

ARAB AMERICAN INSTITUTE

ARAB SPRING

Background

After decades of political stagnation, the Arab world saw the first glimmers of democratic change in January 2011 when, inspired by the self-immolation of a street-vendor, Tunisians rose up and ousted strongman Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. Protests quickly spread across the region, from Morocco to Bahrain. The “Arab Spring” was a remarkable outpouring of pent-up political frustration and economic grievances, manifested at first in non-violent passive resistance and popular demonstrations for democracy and economic opportunity.

These street protests also succeeded in toppling Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak and forced Yemen’s Ali Abdullah Saleh to abdicate his presidency, while Libyan rebels assisted by a massive international military effort succeeded in deposing Libyan dictator Moammar Al-Qaddafi. Meanwhile, the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Bahrain, among others, have grown increasingly bloody and complex. As these regional dynamics have changed, so too have the Arab World’s interactions with the United States, primarily due to Washington’s deeply ambiguous role in the Arab Spring. For American policymakers, the Arab Spring has exposed the contrast between our strategic interests and our ideals, as evidenced by Washington’s lukewarm support for the ouster of some of their long-time allies. Recent polling shows that since the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, Arab public opinion of the United States is at an all-time low, and Washington’s inability to influence events on the ground has been a symptom of their growing regional irrelevance.

The Problem

For the better part of the past decade, our country’s leadership did grave damage across the broader Middle East and North Africa, negatively impacting not only the peoples of that region but relations between the Arab world and the United States. US foreign policy in the wake of the Arab Spring has scarcely been any different. Washington’s reticence to endorse the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia have caused approval ratings of the US to drop to record lows. The administration’s silence on on-going repression in Bahrain, Yemen, and upheavals in other “friendly” states, has significantly undermined their position on Syria. And the wake of US-led military strikes in Libya has produced a lawless and fragmented state that shows no sign of short-term peace.

Meanwhile, the situation on the ground appears to be steadily deteriorating. The ouster of the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan regimes appears to have empowered groups with questionable commitments to democracy and pluralism, and violence continues to mar their transitions toward democracy. Other uprisings, in Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria, have failed to achieve their objectives, and have settled into an uneasy stalemate. Other Arab countries have all experienced some level of unrest, but have not reached anything near a critical mass.

Moving Forward

Efforts to transform our relationship with the Arab world and challenge the politics in America that have shaped our approach to this region have been repeatedly rebuffed by those who do not want change and who benefit from the continuation of the status quo. Today, with the Arab world in upheaval, the status quo is both unacceptable and dangerous. There must be a fundamental change in our relationship with this region.

Our polling shows that America has limited political capital in the Arab world. The toll of the past decade cannot be ignored. Libya aside, leaders of the Arab uprisings across the region quite simply do not want or trust American intervention or meddling in their internal affairs. What Arabs do want is for America to respect their history, culture and aspirations and to demonstrate responsibility for the problems we have helped to create or have not effectively addressed - like the quagmire in Iraq and the suffering of the Palestinians - and to provide support for capacity-building that will help create jobs, improve health care, and expand education in their countries.

As Arab Americans, we must muster the political resolve to pressure Washington to adopt a consistent and supportive policy toward the new emerging Arab region. Though the atrocities in Syria are doubtless deserving of American condemnation, the words will ring hollow unless the administration can demonstrate to the Arab world that it will be balanced in its approach to the region. Hearing the cries of some for freedom, while threatening to veto the Palestinian's call for justice only insures that America will continue to be viewed with mistrust.