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The Transnational Challenge to Arab Freedom

JASON BROWNLEE

Until this year scholars seeking signs of a fourth wave of democratization would have barely given the Middle East a second thought. The region holds the dubious distinction of having escaped Samuel Huntington’s “third wave,” the dramatic growth of democracies during the late twentieth century. In that period, dozens of countries in Southern Europe, Latin America, East Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Eastern Europe saw authoritarian systems fall and new democratic governments arise. None of the Arab states (nor the non-Arab state of Iran) took part in that sea change.

The domestic reasons for persistent authoritarianism in the Middle East have been well documented: The middle classes are too weak, the repressive agencies too strong; the ruling elite is too insecure and, in some cases, too wealthy to enable genuine liberalization. But also worth considering are the international reasons for this phenomenon, and specifically the role that US foreign policy has played in constraining or impeding democratic change in the region.

The “Arab Spring” or “Arab Awakening” of 2011 offers new hope for an exodus from authoritarianism. Yet, as we approach the first anniversary of the Tunisian protests that began the Arab uprisings, the foundations of authoritarianism across the region remain remarkably sturdy. Monarchies from Morocco to Kuwait have avoided mass demonstrations—or in the case of Saudi Arabia’s intervention in Bahrain, assisted in repressing them. Leaving aside the troubled but distinct circumstances of Iraq, the political yield from the other

non-monarchies (Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen) has been mixed.

Only two rulers, Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, have been brought down by predominantly nonviolent uprisings. Libya’s Muammar el-Qaddafi lost power to rebels backed by US and NATO aircraft and special forces. Meanwhile, the presidents of Syria and Yemen have refused to resign and employed massive violence against the opposition. Algeria’s military leaders have retained power against less opposition and with less bloodshed.

If there is reason for hope for democratic development in the Arab states it lies with the societies that have risen up to reclaim their dignity from unscrupulous autocrats. For whereas millions from Tunis to Manama showed newfound tenacity, the regimes they faced responded with brutally familiar methods. In Tunisia and Egypt, Ben Ali and Mubarak tried first to repress their critics and for weeks they enjoyed the staunch support of their country’s militaries. Only when mass demonstrations showed no signs of abating did the generals swivel on the presidents and usher them from office.

By that point, activists who faced uniformed security personnel and plainclothes thugs had paid a steep price. Over 800 Egyptians had perished by the time Mubarak’s resignation was announced on February 11. In Syria, the armed forces have remained loyal to President Bashar al-Assad and killed thousands of civilian protesters. In Libya and Yemen, significant portions of the military also stood behind incumbent autocrats. Opponents of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh face protracted conflict rather than quick liberation.

2011 AND 1989

Although some commentators initially likened the 2011 Arab Spring to the 1989 revolution in

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Eastern Europe, the processes and outcomes differ markedly. To date much less political upheaval has occurred across the sixteen Arab states of North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula than occurred in 1989 among the six states of the Eastern Bloc (Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria). In addition, whereas the regimes of Eastern Europe generally collapsed nonviolently (Romania was the grisly exception), Arab rulers generally have been willing to deploy their arsenals against their own citizenry to stay in power.

In the two cases where civilian opposition forces have prevailed, Tunisia and Egypt, the military has led the transition process. This is a far less propitious starting point for democratization than was the case in Poland and the other postcommunist states of Eastern Europe, where the historic opponents of authoritarianism came to power immediately after the revolts. That difference alone is reason enough to reserve the term “revolution” for Eastern Europe’s political change in 1989 and to call the events in Tunisia and Egypt “uprisings,” albeit with important consequences and transformative potential.

Despite these differences, the struggles of 1989 and 2011 do show one powerful similarity. The revolutions of Eastern Europe and the Arab Spring each constitute an “international event,” in the words of the historian Timothy Garton Ash, driven by “not just the diplomatic relations between states but also the interactions of both states and societies across borders.” The ideas and actions that propelled events in Eastern Europe and the Arab world flowed across nation-states, through networks of power and resistance that contested systems previously considered inviolable.

