so-called Arab Spring. What is happening

is something very new: It is about the future of the new generation, about reforms, jobs, social security, and the right to an education. In short, it is about everything a human being needs.

Amazing to watch are the people challenging Qaddafi who, for more than 40 years, endeavored to break their backs. Yet, these very people “came out and surprised us . . . in a wonderful way.” The “wonderful people of Yemen” who revolted against the leader with daggers and guns did not use these weapons against one another. “This is new and this is wonderful.” The Arab Spring is happening in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria. Qaddafi will be forced out -- as will Ali Abdullah Saleh and Bashar al-Assad.

Although little is mentioned in this upheaval about the Palestinian issue, we should not be mistaken about this “essential issue in the lives of Arabs.” They are proud of the fact that an Arab peace initiative is on the table that proposes peace with Israel provided that Israel ends its 1967 occupation with land swaps -- terms that everybody is familiar with.

Unfortunately, the presenter noted that there is “no official Israeli peace initiative” but only an “unofficial peace initiative” launched by “very wonderful Israelis” that includes “the son of the late Yitzhak Rabin.” What some people did not realize or acknowledge is that they are stuck in the past and fail to see that “something new is happening.” They are, therefore, unable or unwilling “to cross the threshold into a new relationship.” It is far more interesting to read the Israeli press on the Palestinian issue than the Arab press. Regrettable and even counter-productive, according to the speaker, is that much of the discussion going on in Israel is stifled in the United States.

In regard to Syria, the presenter noted that President Assad had three choices to avoid catastrophe: (1) to implement meaningful reforms, (2) to promise reforms, and (3) to do nothing. Assad combined (2) with (3). The speaker attributed the failure to implement reforms to the mind-set of “those who have grown accustomed to being in power and have been raised around it.” The aim, in other words, is to “stay in power with authoritarian [rule] under any circumstance.”

Notwithstanding the fact that Assad’s regime is “damaged, fractured, and destabilized,” he believes that he will prevail because of “regional and international powerlessness.” Regionally, he feels assured by the support of Iran and Lebanon and internationally by the West’s reluctance to use force, believing that it is better to deal with “the devil we know” rather than with extremist Muslims like the Salafists.

The president also believes that the issue will not reach the Security Council -- with all that that implies.

He is fortified in this belief by the fact that China and Russia, both permanent members of the Security Council, as well as Lebanon, the only Arab non-permanent member of the Security Council, are opposed to bringing the issue before the Security Council because they consider the upheaval to be a regional problem to be solved largely internally. This view is also shared by India. Assad is wagering that the League of Arab States and the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) will come to a similar conclusion.

However one looks at the situation, sooner or later “the United States, Europe, and other countries in the world will not remain silent” in the face of the outrages taking place in the country. NGOs like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch demand the “prosecution of those who violate human rights laws.”

Events in the region have isolated Syria and are also having geopolitical implications. The presenter noted that the disappearance of the Assad regime would, among other things, weaken Iranian influence because the pipeline of Iranian supplies to Hezbollah in Lebanon would be blocked. Perhaps this would also remove from the Iranian regime the Palestinian card that it uses for the purpose of outbidding the Arabs. In short, there is no question that the Arab Spring has implications for Iran’s regional ambitions.

Iranian Influence, Regional Response

Ever fearful of Iran, the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council do not appear to be eager to provide “the regime in Damascus the cover of protection.” There is also no question that Turkey is faced by a serious dilemma because it finds itself “trapped between . . . friendships with unpopular Arab and Iranian leaders and the public in those countries” demanding material reforms. That Turkey will have to reformulate its foreign policies in the region is beyond doubt. Had the Arab Spring not come to Syria and had Mubarak’s Egypt still been intact, for example, it is doubtful that Turkey would have advised Hamas “to take the path of reconciliation with Fatah and work with the Palestinian authority toward a new regional and international strategy.” This “advice would not have been welcomed by Hamas had the [the upheaval] not come to Syria and shown both Hamas and Turkey that leadership was beginning to slip away from Damascus.”

