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## USA and Revolutions in the Arab World

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The recent protests in West Asia that started in Tunisia and now encompass the entire Arab world will have an impact on the regional balance of power equations. West Asia's geographic location and its weight in the world energy market bestow on it an undeniable centrality that has also resulted in intensive interaction with external powers.<sup>1</sup> Since it is at the heart of global energy security resources, West Asia has witnessed intense great-power competition that has had an impact on the regional security and political architecture of this region.<sup>2</sup> The war in Iraq and Iran's nuclear programme have further reinforced concerns about US policies in West Asia. Since the US has been a major player in West Asia and North Africa since the end of World War II, this paper seeks to examine, through a country-by-country analysis:

- US policies in the region
- The reaction of the US to the current wave of protests
- The larger implications of the pro-democratization movements for the region and
- What steps the US can take to deal with the recent developments

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<sup>1</sup> Harinder Sekhon, 'Security Scenario in West Asia: Implications for India', in Dilip Lahiri (ed.), *Emerging Security Concerns in West Asia*, (New Delhi: Macmillan, 2009), p.170.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

## ***Israel***

Support for Israel's survival and security has been a cornerstone of US West Asia policy. US-Israel ties are strengthened by their shared political values, historical and cultural ties as also by the presence of a substantial Jewish population in the US. Israel has also been a major recipient of US economic and military aid. Truman supported the UN plan of 1947 for partitioning Palestine between the Arabs and the Jews and the US became the first state to recognize Israel when it declared independence on 14 May 1948. He also supported membership for Israel in the UN in 1949. After 1967, the US became Israel's main supplier of arms because of a French embargo on arms to Israel. During the Reagan Administration, US support for Israel increased and Reagan even supported Israeli settlements in the West Bank and sold modern weapons to Israel, making it one of the US' most important allies. The US has also been involved in efforts to solve the Arab-Israeli crisis. After the Gulf War, peace talks were held between the Arabs and the Israelis in October 1991 in Madrid. This resulted in a Declaration of Principles between them. President Clinton also tried to broker peace in the Middle East through peace talks between the PLO and Israel. This led to a peace treaty between Yasir Arafat and Ytzak Rabin which came to be known as the Oslo Accords of 1993. But peace did not last for long because of suicide bombings in Israel and the Israeli retaliation. In July 1994, the US brokered the Washington Declaration (a nonbelligerency treaty) between Israel and Jordan, culminating in a peace treaty between the two countries in October 1994. After 9/11, as Bush had to cobble together a coalition when he decided to attack Afghanistan, throughout the bombing of Afghanistan, he adopted a neutral line regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict and for the first time, an American President and his Secretary of State openly declared support for a Palestinian state. The war against terror brought Washington and Jerusalem closer together as they had shared interests in combating terror. Under Obama, relations have become fractious because of Israel's refusal to stop building settlements in West Bank and East Jerusalem despite Washington's demand to do so.

## ***Saudi Arabia***

Saudi Arabia is a major exporter of oil to the US. During World War II, as the importance of Saudi oil grew and the extent of its reserves became known, Roosevelt

declared that the defence of Saudi Arabia was vital to the defence of the US.<sup>3</sup> Relations between Saudi Arabia and the US cemented into an alliance in 1945 when the Arab country agreed to provide oil and gas to the US in return for the US providing it security. The US-Saudi alliance strengthened when Truman assured the Saudis that Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity and political independence was a key objective of US policy. This culminated in the mutual defence assistance agreement in 1951 under which the US provided arms and training to the Saudis and helped build military installations in the country. The agreement also enabled the US to create a permanent United States Military Training Mission in the country.<sup>4</sup> As both countries had common views about Soviet influence in the region, security and political ties between them grew during the Cold War, despite Saudi Arabia's differences with Israel and refusal to recognize it.

In 1963, during the Yemeni civil war, the US sent war planes to the conflict zone to protect Saudi Arabia from Egypt. Relations became strained when after the 1973 Yom Kippur war, Saudi Arabia imposed an embargo on oil sales to the US. But relations were re-anchored due to their shared opposition to Communism and economic and military cooperation. In the 1980s, the US collaborated with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to send the Mujahideen to Afghanistan to bring down the Soviet-supported government and force Soviet forces' withdrawal from the country.