Viewing the Arab uprisings as an international event, rather than a series of domestic movements, and contrasting them in those terms with the revolutions of 1989, places in relief transnational forces that may at least for a time confound hopes for a fourth wave of democratization.

PILLARS OF SECURITY

Civil society in Eastern Europe is generally understood to have been especially strong, while the repressive states of the Middle East are known to be unusually harsh. But it is important to recognize that by the autumn of 1989 the Eastern bloc dictatorships had lost an important base of external support, and this shift was as crucial as the growth of domestic opposition. Soviet President

Mikhail Gorbachev had discarded the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine, the Kremlin’s long-standing pledge to intervene on behalf of communist incumbents, and instead left the USSR’s satellites to handle their own affairs without help from Moscow.

This diminution of regime power was integral in the nonviolent success of opposition movements across the region. Facetiously dubbed the “Sinatra Doctrine,” because governments would do it their own way, Gorbachev’s realignment exposed autocratic rulers in Eastern Europe to domestic unrest, interrupting the transnational network of repression that had re-stabilized authoritarianism in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.

In the case of East Germany, the incumbent dictator, Erich Honecker, bristled at the Kremlin’s unwillingness to prevent East Germans from migrating to the West through Hungary’s newly opened borders. The repeal of the Brezhnev Doctrine was a momentous prerequisite for the cascade of peaceful revolutions that spread from Poland to Bulgaria.

In the Arab Middle East, no superpower in the postcolonial era has dominated the region the way the Soviets loomed over Eastern Europe for 40 years. Since the 1970s, however, many of the region’s autocrats have benefited from a transnational security network that fortifies them against external foes and internal dissent. Built by the United States, this network has been underpinned by the eponymous doctrines of two American presidents, Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter, and the strategic tenets remain in force today.

Two years before Great Britain finished withdrawing its forces from the Persian Gulf in 1971, Nixon announced that the United States would help America’s allies defend themselves by providing military aid. This commitment led Washington to establish regional proxies that were intended to secure US interests without America having to intervene directly.

In the Persian Gulf, Iran and Saudi Arabia were the “two pillars” of American security policy, though Nixon and his national security adviser Henry Kissinger considered Iran the cornerstone. Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the Iranian autocrat, ordered \$20 billion of US materiel during 1970–1978, a quarter of all US foreign military sales during that period.

It was not enough. Flush with advanced hardware, the Shah could not stop a revolution from sweeping over his country in 1978 and pushing

him into exile the following January. Soon after the Shah's ouster, Carter's secretary of defense, Harold Brown, toured the Middle East—the first such official visit by a sitting secretary of defense—to shore up America's alliances with Arab states and find customers for the arms previously destined for Tehran.

Before US strategists had been able to recover from the loss of their main pillar of Gulf security, the Soviets began invading Afghanistan. Carter responded in his 1980 State of the Union address, vowing that the United States would forcibly defend the “free movement of Middle East oil.” The Carter Doctrine raised Nixon's pledge to the next level—promising direct US military intervention if necessary—and the White House created a Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force for moving quickly into the region.

Under President Ronald Reagan, the joint task force became Central Command (CENTCOM), America's fourth regional, unified, combatant command (after analogous arrangements for Europe, the Pacific, and South America). Based in Tampa, Florida (it proved infeasible to host the command in the Middle East), CENTCOM oversees operations from Egypt to Pakistan and advances strategic goals from containing Iran to safeguarding Israel and maintaining strong ties with Arab oil exporters.

The Arab petrostate allies, meanwhile, have proved less crucial for the free movement of oil than for steady outflows of cash to the US arms industry. During 2006–2009, the United States signed over \$39 billion in arms transfer agreements in the Middle East, 60 percent of which went to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

This geostrategy forged by Nixon and Carter in the 1970s has shaped US attitudes toward democracy in the Arab world for 40 years. Importantly, an American wariness regarding popular challenges to autocratic Middle East allies has stretched through the end of the cold war into the twenty-first century, overshadowing the progressive currents of the third wave.