A participant asked two questions: (1) On the issue of double standards, why did President Obama omit Saudi Arabia, and

(2) What are the geopolitical and geo-strategic issues involved in the relations between Iran, Syria and Turkey? Answering the first question, the presenter noted that President Obama focused on countries where the Arab Spring had erupted. To date, the Arab Spring has not affected Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. But President Obama gave an indirect warning to Saudi Arabia in his comments made to America's ally Bahrain, where a Sunni minority rules over a Shiite majority. President Obama urged the leaders of Bahrain to address the legitimate rights of the people --- clearly meaning the Shiites. The speaker did not believe that unrest in Saudi Arabia would start in the Shiite region, rather, if unrest ever did erupt, it would be among the terribly impoverished masses. In answering the second question, the presenter noted that there is no love lost between the Sunni leaders of non-Arab Turkey and the non-Arab leaders of Shiite Iran. Both are competitors in the region, with Iran's leaders terribly frightened by the Arab Spring and the effect it has had on Iran. Stated succinctly, the unrest in Syria has weakened Iran's position in the region materially and, were Assad to be ousted, this would impact Hezbollah in Lebanon --- which is, as everyone knows, an armed entity that takes its orders primarily from Iran and secondarily from Syria. An Assad defeat would remove the safe passage of arms and ammunition to Hezbollah from Iran. What would this mean for Hezbollah? Without safe passage from Iran would Hezbollah become a legitimate force in Lebanon's politics? Or, if Iran were to order Hezbollah to start a conflict with Israel, then the price will be paid by Lebanon. What would further destabilize the region is an Iran unscathed by what is happening in the region.

Arab Peace Initiative, Refugee Return

One participant questioned the presenter's point of equating the 1967 armistice lines with borders. This is not only confusing but bedevils the Israel-Arab negotiations, according to the participant. The presenter noted that it is irrelevant whether we call armistice lines borders or vice versa. We all know what is meant, namely, that the 1967 lines constitute the basis of negotiations. It is also understood that this will include territorial swaps as President Obama and his predecessors have said time and again. The sticking point is that neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians have defined the borders. But because Bibi is not interested in a two-state solution, he is not about to articulate a proposal --- which is a shame. This point was challenged by another participant, who noted that Netanyahu has often stated that he would recognize a two-state solution provided that two conditions are met: (1) that the West Bank will be demilitarized, and (2) with few exceptions, that there cannot be a mass return of refugees. The participant then posed the following

question: Would the Arab world accept an Israeli state that is Jewish?

The presenter urged that we all read the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002: This was adopted at an Arab summit that clearly stipulates that Israel be recognized as a state within the 1967 lines --- with all that that implied --- and that questions pertaining to demilitarization (which is not mentioned in the Arab Peace Initiative) and the refugee issue would be left for the negotiators to settle. Another presenter remarked that the refugee issue is artificial insofar as both Hamas and Fatah insist that all refugees have the right of return. As the status of refugees is recognized by international law and Israel, as a member of the UN, abides by international law --- which accords individuals and families a right to return provided they use the traditional consular route of application. But, because both Fatah and Hamas are intransigent on this issue, they are, in effect, blocking peace. Moreover, Palestinians are dissuaded from applying to return to Israel as this would constitute a recognition of Israel as a sovereign state. There are no legal provisions that require countries to open their doors to mass influxes of refugees.

