A Joint Wilson Center-USIP Project

The Changing Security Architecture in the Middle East: **Issue 1**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Global Authoritarians and the Arab Spring: New Challenges for U.S. Diplomacy

Daniel Brumberg and Steven Heydemann, U.S. Institute of Peace

As the Arab Spring enters its third year, the contours of a new strategic landscape are taking shape in the Middle East. Reflecting the disordered state of regional politics, this landscape is far from stable. Yet it contains features that will pose significant challenges for U.S. diplomacy.

Wilson Center

Global Authoritarians and the Arab Spring: New Challenges for U.S. Diplomacy

Executive Summary

Daniel Brumberg and Steven Heydemann
U.S. Institute of Peace

As the Arab Spring enters its third year, the contours of a new strategic landscape are taking shape in the Middle East. Reflecting the disordered state of regional politics, this landscape is far from stable. Yet it contains features that will pose significant challenges for U.S. diplomacy. Among them is the role that leading authoritarian states have assumed, notably Russia and China, but also Iran, as critical actors in regional and international diplomacy, complicating U.S. efforts to respond to the uprisings that began in Tunisia in December 2010 and rapidly swept across the region. Even as these authoritarian actors themselves struggle to absorb the consequences of the Arab Spring—including the uncertain effects of Arab democratization on their regional influence and ambitions—they have worked to consolidate their standing as a counterweight in the Middle East to the United States and its Western allies.

Efforts by leading authoritarian regimes to enhance their regional influence are unfolding on several levels. How these regimes view the opportunities and constraints posed by the Arab Spring, how they are trying to exploit the former and mitigate the latter, and how their efforts have in turn shaped the strategic calculations of newly elected Arab governments are questions that will dramatically affect the region's emerging strategic architecture and thus the political environment that the United States will face in the coming years. This paper highlights and selectively illustrates the main empirical and conceptual contours of the new strategic-political map that is emerging as Russia, China, Iran, and other like-minded states respond to the political forces unleashed by the Arab Spring.

In setting out this new map, we accentuate two related dynamics: first, the ways in which powerful authoritarian regimes collaborate to advance collective interests in sustaining—or consolidating—institutional and strategic alternatives to Western democracy; and second, their associated bid to use the Arab Spring to mobilize support from regional-democratic powers including Turkey, Brazil, India, South Africa, and others. Because the leaders of these regional powers are sympathetic to critiques of Western economic and geo-strategic dominance, global authoritarian regimes view these leaders as potential allies whose support can be enlisted to redefine regional and global security and governance structures in ways that complicate the diplomatic and strategic environment in which the United States works to advance its interests.

The proposition that the Arab Spring may be generating changes that are compounding the security and diplomatic challenges facing the United States goes against no small amount of conventional thinking in Washington. After all, the region's political rebellions have rung alarm bells in Moscow, Tehran, and Beijing as well. Indeed, Russia and Iran will probably lose one key state ally in the region, see a second leading state ally

weakened, and, in turn, will have to grapple with the weakening of their key non-state allies—Hamas and Hezbollah. Moreover, the new governments in Tunisia and Libya, and possibly Yemen, have a favorable view of the United States. However, escalating conflicts between Israel and the Palestinians, Sunnis and Shi'ites, and emerging Arab democracies and authoritarian status quo regimes are also opening spaces for Moscow, China, and even Iran to exercise new leverage. Indeed, Washington's key Arab ally, Egypt, is now led by Islamist leaders who are profoundly unhappy with—if not opposed to—the regional order that the United States has promoted. Further to the east, the escalating civil war in Syria has created new space for radical jihadists, thus raising the possibility that a post-Assad Syria might be led by an Islamist government that will seek to make common cause with other Sunni-Islamist governments. Although such a "Sunni axis" may in theory view Shi'ite Iran as a threat, growing popular dissatisfaction with U.S. policies may tilt that axis against Washington far more than Tehran.