STABILITY COMES FIRST

Diplomatic historians and political scientists have written extensively on Washington's support for autocratic regimes during the cold war. The

pattern is clear: When the incumbent was pro-American (and anticommunist), the United States was pro-incumbent. For example, when it came to the Dominican Republic, President John F. Kennedy remarked candidly: “There are three possibilities in descending order of preference: a decent democratic regime, a continuation of the [Rafael] Trujillo regime, or a [Fidel] Castro regime. We ought to aim at the first, but we really can't renounce the second until we are sure that we can avoid the third.”

The implications for popular sovereignty in the Dominican Republic became clear when Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson, oversaw a military intervention in 1965 that enabled an ex-aide to Trujillo to claim the presidency over leftist opposition. Later Reagan's ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, celebrated the double standard by which US leaders denounced human rights abuses committed by communist regimes and ignored them in its anticommunist allies.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 opened vistas to American values and influence.

Francis Fukuyama contended that the demise of communism as a major mobilizing ideology left Western liberalism with no serious rivals. If ever US officials sought to promote human rights and democracy

abroad, there was no better opportunity. Yet, when it came to the Middle East, “liberal hegemony” still resembled the outlook of Kennedy and Kirkpatrick. Despite an uptick in democracy promotion rhetoric, American leaders still prioritized security interests in the region ahead of representative government.

On December 26, 1991, in a coincidence that marked a geostrategic watershed, the Soviet Union dissolved and Algerians went to the polls in a seminal multi-party election. Historically ruled by the military, Algeria had begun a limited shift to party pluralism, ostensibly an admirable step. The first round of voting gave 188 of 231 seats (81.4 percent) to a conservative religious movement, the Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamique du Salut*, or FIS). The FIS was poised to command a large legislative majority when the runoffs took place. Rather than let the elections proceed normally, however, the Algerian military froze voting the next month. The interruption of the electoral process precipitated a decade-long

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civil war that took hundreds of thousands of lives.

The United States objected mildly to the Algerian military's move but did not oppose the aim of excluding the FIS. Then-Secretary of State Jim Baker later described the view of the George H.W. Bush administration:

Generally speaking, when you support democracy, you take what democracy gives you. . . . If it gives you a radical Islamic fundamentalist, you're supposed to live with it. We didn't live with it in Algeria because we felt that the radical fundamentalists' views were so adverse to what we believe in and what we support, and to what we understood the national interests of the United States to be.

Baker's point man for Middle Eastern affairs, career diplomat Edward Djerejian, insisted the United States would not support elections that threatened to be "one man, one vote, one time." As the six words became a Washington mantra for blocking Islamist movements, the White House would continue endorsing juntas, monarchs, and presidents-for-life.

The Islamist threat perceived in Algeria, along with continuing concerns about the Islamic Republic of Iran, underscores America's conservatism when it comes to indigenous regime change in the Middle East. But has US political and material support for authoritarian regimes in the Middle East reduced the chances of democratic change?

It would be implausible to suggest that US officials determine events in Middle Eastern states. At the same time, there is reason to infer that the strategy that followed the Nixon and Carter doctrines has held back democratic aspirations and empowered authoritarians. On the one hand, billions of dollars of military hardware did not guarantee Iran's stability. On the other hand, the record of regime stability subsequent to 1979 has been remarkable, even in the wake of the Arab Spring, suggesting that US strategists and local autocrats have been highly successful at mitigating the forces that overthrew the Shah.

Unlike the Kremlin in 1989, the White House has not repealed the doctrines that in the Middle East prioritize the stability of allied autocracies over democratization. Even as the Obama administration has sought to position itself on the victors' side in Egypt and other Arab states, admin-

istration policy has shown a clear preference for order and continuity over mass mobilization and popular change.

HOW TO HELP AUTOCRATS

Although each dyad of US-Arab relations differs, there are four main mechanisms through which American support has bolstered Arab regimes and, if current trends continue, will bolster them after 2011: national defense, coup proofing, macroeconomic stability, and domestic repression.

To begin with, US support tends to check the aggression of neighboring states. This effect has been especially acute in the wealthy but militarily vulnerable Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, which has long enjoyed an American "security umbrella." Without maintaining a network of sovereign military bases, as the Pentagon enjoys in Western Europe and East Asia, the US armed forces have been positioned "over the horizon."