Another participant asked the presenter to identify U.S. interests in the countries in which the Arab Spring erupted. The speaker noted that President Obama had made very clear that the U.S. interest is to partner with the people --- with the wave of the future. Unfortunately, because the president did not immediately side with the people everywhere, he left himself open to the charge of employing a double standard as, for example, in the case with Syria. Speaking of Egypt, the presenter disagreed with the observation of the participant that the people of the street were totally irrelevant in the overthrow of Mubarak, but did agree with the participant that, to an extent, it was an army coup, different in kind from those in the past in which the masses played no role. In the case of Tunisia, the speaker pointed out that Bourguiba did introduce a democratic process and that women have more rights in Tunisia than in any other Arab country. It will be the women, according to the presenter, who will prevent Islamists from coming to power as women would be the losers. The speaker noted that it is vital for the Arab Spring to succeed in Egypt and Tunisia. Were it to fail, nobody knows what unpredictable forces will prevail. The presenter agreed with the participant who focused on the oil of Libya. But the oil will go to Europe and not the United States as we do not rely on Libyan oil. Nevertheless, it is important to stay involved in the country not only because of its geography but because, at the end of the day, it will be remembered that the United States also played a role in ridding the country of Qaddafi. The presenter continued by noting that the U.S. interest in Syria is to side with the people and not give Assad the

chance to remain in power as this would embolden him to strengthen his ties with Iran and Hezbollah. Regrettable, according to the presenter, is the fact that the U.S. came late to the chorus condemning Assad, thus leaving us open to the charge of following a policy of double standards. Yemen is a tricky situation because of the presence of al Qaeda and similar groups. But this is no reason for giving Saleh a long leash.

III. Sparking the Arab Spring

Following this presenter, the luncheon speaker began by providing a tour de horizon of factors that sparked the Arab revolution or the Arab Spring. Observing that the upheaval differed from country to country, the presenter provided elements that can generally be found in the countries in question, namely, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. The list includes the “population explosion,” “contact with the outside world,” the “millions of Arabs [who live] in Europe and come and go to their native countries and in this way they create a bridge between Europe and North Africa,” the disappearance of the “monopoly of information that despotic regimes used,” “change in the orientation of the military” who are no longer Soviet-trained but “trained in the West, including the United States” with all that that implies, namely, the movement away from a Soviet style of authoritarianism to a “democratic style of government” and the Bush administration’s “Freedom Agenda” in the wake of 9/11.

The “Freedom Agenda,” according to the speaker, “aimed at democratizing the Arab world” on the assumption that terrorism is born and bred in despotic regimes, and that these dictatorial regimes are like swamps where the mosquitoes of terror breed. So, it is important to drain these swamps.” In other words, the earlier U.S. policy based on stability had to give way to promoting democracy, which resulted in the explosion of NGOs in these countries. The U.S., for example, opened an office in Cairo and one in Dubai with a staff of more than two hundred. More than four hundred organizations dealing with the “environment, youth, cultural heritage” and so forth opened in Cairo thus “capturing some of the political space from the government.” When the explosion finally came, it was “the fruit of over a decade of work by thousands of people to loosen the hold of the regime.”

Drawing up a balance sheet of winners and losers in the Arab Spring, the speaker noted that the biggest winners will be the Arab people. Despite the fact that the U.S. has oscillated between supporting and failing to support the transition, the U.S. might support countries

with whose people it could partner “rather than just dealing with a family or an individual.” This would accord with the national security interests of the U.S. rather than looking at these countries through the prism of oil. As is well known, the U.S. dependence on Middle East oil has been declining for years. With the development of modern economies and popular government systems, European countries would be spared the so-called Arab invasion of which they are so frightened.

Among the losers would be Russia, which is pursuing opportunistic policies, as well as China “which is copying European nineteenth-century colonial scenario.” Iran, too, will be a loser. “Having dreamt of exporting their revolution for the past thirty-one years, they have ended with the miserable Hezbollah in Lebanon And when Arab countries become an open market for ideas, [Iran] offers Khomeini and nobody wants him.” Radical Islamist groups would also be losers. Al Qaeda, according to the presenter, “is just a label . . . because they showed that despite all the killings, despite all the raids they did against New York, London, Madrid, Paris . . . they haven’t managed to change anything.” Confronted by a “bazaar of political ideas,” even the more moderate Islamist groups “would have to compete in the market place of ideas where their chances of success are questionable.”