When Iraq attacked Kuwait, the US sent troops to Saudi Arabia to protect it from Iraqi invasion. Saudi Arabia was an important partner in Operation Desert Storm against Iraq and helped enforce the no-fly zone over Iraq after the war. In this period, relations with Saudi Arabia deepened and the US sold arms and provided help for building military facilities. The US helped strengthen the Saudi armed forces as a counterweight to Iran and Shiite extremism. 9/11 and the US invasion of Iraq caused fissures in relations between the US and Saudi Arabia. Evidence emerged about the Saudi royal family's financial and cultural support to extremism. Though Saudi Arabia supported the US war

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<sup>3</sup> 'Saudi Arabia', available at <http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/59.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

against terrorism, bowing to public sentiments, it refused to support the invasion of Iraq. It however acted against the Al Qaeda in the country and against financing of terrorists, thus becoming one of the key allies in the Global War on Terror (GWOT). In August 2003, the US ended its military presence in Saudi Arabia due to local resentment. Bush prodded Saudi Arabia to move faster towards democracy, leading to tensions in bilateral ties. When Obama came to power, he continued to engage with Saudi Arabia for several reasons: to get its help in the fight against terrorism, to serve as a counterpoint to Iran and because of its vast oil reserves. Saudi Arabia too has witnessed protests. But protestors were mollified by the government promising money and jobs to citizens, using police force and by banning marches. The US responded to this by merely stressing the universal right to protest. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, under the aegis of the GCC, also sent troops to Bahrain to quell the protests there, firing live shots and killing several protestors.

### ***Egypt***

During much of the Cold War, US' relations with Egypt were less than cordial as Egypt was more pro-Soviet than pro-West and because of US support for Israel. This changed in 1979 when Sadat signed a peace treaty with Israel at Camp David, brokered by Carter. After this, Egypt became one of the largest recipients of US aid. A small amount of this aid was set aside for democracy promotion, a policy criticized by the Egyptian regime. Military cooperation with the US helped Egypt modernize its armed forces. Egypt also took part in Operation Desert Storm against Iraq. After 9/11, Egypt became a close ally in the GWOT. In fact, there were reports that the CIA deported many suspected terrorists to Egypt for intense interrogations and even torture.<sup>5</sup> Bush pushed Egypt to move faster towards democracy, leading to tensions in bilateral ties. But despite all the rhetoric, the US did little when the Mubarak government took several repressive steps. This was because Mubarak argued that democratization would only lead to Islamist extremists like the Muslim brotherhood coming to power. So the US chose the relative stability of a dictatorship to the seeming chaos of a democracy and the possibility of Islamists gaining power. Another reason for the administration's blind eye to the authoritarianism of the

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<sup>5</sup> Jeremy M. Sharp, 'Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations', 2 September 2009, *CRS Report*, available at [www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33003.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33003.pdf), p.17.

Mubarak regime was because it needed Egypt as a counterpoint against Iran and for continued stability in the region.

During the ‘Arab Spring’, Egypt’s regime was the second to fall after the Tunisian one. The Supreme Council of the Military took charge and promised appropriate constitutional amendments and elections within six months. Recently, Egypt conducted a referendum on nine constitutional amendments. These amendments aim at limiting the number of Presidential terms to two, defining eligibility for candidates who wish to contest elections for the Presidency, changing the emergency law and giving the Parliament control over it while strengthening the independence of the judiciary. However, there are no proposals for reducing the powers of the executive and other authoritarian aspects of the government. Critics say that due to the short time span and the rapid political process, forces which are already well-organized like the Muslim Brotherhood or remnants of Mubarak’s regime could take advantage of the situation and win more seats in the elections.<sup>6</sup>The caretaker government has said that a new Constitution will be put in place after the Parliamentary elections in June. Egypt’s population voted in favor of the referendum by a substantial majority.

