



The Myth of the Useful Dictator

In propping up autocrats in countries like Yemen and Bahrain, the United States has long weighed its interests against its principles. Is it a false choice?

BY JAMES TRAUB | MARCH 18, 2011



In a [recent column](#) mocking the argument for a military intervention in Libya, *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd cited John Quincy Adams's famous dictum that the United States "goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy." Foreign-policy realists count Adams as their founding father; like him, they view American meddling in the internal struggles of faraway places as a species of national folly.

The Arab world has a way of turning American policymakers into realists: The stakes are just too great for it to be otherwise. Anyone can thunder against rogue leaders in Sudan or Zimbabwe, or for that matter in Libya, where the United States has no vital interests. In the Middle East, where publics disagree -- often vehemently -- with Western policy on Israel, counterterrorism, and Iran, unaccountable leaders are prepared to ignore public opinion so long as they see those policies as in their country's (or their own) interests. What's more, autocrats offer a form of one-stop shopping that makes them vastly easier to deal with than parliaments and an

unbuttoned media.

But the events now transforming the Arab world illustrate the degree to which Adams's intellectual heirs are making a false choice. America's national interests now depend on the well-being of people in remote places as they did not in the early 19th century. The chaos not only in Libya but in formerly staid autocracies like Bahrain and Yemen seriously threatens American interests and shows how foolish it was to have counted on the stability of these states.

This sentiment has, it's true, become something of a cliché. George W. Bush's administration, of course, acknowledged the limits of realism. But outside Iraq, Bush's policy in the region -- like that of nearly all his predecessors -- proved to be vastly more realist than its rhetoric. In a famous 2005 speech in Cairo, Condoleezza Rice admitted that "For 60 years, my country, the United States pursued stability at the expense of democracy in the Middle East -- and we achieved neither." But, she said, the United States had come to understand that in the long run despotic regimes eventually lose their legitimacy, and thus stability. Rice herself, like the rest of the democracy-promoting Bush administration, ultimately wound up betting on stability rather than democracy in Egypt and elsewhere in the region; the pressure of short-term interests ultimately prevails over the calculus of long-term benefits. Thus the Middle East policies of U.S. presidents tend to be a great deal more realist than the rhetoric.

American presidents seem destined to make the same fine professions, then pursue the same apparently pragmatic line, and finally learn the same painful lessons again and again. President Barack Obama only jumped on the bandwagon of change in Egypt and Tunisia when it turned into a juggernaut, at which point the merits of dealing with an autocrat had become moot. Like his predecessors, he has refrained from any public criticism of the domestic policies of Saudi Arabia, which can turn the oil spigot on or off at will.

But realism doesn't look as realistic as it used to. Saudi Arabia, at least for the moment, looks unshakeable, but what does Obama do about the American allies desperately resisting calls for change and doing terrible damage in the process -- that is, Bahrain and Yemen? In Yemen, after weeks of relatively peaceful mass protest, government troops have fired on protesters, reportedly killing dozens. Before the massacre, there was some reason to hope that a compromise solution might be possible, because President Ali Abdullah Saleh had promised not to run again, though he had refused to step down before the end of his current term in 2013 -- as the opposition has insisted he do. Both sides may emerge so hardened from this new bout of violence that U.S. and European diplomats will be able to do little to help bring them together.

The same dangerous dynamic has now emerged in Bahrain, where the situation looks, if anything, yet more dangerous and less tractable. Bahrain, of course, is home to America's 5th Fleet; and in a country whose population is 70 percent Shiite, the Sunni monarchy serves as a counterweight to Iranian influence in the Persian Gulf. The ruling Khalifa family undertook limited political reforms a decade or so ago and is considerably less reactionary than Saudi Arabia, its neighbor and chief patron. For all these reasons, the Khalifas have enjoyed a virtual exemption from U.S. criticism, even after jailing dissidents and shutting down civil society organizations

last year. So long as repression didn't threaten stability, there were no monsters that needed to be destroyed.