Potential Tinderboxes

The speaker then turned to problem areas and noted that Yemen is a “very dicey society” that could become a failed state unless a “very urgent rescue package” is forthcoming. Bahrain, too, is a problem. Because President Obama mentioned in his speech the conflict between the Sunni government and the Shiia majority, he succeeded in turning it “into an open confrontation.” Were the Saudi’s to back down from supporting the Sunni minority, it would be viewed as “Obama told them to back down.” Although Jordan appears calm on the surface, unrest is “simmering underneath.” Were Jordan to collapse, this will have an impact on the Palestinian issue (which, in the overall Arab Spring and in general, “is a very minor issue”), on Israel, and on “the whole heartland of the Middle East.”

Mention has already been made of Iran as a loser, but the speaker now added that Iran’s Islamic revolution “no longer sells in Iran,” and that Ahmadinejad is endeavoring to replace it “with a nationalistic discourse.” To move toward achieving his goal of ridding Iran of the immensely wealthy mullahs who control some the country’s major businesses that Ahmadinejad would like to channel at least a part “to the revolutionary guards so that he has the military on his side.” The conflict between him and the mullahs may very well weaken the

regime and may revitalize the protest movement in 2012 --- an election year. Turkey, too, will be affected by the Arab Spring because “the AKP’s [Justice and Development Party] historic run is drawing to an end.” The AKP may still win the next election, according to the speaker, “but their time has passed and they have to be pictured out of the situation.”

A lively question-and-answer period followed the presentation. One participant asked about the political motives of radical Islamists, mullahs and al Qaeda regarding the restoration of the Caliphate. The presenter noted that the revival of the Caliphate is the policy of only one party, the Islamic Liberation Party --- which is very strong in Britain but not in the Muslim world. The presenter also noted that the Islamist forces in the Muslim world “are as surprised by what is happening as everybody else. They don’t know what to do.”

Another participant noted that because the U.S. has lost leverage in the Middle East from the perspective of hard power, what soft powers could the U.S. employ to obtain desired ends? Most important, according to the presenter, is for the U.S. to be faithful to its own values. The presenter then posed the following question: “What is the interest of the U.S. in keeping a despot in power?” Answer: “Nothing, really.” Speak about your values. If you are a “democratic country and you believe in human rights and so on, speak about it.”

In response to a question by a participant about Western intervention in order to overcome violations of human rights in Middle Eastern countries, the presenter noted that when an upheaval is internationalized and constitutes a threat to regional peace, military intervention would require UN approval. In the case of Assad’s Syria (where people are killed every day), the matter needs to be brought to the attention of the Security Council. China and Russia would veto resolutions calling for military intervention and thereby exposing countries that encourage mass murder.

Another participant asked for an explanation of the reason for the silence on the part of the U.S. and the West about what is going on in Iran. The presenter noted that at this moment there is inadequate information about the forthcoming parliamentary elections. Instead, the speaker noted that Iran has invested much in its clients in Iraq, especially in the Sadrist movement. Despite Iranian support, the Sadrists won only 11 percent of the vote. Furthermore, the Iraqi Prime Minister Malaki is a nationalist who is “opposed to Iranian domination . . . and is interested to make Iraq the leader of the new block of Arab democratic countries.” In short, even though “90

percent of Iraqis live within sixty miles of the Iranian border” and Iraq obtains much of its water from Iran and whose access to the sea is through Iran, Iran’s “massive investment in Iraq has ended up with very little.”

Another question asked by a participant addresses who will be the leaders in the future? The speaker noted that “the leadership will come from civil society” that has reconquered it from the government. In contrast to the pre-coup d’état Egypt, that country now has 66 parties.

Another participant observed that the King of Jordan was partly educated in Britain, the President of Syria in London, Abbas in Moscow, and Egyptian intellectuals mostly at the Sorbonne. In view of this, the question asked was on the role that education plays in what is happening now? “Education on its own does not determine anything” according to the presenter. “You could be educated at [the Sorbonne] and be a despot.” “Catherine the Great was a pupil of Voltaire and Diderot . . . and you could still be a despot.” We are now speaking of a generation that is “mostly open to the West, rather than to the East.”