### ***Jordan***

US-Jordan relations date back to 1951 and Jordan has been a major recipient of US economic and military aid. US support has helped Jordan deal with its stronger neighbours like Israel, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iraq.<sup>7</sup> The only Arab country with which US relations worsened during Operation Desert Storm was Jordan, which voiced support for Saddam Hussein, spurred on by its Palestinian population. Relations were restored after the Gulf War and Jordan also enforced the UN sanctions on Iraq. Jordan has been a key ally in the US efforts for peace in West Asia and signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994 and later gave it recognition. It provided logistical support for the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Jordan has played a pivotal role

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example the interview with Steven Cook, ‘Egypt’s Referendum: Nervous Steps Forward’, available at <http://www.cfr.org/egypt/egypts-referendum-nervous-steps-forward/p24452>.

<sup>7</sup> Alfred B. Prados, ‘Jordan: U.S. Relations and Bilateral Issues’, 26 April 2006, *CRS Report*, available at <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/141575.pdf>, p.1.

in supporting the restoration of stability and security to Iraq and has provided training to the Iraqi police. Jordan also helped the US in its GWOT by helping stop funding to radical extremists and has shared intelligence about terrorist groups with the US. In response to growing protests, the Jordanian King dismissed his government and appointed a new cabinet, with instructions to take steps towards political reform.

### ***Iraq***

During most of the Cold War, US-Iraq relations were cordial and Iraq was the only Arab member of the Baghdad Pact. However, after the Six Day War, it broke off diplomatic ties with the US. Relations were restored after the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the Iranian hostage crisis as both countries shared antagonism towards Iran. The US supported Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s by giving it economic aid, weapons, intelligence and training. After the Cold War, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, the US came to Kuwait's rescue because if Iraq conquered Kuwait, it would have got control over more than 20% of global oil reserves. It also imposed sanctions on it. In 2003, the US invaded Iraq, claiming that it had WMDs. It brought down Saddam Hussein's regime and has stayed on to help the democratic transition and also to stabilize the country. Iraq is a major oil exporter to the US today.<sup>8</sup> Iraq also witnessed some protests and PM Maliki has announced that he will not run for a third term.

### ***Kuwait***

In 1987, when Iran threatened Kuwaiti oil tankers, the US allowed the tankers to carry American flags and also sent war ships to the region. Political and military relations with Kuwait became closer during the Iran-Iraq War in which Kuwait supported Iraq despite Iranian intimidation. In 1987–1988, the United States established a US naval escort and tanker reflagging programme to protect Kuwaiti and international shipping from Iranian naval attacks (Operation Earnest Will) as at this time, Iran had fired at and struck some Kuwaiti oil facilities with “Silkworm” surface-to-surface missiles.<sup>9</sup> When Saddam Hussein attacked Kuwait, the US came to its rescue through Operation Desert Storm.

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Crude Oil and Total Petroleum Imports: Top 15 Countries’, available at [http://www.eia.doe.gov/pub/oil\\_gas/petroleum/data\\_publications/company\\_level\\_imports/current/import.html](http://www.eia.doe.gov/pub/oil_gas/petroleum/data_publications/company_level_imports/current/import.html).

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Katzman, ‘Kuwait: Security, Reform, and U.S. Policy’, 4 November 2010, *CRS Report*, available at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS21513.pdf>, p.7.

After the Gulf War, Kuwait became an important buyer of US arms and strategic relations between the two countries intensified when a ten-year defence pact was signed in 1991. Kuwait provided the base for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. It also became an important partner in the GWOT and provided assistance in the military, diplomatic and intelligence arenas and also helped to block financing of terrorist groups. Kuwait is another important oil exporter to the US.<sup>10</sup> Kuwait's Emir responded to protests by giving his citizens free food rations and a thousand dinars each.

### ***Libya***

Though the US supported Libya's independence in 1951, after Qaddafi's coup in 1969, relations with Libya became strained because of Libya's alleged policy of supporting terrorism and it was designated a state sponsor of terror in 1979. Relations with Libya were hostile during the Cold War and the US imposed economic sanctions on Libya. In 2003, the US began the process of normalizing relations with Libya after it renounced terrorism and cooperated with the US and the IAEA in getting rid of its WMDs. The US terminated the applicability of the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act on Libya and ended economic sanctions against the country and removed it from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. Gaddafi also faced protests from rebels. The uprising against Gaddafi has become strong over the days and forces opposing him have gained control over many oil-rich parts of Libya. Gaddafi responded to this by threatening the rebels and using his armed forces to destroy them to the last man. After much dithering, the West finally stepped in after the UNSC passed its Resolution 1973 which allowed the international community to enforce a no-fly zone to protect civilians. Over the last few days, forces led by France, Britain and the US have pounded Gaddafi's Air force and other strongholds. France has already recognized the Transitional National Council as an interim government. The West's proactive measures were in stark contrast to its inaction when civilians protesting in Bahrain and Yemen were being killed.