Defending a controversial sale of high-tech radar to Saudi Arabia, Reagan intoned "we will not permit [the kingdom] to be an Iran." Thus the

United States has deterred potential adversaries or even, as in the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, intervened to eject a hostile occupying power. This contribution to national security has effectively eliminated the threat

of military defeat for pro-US regimes in the Middle East.

Through military sales the United States has also diminished the incentives for a hostile putsch. More leaders in developing countries have lost power through military coups d'état than foreign invasion or opposition victory. Hence postcolonial leaders interested in staying in power have tried to "coup proof" their regimes. While coup proofing typically entails creating internal security forces that counterbalance the traditional military, another way of reaching the same goal is to placate the military and remove the motive for a takeover.

Lavish arms deals between the United States and Arab regimes have been mutually advantageous. When weapons transfers could not be financed domestically, such as in non-major oil exporting countries like Egypt, US military aid has bankrolled arms acquisitions that keep top officers loyal under normal circumstances.

The next greatest challenge to Arab regimes comes from the populace. Ever since Egyptian

Many of the region's autocrats have benefited from a security network built by the United States.

price riots in January 1977 and the Iranian revolution, leaders in the Middle East and the United States have strived to quiet mass unrest. This is less of a problem in the wealthy Gulf states. In poorer countries like Egypt, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) has spent several hundreds of millions of dollars annually in economic aid and food subsidies.

Probably more consequential than the ongoing USAID presence have been periodic interventions in which the United States, and sometimes Western Europe, have helped revive a sagging Egyptian economy. Debt forgiveness from the United States and the Paris Club of major economies in 1991 pulled Egypt back from the brink of fiscal crisis. Washington's readiness to ease economic hardship in Egypt—when it appeared to threaten political stability—helped the regime keep the coercive apparatus well funded.

Finally, and most controversially, the United States has colluded with Arab security agencies, the dreaded *mukhabarat*, as part of a global dragnet to detain and interrogate suspected Islamic militants. In 1995 President Bill Clinton authorized a program of “extraordinary rendition” for apprehending alleged terrorists and transferring them to third countries without formal arraignment and extradition proceedings.

Michael Scheuer, a US Central Intelligence Agency officer who helped craft the program, later explained that the goal was to get belligerents “off the street” by turning them over to the “Arab tyrannies” who wanted them. American agents whisked the program's first subject, an Egyptian named Talaat Fouad Qassem, from Croatia to Egypt, where he was covertly executed. The program expanded in subsequent years—particularly under President George W. Bush after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Extraordinary rendition emblemized a relationship based on shared security interests, in which the local spy czar becomes an indispensable partner of US officials. In most Arab states these relationships remain undisturbed. Even in Egypt, the centerpiece of the Arab Spring, the White House worked until the eleventh hour to position Omar Suleiman, the chief of Egyptian intelligence, as Mubarak's successor.

DAYS OF WRATH

Like the Eastern European revolutions of 1989, the Arab Spring is an international phenomenon. In 2011, though, the relevant superpower is far

from disinterested. Unlike Gorbachev, President Barack Obama has unveiled no Sinatra Doctrine, signaled no readiness to let Arab societies go their own way. Instead, the Obama administration has sought to preserve America's traditional security framework for the Middle East. It has buttressed strategic allies where possible, as in Bahrain, and strived to limit the amount of change wrought by popular uprisings, as in Egypt.

On this score, Mubarak's downfall is especially instructive. Since 2006 the main currents of opposition in Egypt have explicitly opposed US political and economic goals. In fact, going further back the lineage of protests can be traced to rallies in solidarity with the second Palestinian intifada of 2000 and mass denunciations of the Iraq War in 2003. Additionally, Egypt's position as a node in US force projection (through the Suez Canal and Egyptian airspace), as the most populous Arab nation, and as a peace partner with Israel makes the stakes of political change especially high for Washington.