A question asked by another participant dealt with Iran potentially becoming a nuclear power and North Korea already being one, what incentive would there be for Iran and North Korea to forsake weapons of mass destruction in view of the fact that Libya had done so for which it was hailed and is now being bombed by NATO? The speaker replied by noting that “if you do not have nuclear weapons, nobody [will] attack you with nuclear weapons.” Any nuclear attack against a non-nuclear nation would be considered a “crime against humanity.” In the case of Iran, for example, the country cannot be attacked with nuclear weapons as long as it is not in the possession of such weapons. “Therefore,” according to the speaker, “it is in the interest of Iran to keep any possible confrontations within the contours of a conventional war rather than a nuclear war.” Knowing full well that the United States could demolish Iran with nuclear weapons, but would lose a non-nuclear military intervention, it follows, according to the speaker, that “Iran has absolutely no interest to become a nuclear power because Qaddafi is being bombed.”

IV. Yemen: “History’s Events Converge”

The next and final speaker focused attention on Yemen. Contrasting Yemen’s rich history with the chaotic situation the country finds itself in now, the speaker noted that the country was a “place where history’s major events often converged. Strategically

situated on the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula where the Indian Ocean meets the Red Sea, it thrived on the incense trade some three thousand years ago, and was hailed as the proverbial land of milk and honey. The Romans called it Arabia Felix, or Happy Arabia, and it was here that the Queen of Sheba ruled, according to legend.” In contrast, Yemen today is “the poorest Arab state . . . with deep-rooted problems such as grave poverty, high illiteracy, rampant corruption, human rights abuses, a lack of democratic reforms, a dysfunctional judiciary system . . . a war in the North, a secessionist movement in the South, and it is anticipated to run out of water and oil -- oil being its main source of income.” Compounding these problems are “decades of civil war, tribal conflicts, terrorism, and the conservative school of Salafi Islam.”

The aforementioned notwithstanding, the speaker noted in the question-and-answer period that prior to the Arab Spring the country was one of the most open ones in the region and enjoyed comparatively greater press freedom with some fifty magazines and newspapers, although it was still taboo to criticize the president. Stated succinctly, despite the troubles, Yemenis had hoped that in the final analysis the “Yemeni tradition of mediation and dialogue” will prevail. But this was not to be largely because of Saleh’s politics of running hot and cold on the issue of a peaceful transition “to a more democratic system.” This, after ruling the country for more than thirty years.

That Yemen should be of great interest to the United States should not be surprising. It is the home base of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Al Qaeda was formed in “2009 with a merger of branches of the terrorist group in Saudi Arabia and Yemen and claimed responsibility for the 2010 plot to send explosive parcels to the United States, after trying to bomb a U.S.-bound plane in 2009.” It is believed to have some three hundred active members, and the movement “calls for many small attacks, which are less expensive and more difficult to detect yet still very harmful” the speaker said, citing security analysts. By focusing on the U.S., al Qaeda believes that they “manage to make America take further costly measures to increase its security.”

Another thorn in the side of the U.S. is the American-born Anwar al-Awlaki (who has since been killed). His command of the English language “allows him to reach a wide Internet audience and spur home-grown terrorism in America.” Hence, fighting al Qaeda, especially in Yemen, is a special focus of the U.S. military.

Following the presentation, a participant asked: “Assuming Saleh retires, what do you get afterwards?” The speaker said that it was still unclear if Saleh would step down and that there was risk of more violence if he did not. “Most people I speak to seem to anticipate civil war.” There is a consensus by some that most of the fighting will take place in Sana between two families, the Saleh family against General Mohsen’s family. It should be noted that Saleh and Mohsen, the former head of the army, had once been close friends.

Another participant asked how well entrenched is Sharia law in Yemen? According to the speaker, you basically have three laws in Yemen that are parallel: the constitution, Sharia law, and tribal law. Sharia law, according to a former presenter, “is a kind of *à la carte*.” If, for example, an issue is brought up under Sharia or tribal law and is settled accordingly, the government does not interfere with the decision. But if you take an issue “to a government court, then the Yemeni constitution applies, and the rules that apply are there.”