### ***Yemen***

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<sup>10</sup> 'Crude Oil and Total Petroleum Imports: Top 15 Countries', available at [http://www.eia.doe.gov/pub/oil\\_gas/petroleum/data\\_publications/company\\_level\\_imports/current/import.html](http://www.eia.doe.gov/pub/oil_gas/petroleum/data_publications/company_level_imports/current/import.html).

The US-Yemeni relations have traditionally been hampered by a lack of strong military-to-military and commercial ties and by Yemeni distrust of US policy in West Asia.<sup>11</sup> In fact during the first Gulf War, Yemen supported Saddam Hussein. However, in the wake of 9/11, the US stepped up relations with Yemen to get its support for fighting the Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Al Qaeda is quite active in Yemen. The US gave military and economic aid to Yemen and has launched drone attacks against Al Qaeda targets in the country. As Wikileaks cables show, President Saleh covered up for the US saying these attacks were carried out by the Yemeni Air force. Yemen is now a major recipient of US economic and military aid. Protests against the regime have been met with harsh responses by Saleh and many people were killed in a crackdown on the opposition. The US and its allies stood by since the fall of Saleh would mean the loss of an important ally. Protests are continuing in the country. However, some senior Generals in the Yemeni Army and other supporters have deserted the President, and he may be expected to depart before long.

### ***Bahrain***

The USA's relations with Bahrain have been traditionally warm and Bahrain was part of Operation Desert Storm. A ten-year defence pact, which was signed in 1991, was renewed in 2001. Bahrain has been a Major Non-NATO ally since 2001. It is now a key asset in the US strategy against Iran and could be the linchpin of any US military operations in the region while also helping it to keep an eye on piracy. The US naval base in Manama allows the US military to protect Saudi oil installations and the Gulf waterways used to protect oil transport, without any sensitive presence of American troops on Saudi soil.<sup>12</sup> Bahrain also provides basing and over flight clearances for US aircrafts engaged in Afghanistan and helped cut off financing for terrorists.<sup>13</sup> The US has provided Bahrain advanced military equipment, training and military assistance.

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<sup>11</sup> Jeremy M. Sharp 'Yemen: Background and US Relations', 3 February 2011, *CRS Report*, available at <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/156516.pdf>, p.29.

<sup>12</sup> 'Key Political Risks to Watch Out in Bahrain', available at <http://us.mobile.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSTRE71G5XX20110217>.

<sup>13</sup> Brad Knickerbocker, 'US Faces Difficult Situation in Bahrain, Home to US Fifth Fleet', 19 February 2011, available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Foreign-Policy/2011/0219/US-faces-difficult-situation-in-Bahrain-home-to-US-Fifth-Fleet>.



However, during the recent protests by Shias against the Sunni regime, many people were killed. Saudi Arabia sent in its troops against the protestors and a three month long emergency was declared. Unlike in Libya, the US stood by when Saudi Arabia sent troops to quell the rebellion as it cannot afford to offend oil-rich Saudi Arabia. The protestors include Sunni Muslims also and the US has advised the al Khalifa ruling family to reform the regime.

### ***Syria***

Syria-US relations have long been troubled and Syria is a state sponsor of terror according to the US. Therefore, it is under US sanctions. Another reason for the discord is Syria's close relations with Iran, though this closeness is partly due to both countries' shared rivalry with Iraq. The US further suspects Syria of developing WMDs and working with Iran on this. Syria's support to the Hizbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, etc. have contributed to the acrimony in relations. Israeli-Syrian peace talks have also been stalled. Obama's attempts to engage with Syria through private meetings have not borne fruit so far. In Syria, many protestors have been killed by the security forces and protests are continuing. Unless some liberalization and reform measures are initiated by President Assad, the protests are likely to gain momentum and US-Syrian relations will remain strained.