Although Obama congratulated Egyptians for their victory over Mubarak, the White House and State Department had pushed for a more regulated transition that would have followed the Egyptian constitution and established Suleiman as the de facto president for seven months, if not longer.

The administration notably did not endorse a plan floated by Mohamed ElBaradei, an opposition leader and former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, that would have had a civilian council replace Mubarak and oversee constitutional changes and new elections. Instead, public rhetoric aside, the Obama administration stood pat with Mubarak and Suleiman through two weeks of protests, belatedly accepting a soft military coup that would sideline both men.

Even with Mubarak out of office and new elections being scheduled, the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) has yet to break from the tradition of military rule and heavy policing that has characterized Egyptian politics for nearly 60 years.

Two distinct movements fed Egypt's initial “Day of Wrath” on Tuesday, January 25, 2011. The first, composed of urban-based political activists, objected to Mubarak's apparent bid to hand power to his son, through a future presidential election. They wanted structural reforms to the regime, including presidential term limits and an end to the state of emergency that subjected Egyptians to martial law. The second group was made up of blue- and white-collar workers who had been

pressing for increased wages and benefits, as well as the right to form unions independent of government control.

Both trends threatened US policy makers and investors who had depended on Mubarak for regional security cooperation and aggressive privatization. Any outcome that brought the opposition's constituencies to power would presumably entail a far more assertive, perhaps even adversarial, approach toward the United States. These concerns made the White House reticent to embrace the democracy movement and fostered a strategy of limited liberalization that, were it not for the demonstrators themselves, would have given Mubarak and his cronies the chance to recover and re-trench themselves.

OUT OF CONTROL

Initially, the US government did not think Mubarak's hold on power was threatened. "Our assessment," remarked Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on January 25, "is that the Egyptian government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people." Later that week Vice President Joseph Biden refused to call Mubarak a dictator. Friday evening Mubarak addressed his countrymen and offered a cabinet shuffle, not his own resignation. The next day he appointed Suleiman vice president.

That weekend a cautious US response took shape. Scores of Egyptians had been killed by the Ministry of Interior, but when the White House was asked whether such repression would scotch America's considerable assistance package, a spokesman answered only that the administration would be "reviewing" aid in light of events. On Sunday morning talk shows, Clinton ignored ElBaradei's proposal for a transitional council and said the administration supported an "orderly transition," America's watchword for the remainder of the uprising.

An "orderly transition" would hypothetically bring about liberalizing reforms, demobilize the protesters, and reassure nearby allies, among them Israel and Saudi Arabia, who favored keeping Mubarak in power. The transition Obama's national security team envisioned would shift power not to the opposition but to Suleiman.

When Mubarak seemed to be dragging his feet in a second televised address the following Tuesday, Obama admonished him that "orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now." But this did not necessitate Mubarak's resignation—he could recede into the background while formally staying in office. Tactically concerned that the Egyptian president was exacerbating the crisis, administration officials focused their energies on Suleiman and military officers.

The Egyptian armed forces shared the White House's interest in restoring order and dispersing the protests. On February 4, dubbed the "Friday of Departure" by demonstrators, Defense Minister Mohamed Hussein Tantawi visited Tahrir Square and urged protesters to pack up, to no avail. By that point the central demand of the protesters was Mubarak's resignation. US officials preferred instead for Mubarak to cede his presidential powers to Suleiman but remain nominal executive until the constitution could be amended and presidential elections were held in September.

Responding to skepticism that Suleiman looked like "Mubarak II," Clinton expressed confidence that the former intelligence chief would reduce government repression and enable Egyptians to campaign freely. But the opposition had refused

Suleiman's cynical offer of a "dialogue," one that pointedly excluded ElBaradei and looked like another attempt by the regime to reduce pressure through pseudo-liberalization.

At the climax of the uprising, Suleiman dismayed the White House and confirmed protesters' fears that he was not sincere about opening the political system. On Tuesday, February 8, organizers opened a third week of rallies. That day crowds in Cairo and Alexandria grew prodigiously, bolstered by labor strikes in textiles, telecommunications, transportation, and other sectors. Vice President Biden implored Suleiman to lift the state of emergency and thereby help quell the protests by evincing concrete steps toward reform. Instead, Suleiman assured Biden that Mubarak would soon step aside and make Suleiman the de facto president.