Another participant asked if Yemen were to split in two, would it make any difference as far as American foreign policy is concerned? This is very difficult to discern, according to the speaker. Much will depend what happens in the south. The best course of action for the U.S. would be to put pressure on Saleh to sign the initiative. Should he refuse, the matter should be brought to the Security Council. Another outcome would be civil war.

Another participant asked about the effectiveness of al Qaeda in Yemen. In addition to what the speaker had already noted in the presentation, al Qaeda’s strength is considerably enhanced by being able to operate in English. Another presenter noted in this context that “Major Hasan, who killed eleven Americans, was recruited by Awlaki in Yemen.”

Is Yemen really running out of water was another question. “Yes.” “Sana is going to suffer a huge shortage of water by 2015.” In part, the shortage is attributable to the very widespread addiction to chewing khat. This narcotic leaf soaks up water and for a “desert country this is really bad news.”

The issue of elections was also brought up. The participant noted that in the West we have a tendency to “confuse elections with democracy.” First, institutions of democracy must be put in place --- to be followed by elections. Otherwise we can end up with the results like those obtained by Hamas in Gaza. In the instance of Yemen, the presenter reiterated the comments made earlier that the country had

a well established civil society and had enjoyed relatively free elections in the last 20 years. Another speaker noted that once people begin to vote, they get accustomed to it and like it. Even though Iraq is no democracy and institutions of democracy do not yet exist, “all Iraqis [agree] on one thing: that governments can be changed only through elections.”

The last question asked was what caused the presenter to focus on Yemen. In addition to having seen pictures of Sana and Shibam at age 10, the speaker later on worked as an “energy reporter for Reuters in London” where the presenter was “introduced to a Yemeni person who said ‘you must come to Yemen.’” As a junior reporter, the chances of doing so were slim. “What would it take for you to come?” the Yemeni asked. The presenter said: “I would need a personal invitation from the president to get guarantees to interview the president and prime minister, and also that you understand that I might not necessarily write about your lovely tourism in Yemen, but [will write] whatever my boss and I would like to write. . . . And then I got it.”



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In the annals of history the Arab Spring will be remembered as one of the great surprises of the first decade of the 21st century. No one knows when the upheaval will end and what the end result will be – an Arab Summer, an Arab Winter, or remain where it now is. Foreign policy, as a rule, is conducted between authorities of legally and stably constituted entities of sovereign states; in the absence of such, relations become dubious and their sustainability uncertain. The United States finds itself in this predicament vis-à-vis countries immediately affected by the Arab Spring.

Though the Arab Spring does not now constitute an existential threat to the United States, the country's security interests dictate that the U.S. cannot afford to stand by and possibly see radical Islamic forces fill the vacuum that the uprising is engendering. Because the leverage of the U.S. is limited, we can at most now unequivocally support the democratic elements that ignited the Arab Spring. Stated succinctly, the United States, jointly with like-minded countries, should encourage the establishment of a multitude of humanitarian NGOs -- ranging from health clinics to educational institutions for children and women. In addition, the U.S. should also broaden its educational and cultural exchange programs. The U.S. must also expand and deepen its efforts to project and inculcate our values that are at the foundation of our country.

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy has for years noted the existential threat that non-Arab Iran would potentially pose to the region and to much of the world, including the United States. That threat is more ominous now as Iran's nuclear weapons program is rapidly progressing -- with all that that implies, including the country becoming a nuclear proliferator. Given the obstinate behavior of the Iranian government on the nuclear issue, the military option must not be removed from the U.S. security equation. In the meantime sanctions need to be materially broadened and tightened to include Iran's Central Bank and Iranian assets frozen abroad. Cyber tools, too, need to be employed to thwart Iran's nuclear ambitions, and it also is in the U.S. interest to overtly and covertly support the forces of democracy.



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