### ***UAE***

The UAE and the US have had friendly relations since 1971, and arms sales and military cooperation are key elements of the relationship. UAE took part in Operation Desert Storm. After the first Gulf War, defence ties between the two countries deepened and UAE became an important ally in US efforts to build a missile defense shield for the Gulf to deter or contain Iran.<sup>14</sup> The UAE hosts port calls and shore visits regularly for American naval vessels and permits the US military to use Al Dhafra air base for supporting many missions in the CENTCOM's area of operations.<sup>15</sup> US firms have interests in UAE's oil and gas sector. The UAE has also helped in stabilizing Iraq and

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<sup>14</sup>Kenneth Katzman, 'The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy', 7 December 2010, *CRS Report*, available at <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/153294.pdf>, p.10.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard and Paul K. Kerr, 'The United Arab Emirates Nuclear Program and Proposed U.S. Nuclear Cooperation', 20 December 2010, *CRS Report*, available at <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/154163.pdf>, p.1.

Afghanistan. Differences have mainly been related to political reform, US policies towards Iran and Iraq, counterterrorism efforts and the Arab-Israeli conflict. UAE too has not been able to escape from the effects of the Arab Spring. A group of intellectuals have petitioned the King to implement political reforms.

### ***Tunisia***

The US sees Tunisia as a voice of moderation in the region. Military-to-military cooperation is strong and Tunisia receives security and economic assistance from the US. Tunisia is an important ally in the GWOT and cooperates in NATO's Operation Active Endeavor<sup>16</sup> and its Mediterranean Dialogue and also permits NATO ships to make port calls at Tunis.<sup>17</sup> Tunisia was the first country in the region to witness protests, leading to the downfall of the regime of President Ben Ali. A new caretaker government has been established in the country and a state of emergency has been proclaimed.

### ***Algeria***

The US supported Algeria's fight for independence from the French. However, relations were strained during the Cold War as Algeria became a socialist republic, was close to the USSR and became a member of the NAM. After the Cold War, Algeria became important as it supplies natural gas to the US and is an important partner in the fight against groups linked to the Al-Qaeda in North Africa. Algeria receives security assistance from the US and there is close military-to-military cooperation between them. The US has tried to balance Algeria's cooperation against terrorism with calls for democratization by giving it funding through the Middle East Peace Initiative to support its civil society.<sup>18</sup> Protests in Algeria began in December 2010, much before the Tunisian Revolution. However, the government has succeeded in putting them down by lowering food prices and promising to amend the emergency law and create new jobs.

### ***Morocco***

Morocco is one of the closest US allies in the region. US relations with Morocco date to the 1787 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Renegotiated in 1836, the treaty is still

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<sup>16</sup> This provides counterterrorism surveillance in the Mediterranean.

<sup>17</sup> Alexis Arieff, 'Political Transition in Tunisia', 2 February 2011, *CRS Report*, available at <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/156511.pdf>, p.5.

<sup>18</sup> Background Note, 'Algeria', available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/8005.htm>.

operational, constituting the longest unbroken treaty relationship in American history.<sup>19</sup> The US today sees Morocco as a moderate Arab state which supports the Arab-Israeli peace process. Morocco is a major Non-NATO ally and an important partner in the Great War on Terror (GWOT). Morocco is part of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue and collaborates with NATO's Operation Active Endeavor.<sup>20</sup> Morocco also receives development assistance from the US. In response to peaceful protests for political reforms, the King has announced plans to reform the Constitution.

### ***Oman***

Oman is another close ally of the US and the two countries' relations date back to 1833. US-Omani relations deepened in 1980 with two important agreements: one gave access to Omani military facilities to US forces and the other provided economic assistance to Oman.<sup>21</sup> Oman was part of Operation Desert Storm. Oman also supports US efforts for ending the Arab-Israeli conflict and has long seen the United States as the key security guarantor of the region.<sup>22</sup> The only disagreement between the two countries is with regard to Oman's closeness to Iran and its misgivings about US policy towards Iran's nuclear programme. In Oman, which also witnessed protests, the Sultan responded by promising political reforms and more jobs, giving grants to students and the unemployed and by dismissing several ministers.