The Obama administration largely stuck to that script over the last two years. In the early weeks of the uprising, as tens, then hundreds of thousands, of Shiite protesters poured into the streets demanding equal treatment, the White House did not publicly criticize the regime, as it did in the case of Egypt and Tunisia. Officials only began to change their tune last week when the ruling family declared martial law, "invited" 2,000 troops from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to help them deal with the uprising, and then savagely attacked protesters with tanks and guns. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton **said** that the United States "deplored the use of force," while Defense Secretary Robert Gates **urged** the regime to take "more far-reaching steps" to meet protesters' demands. Neither, however, called on the Saudi troops to leave or the Bahraini regime to begin to relinquish some of its authority, as the protesters have demanded.

The administration argues that the United States can't simply take the protesters' side, as it did elsewhere, because hard-liners among them are blocking compromise, just as hard-liners in the regime are doing. Officials have thus been trying to preserve space for moderates on both sides. But Leslie Campbell, Middle East director for the National Democratic Institute, says that U.S. officials in the region, including Gates and Assistant Secretary of State Jeffrey Feltman, have been more willing to criticize moderate Shiite parties for declining to join negotiations than they have regime leaders for flatly rejecting the protesters' demands. Michele Dunne, a Middle East expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, gives the administration more credit for toughness in recent days, but says that until then "they were being really soft on the Khalifas."

A precious opportunity has been lost. Earlier in the uprising, al-Wefaq, the largest Shiite opposition group, had promised to accept the continuation of the Khalifa dynasty, but had demanded at a minimum a change in the absurd districting rules which allowed more Sunnis than Shiites to win seats in the lower house. Campbell believes that the moderates would have been able to persuade the bulk of the protesters to come to the table had the ruling family agreed to talk about redistricting or "telegraph that the Khalifa family is open to the eventual evolution of a constitutional monarchy." But the regime's own hard-liners refused to make that offer. It's unlikely that more concerted American pressure could have tipped the balance -- Saudi Arabia matters more to Bahrain than the United States does -- but Campbell argues that the White House didn't try hard enough. Now many of the protesters are calling for the king's head, which really would be a disaster for U.S. policy.

American policymakers have long viewed Bahrain, like the other Gulf monarchies, as a place where U.S. interests are best served by an autocratic regime that tempers its policies enough to satisfy the demands of critics. But that realist calculus doesn't look so wise in retrospect. Bahrain appears to be evolving toward something like Syria: a minority-ruled state that will use repression and force to keep a majority from gaining power. And Bahrain is unlikely to achieve Syria's iron-fisted control over dissent. The fear of the Shiite majority, stoked by the Saudi nightmare of an Iranian-dominated state just across the Persian Gulf, will intensify the repression -- which will in turn radicalize the already outraged Bahraini Shiites. That, if anything, will increase the likelihood of Iranian meddling. Autocratic stability will be a distant memory: The 5th Fleet will be based not in the calm harbor of an

enlightened despot but in perpetually stormy seas.

It's a terrible mess for everyone: the United States, the regime, and above all the Shiite opposition. And it's a mess that vindicates the view that autocratic states look stable until they're not -- at which point it quickly becomes too late to do much about it. Muammar al-Qaddafi's rule in Libya looked every bit as impervious to pressure as that of the Khalifas; now violence and chaos have reached a point where outsiders feel compelled to engage in a risky intervention. John Quincy Adams never could have imagined a global system in which distant disturbances profoundly threaten American interests. The United States will undoubtedly find it far more difficult to carry out counterterrorism policies in a Middle East where leaders are accountable to their own citizens. But a Middle East full of citizens bursting with fury at the tyrants who have crushed their democratic aspirations will be so fixated on internal security that it will be virtually useless on core American concerns like nuclear nonproliferation or containing Iran.

The Saudis, realists to the last, believe that autocrats can stay in power forever through a combination of repression and bribery, and thus regard the American preoccupation with legitimacy as a pernicious delusion. But it's the Saudis who are defying reality. Saudi "realism" may be a bigger threat to the region -- and to American interests -- than Iranian expansionism. America cannot afford a stillborn popular uprising in the Arab world; in Bahrain and elsewhere, the United States and its allies in the West now owe it to themselves to insist on democratic reform, and to keep pressing with every available instrument until regimes accept the demands of their citizens.

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