Such a possibility suggests that the fundamental historical-structural challenge facing the United States is not the emergence of new Islamist governments per se: rather, it is *the reassertion of the link between democracy and foreign policy-making in Arab states in response to the Arab Spring.* With newly empowered citizens questioning a regional order anchored in regional relationships with the United States, the worldview articulated by Russia, China, and even Iran may create new opportunities for regional influence. Their critique of U.S. power and of an international system dominated by Western states, their resistance to democratization along Western lines, and their economic resources may also generate sympathy among newly elected Arab leaders struggling to find their balance in volatile domestic contexts—and to secure the resources they will need to respond to the economic grievances that helped launch the Arab Spring. Moreover, because the United States maintains close relations with many Arab autocracies, Arab public opinion will continue to be animated by deep concerns regarding U.S. double standards. Add up the ledger, and the strategic picture is mixed: global authoritarians will find points of leverage, but they will also encounter limits to their influence, some of which are intrinsic to inner dynamics of global authoritarianism.

The case studies set out in this paper illustrate both the opportunities and constraints animating the diplomacy of global authoritarians, the efforts of Arab leaders to leverage these opportunities, and the implications of this overall dynamic for U.S. diplomacy. The UN Security Council-backed intervention in Libya highlighted the challenges that global authoritarians such as China and Russia face as they tried to undercut the international intervention while at the same time trying to avoid alienating Arab public opinion—particularly in Arab states where the Arab Spring was in full gear.

However, the subsequent expansion of Western military action in Libya also provoked a backlash on a least two fronts: from the Arab League, where long-standing concerns about Western interference produced a deeply ambivalent response to the Western bombing campaign; and even more so from global authoritarian states. In the wake of Libya and in the ensuing diplomatic struggle over the uprising in Syria, these states drew a line in the sand by opposing any United Nations Security Council resolution that would authorize the use of force and, by implication, invoke international norms of governance

and human rights (such as The Responsibility to Protect, or R2P) to legitimate intervention.

Viewing the diplomatic maelstrom churned up by the above struggles, the emerging leaders of new Arab governments have tried to walk a fine line: on the one hand, they wish to signal their support for efforts of their counterparts in other states to achieve democracy and, by implication, the global values that accompany such a struggle. On the other hand, many leaders in new Arab governments remain ambivalent about the global distribution of power and the role of the United States in supporting what they see as a lopsided international order. President Morsi's August 30, 2012 speech before the Non-Aligned Movement illustrates the ongoing efforts of a new Arab leader to harmonize these possibly dissonant chords. Standing before his Iranian hosts, he implicitly rebuked them for supporting Bashar al-Assad, while offering a spirited call both for democracy, and for an Egyptian led bid to revise the international political and social order.

The challenge facing the United States is how to respond to this balancing act in a smart, sober, and constructive manner. Yet in doing so Washington faces a balancing act of its own. On the one hand, the United States must work with leaders of new Arab governments whose foreign policies increasingly reflect—or are constrained by—widespread popular unease with U.S. policies in the Middle East. On the other hand, the United States must signal those red lines beyond which U.S.-Arab cooperation will prove difficult or even untenable. While striking this balance will in no small way depend on the particular trajectory of political change in each Arab state—and the nature of the government ensuing from that dynamic—a U.S. effort to address long standing regional conflicts could go a long way to facilitating a new U.S. diplomacy. On that score, a sustained effort to address the stalled Palestinian-Israeli dispute, as well as a renewed bid to resolve the stand-off with Iran on the nuclear issue, would be most useful.

Finally, we must keep in mind that apart from the challenges posed by global autocracy and the efforts of new Arab leaders to forge a new diplomacy that leverages a changing regional and global map, Washington itself must reckon with ambivalence regarding multi-lateral efforts to promote notions of global governance and human rights. Indeed, given the reluctance of Washington and its Western allies to intervene in Syria despite the ongoing humanitarian crisis, and given that U.S. security interests in the Gulf have thus far tempered its response to Gulf regimes that have repressed democratic uprisings, U.S. global diplomacy will continue to be framed by a multiplicity of conflicting philosophical and security interests. The resulting dissonance in our own diplomacy will hardly be unwelcome news for some of our Gulf allies. Viewing the ongoing domestic struggle in Bahrain with concern, they will probably welcome evidence of the enduring constraints that impede any bid to consolidate norms of global governance that conflict with a traditional notion of state sovereignty.

Upcoming papers in this series will be from the following authors:

Shibley Telhami
Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development
University of Maryland, College Park

Laurie Brand
Robert Grandford Wright Professor and Professor of International Relations
University of Southern California

Pete Moore
Associate Professor of Political Science
Case Western Reserve University

Adeed Dawisha
Distinguished Professor of Political Science
Miami University