### ***Qatar***

US-Qatar relations are strong and Qatar was important ally in Operation Desert Storm. The two countries work together on regional diplomatic initiatives, increasing security in the Gulf and have wide-ranging economic ties, particularly in the hydrocarbons sector.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Sudan***

US-Sudan relations have ranged from tepid to hostile over the years. According to the US, Sudan is a state sponsor of terrorism and this has historically hindered cordial

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<sup>19</sup> Background Note, 'Morocco', available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5431.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> Carol Migdalovitz, 'Morocco: Current Issues', 3 February 2010, *CRS Report*, available at <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/138719.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Background Note, 'Oman', <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35834.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Katzman, 'Oman: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy', 6 January 2011, *CRS Report*, available at <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/155044.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> Background Note, 'Qatar', available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5437.htm>.

relations between the two countries. Sudan's support to Saddam Hussein during the first Gulf War caused further strains in the US-Sudan relationship. After 9/11, Sudan cooperated with the US on counterterrorism though it criticized the US attacks on Afghanistan. The US has imposed sanctions on Sudan for the war in Southern Sudan and human rights abuses by the regime and for sponsoring terrorism. However, the US is a major donor of humanitarian aid to Sudan. Responding to marches for political reforms, President Al-Bashir announced that he would not run for re-election.

### ***Lebanon***

US- Lebanon ties have traditionally been cordial, partly because of cultural and religious links, the fact that Lebanon is democratic, the presence of a thriving Lebanese-American community in the US and the pro-western orientation of Lebanon, especially during the Cold War.<sup>24</sup> Lebanon is important to the US because of its role as a buffer between Israel and Syria, its role as an interlocutor for the US with the Arab world though it does not host any US military bases or have significant trade links with the US.<sup>25</sup> However, recently relations became strained due to the Hezbollah's success in Lebanese elections and Lebanon's close relations with Iran and Syria. Lebanon has also witnessed some mild protests. Lebanon, which is a non-permanent member of the UNSC and has a Hezbollah Prime Minister, sponsored Resolution 1973 along with France and the UK.

### **Present Situation**

The current wave of pro-democracy protests which has changed the strategic landscape of West Asia took the US and the world by surprise. While some dictators have fallen and more be forced to quit, the monarchies in the region have been able to quell, or pacify the protests in one way or the other and these regimes seem to be stable for now. Many questions arise about the effects of these protests. Will they result in transitions to democracy or will the military call the shots? Will Islamic extremists come to power? Will they protect the rights of minorities? Many of these countries other than Egypt and Tunisia like Syria, Yemen, Jordan and Bahrain are fragmented on sectarian and tribal grounds. So the question also arises whether they can survive as nations after these

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<sup>24</sup> Casey L. Addis, 'Lebanon: Background and U.S. Relations', 1 February 2011, *CRS Report*, available at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R40054.pdf>, p.2.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

protests. What is certain is that there will be instability in the region in the immediate future and the US may now have to deal with new regimes that might not be as pliant to US pressure and interests as the fallen dictators.

Be that as it may, despite initial support for dictators like Mubarak, the US has now fallen behind the pro-democracy protests. The US has adopted a realist policy in support of peaceful democratic change in its approach to the Arab upheavals. It has adopted a country-specific strategy to deal with the protests instead of a regional strategy for West Asia. So, in countries like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain where it seems that the regimes will be able to weather the storm (while also being conveniently oil-rich and key allies), it has done little apart from making the usual calls for engaging with the opposition and calling for gradual reforms. In other countries like Tunisia and Egypt where it was obvious that the regimes had thoroughly alienated the people and would fall, it supported the pro-democracy movements, ensuring that the dictators departed peacefully. In Libya, it decided on airstrikes to protect civilians, backed by a UNSC resolution, prompted by humanitarian impulses and also by Libya's oil riches.

### **Implications for the US**

Jordan and Egypt are the only two Arab countries which have relations with Israel and have witnessed serious protests. In Egypt, Mubarak, an American ally has fallen. That the new regime that comes to power might not hold the cold peace with Israel cannot be ruled out even though the current military-backed regime has said it will uphold all international treaties. Any new regime that comes to power will find it difficult to ignore the anti-Israeli sentiments among the Egyptian people. This has long-term implications for the US and for Israel's peace. Other allies, like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman and Yemen are all in turmoil. The threat to US interests comes from the fact that the US has engaged with the rulers rather than the people, often ignoring the latter's sentiments.