Thursday night Mubarak and Suleiman gave sequential televised addresses. Instead of delivering the crisp handover White House officials expected, Mubarak rambled for 14 minutes before saying he would transfer some "powers" of the presi-

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dency to his vice president. While millions around Egypt erupted in anger over Mubarak's intransigence, Suleiman told citizens to "return to your homes and places of work." Administration officials realized Mubarak and Suleiman had botched their last chance for a handover. After proactively supporting the Egyptian regime for decades, the United States reactively accepted a limited leadership change, from Mubarak to his defense minister, that would subdue the uprising.

The Egyptian army had also wanted to limit the scope of political change. It was only the massive outpouring of protesters that induced the army to turn against Mubarak. Members of Egypt's top military council later told *The Washington Post*: "At the beginning, we gave the presidential institution the full opportunity to manage events. If it were able to succeed, nothing would have happened. We would have pulled our people back to the barracks. But they were incapable of responding to the events. . . . On February 10, there were demonstrations that amounted to millions of people all over the country." On February 11, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces ordered Suleiman to announce that Mubarak had relinquished the office of the presidency.

A BELLWETHER?

The Arab Spring has not melted away the domestic obstacles to democratization. Security states still menace activists from Rabat to Manama, and oil rents enable many regimes to operate with impunity. What is often less appreciated, however, are the transnational forces that reinforce these internal bulwarks against popular sovereignty. In other regions during the post-cold war era, foreign governments have helped challenge authoritarianism by supporting local democratic activists. Explaining democratization from sub-Saharan Africa to Central Europe, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way have cited the "linkage" and "leverage" between Western states and developing countries.

In the Middle East, the opposite has been the case. Whether for fear of a second Iran (Algeria's election in 1991–1992) or containment of Iran itself (in the 2000s) American rationales for supporting Arab regimes have trumped the alternative of accepting popular sovereignty. Thus, while no country was more linked to and leveraged by Washington than Egypt, the White House saw its interests aligned there with the political and economic elite of a repressive security state. Activists

promoting a more democratic Egypt operated in the shadow of a regime with powerful foreign patrons.

America's rhetorical championing of political freedom, and Arabs' ongoing exposure to the example of Western liberties and prosperity, played an important part in birthing the Arab Spring. But US officials continue to place material and political resources at the disposal of allied juntas and monarchs in the region. And no American president has issued the equivalent of the Gorbachev Doctrine and yanked support for embattled pro-US regimes that repress protest.

Rather, the pattern in 2011, as in prior years, has been to rhetorically celebrate popular emancipation while operationally defending political continuity. Only when the Egyptian opposition made the White House's "orderly transition" untenable did the US administration belatedly accept Mubarak's ouster and the start of an extra-constitutional transition.

At the time of this writing politics across the Arab world remains in flux. In this uncertain environment, Egypt provides a potential bellwether. On one side, organizers from new and traditional political movements have strived to purge the Egyptian state of corrupt and repressive officials. Protests in March, April, and July 2011 forced out an unpopular prime minister, brought criminal prosecution on Mubarak and his two sons, and triggered a cabinet reshuffle.

From the other side, the SCAF has unilaterally issued constitutional decrees and resisted calls to revamp the police apparatus. The SCAF thus far has rejected local calls for international monitors during elections for the People's Assembly, slated to take place in three rounds between November 2011 and January 2012.

Until the military accepts civilian sovereignty (still a distant prospect), the ceiling of Egyptian democratization may be what Levitsky and Way call "competitive authoritarianism," a situation of more contested elections and broadened political opportunities, but under the continuing dominance of oligarchs and regime cronies.

After Mubarak's resignation, Obama hailed the result. "The people of Egypt have spoken, their voices have been heard, and Egypt will never be the same," he declared. If US foreign policy remains the same, however, the region's authoritarians will continue to count on American support as they prevent Arab citizens from going their own way. ■