The protests could also lead to the Shias gaining more power in countries that have been traditionally politically dominated by the Sunni minority. For instance, Bahrain, which hosts the US' fifth fleet, has seen protests by mainly the Shias, who constitute more than

70% of the country's population. Similarly, there have been protests in the Shia-majority, oil-rich Eastern province of Saudi Arabia too. In Iraq, Shia parties have gained power through elections. Similarly, Iran has allies in Lebanon, Syria and Gaza. Qatar and Oman are already tilting towards Iran. This could lead to an increase in the influence of Iran, the home of the Shias and the US' principal antagonist in the region and change region's balance of power.

The turmoil in the Arab world has sent oil prices surging and this has helped Tehran balance the impact of sanctions.<sup>26</sup> Saudi Arabia and Egypt have been the main opponents of Iranian influence and these countries are likely to be in turmoil for some time. Saudi Arabia feels surrounded by Iran and its supporters like Iraq, Syria and Lebanon; Yemen is unstable; Bahrain is uncertain; and so it feels that Iran could exploit the instability in the region against it.<sup>27</sup> Also, most of the oil-rich areas in West Asia happen to be Shia-majority areas and US energy security could be seriously threatened if the Shia-led regimes, prompted by Iran, turn against the US. Even if this happens and Iran gains influence in the region at the cost of US allies, the US should renew its efforts to engage Iran diplomatically like it did the USSR during the Cold War. In fact, there are chances that Iran's influence might not increase even if the Shias come to power in these countries as Iran is not an Arab country and the Arab-Persian schism might prove to be stronger than Shia-Shia unity.

## **Recommendations**

There has been little Anti-Americanism during these protests as also any kind of leadership by Islamic fundamentalists. This must be kept in mind when American policymakers devise strategies for the new West Asia. Since they provide more peaceful ways to show dissatisfaction, democracies would eventually be inherently more stable and its people less inclined to be swayed by Islamic fundamentalism or extremism of any

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<sup>26</sup> Tony Karon, 'Is Iran Really the Winner in the Arab Revolt?', 24 February 2011, *Time*, <http://globalspin.blogs.time.com/2011/02/24/is-iran-really-the-winner-in-the-arab-revolt/>

<sup>27</sup> Alireza Nader, quoted in Michael Slackman, 'Arab Unrest Propels Iran as Saudi Influence Declines', 23 February 2011, *New York Times*.

kind. Moreover, as a recent Carnegie report says, radical groups tend to become more moderate when they take part in the democratic process, in part because of the need to appeal to a larger audience for votes.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, the US support for the democratic transition in these countries is understandable and would be good for the region and for US credibility. US support for democracy in the region would deflect anti-Americanism and give the US more credibility when it deals with the new regimes that will come to power.

In his speech at Cairo in 2009, President Obama had said:

*No system of government can or should be imposed by one nation by any other. That does not lessen my commitment, however, to governments that reflect the will of the people.... And we will welcome all elected, peaceful governments, provided they govern with respect for all their people.*<sup>29</sup>

What is happening in the Arab world is therefore a chance for President Obama to deliver on his promise and to infuse American foreign policy with more idealism and more practical help. US support for pro-democracy movements will ensure that it does not fall on the wrong side of history like during the Islamic Revolution of 1979. During the transition process, the US picking sides or supporting one party against the other will have negative results. It should follow the principle of non-interference and help build up democratic institutions in these countries. In countries whose regimes have managed to quell the rebellion either through hand-outs or through ruthless crackdowns, it must use its influence on the regimes to start political reforms, strengthening the institutions of democracy. The Arab revolutions present an unprecedented opportunity for the US to do away with its policy of supporting dictators in the name of realpolitik. It could also bolster support to civil society in these countries through technical and economic aid.

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Carothers, 'Democracy Promotion under Obama: Finding a Way Forward', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Policy Brief no. 77*, February 2009, available at [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/democracy\\_promotion\\_obama.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/democracy_promotion_obama.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> The text of this speech can be accessed at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>.

Finally, it should try to persuade the Israelis to reach out to the Palestinians as US support to Israel is the cause of much of the distrust of the US in the region.