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AS DICTATORSHIPS CRUMBLE ACROSS THE MIDDLE EAST, WHAT HAPPENS IF ARAB DEMOCRACY MEANS THE RISE OF RADICAL ISLAMISM? DOES PROMOTING AMERICAN VALUES WHILE PROTECTING AMERICAN INTERESTS—MOST NOTABLY, CONTAINING IRAN AND PRESERVING OUR ACCESS TO OIL—REQUIRE THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION TO CALL FOR MORE DEMOCRACY IN ONE COUNTRY WHILE PROPPING UP THE MONARCH NEXT DOOR? IN A WORD, YES.

By Jeffrey Goldberg



THE LIBRAIRIE AL KITAB is a crowded bookstore on Avenue Habib Bourguiba, the main boulevard of Tunis, the once-drowsy capital of the previously lethargic North African republic of Tunisia. Today, of course, Tunisia is known as the cockpit of the Great Arab Revolt of 2011. During the reign of the now-deposed president, the debauched kleptocrat Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali—whose capitulation in January in the face of furious street protests triggered uprisings across the Arab world—the employees of the Librairie al Kitab kept a weather eye on the secret police. As luck would have it, the secret police kept their headquarters just across the street, in a whitewashed building housing the Interior Ministry.

If the Librairie al Kitab had dared to carry a book containing even an insinuation of Ben Ali's perfidy, it would have been "goodbye to the bookstore," Kamel Hmaïdi, one of the employees, told me when I visited in late March. "We would go to jail," he said, pointing out the window toward the looming ministry building. "Just there."

Today, though, the display window of Librairie al Kitab is a shrine to the glories of free speech, given over in large part to works excoriating Ben Ali's regime and his family. The titles include *Le silence tunisien*; *La Tunisie de Ben Ali: La société contre le régime*; and *Ben Ali: Le ripou*, which translates to "Ben Ali:



The Rotten One." Also: a number of books illuminating the transgressions of various other Arab dictators, and two books on the pitiable life and ghastly death of the Tunisian fruit-and-vegetable seller Mohamed Bouazizi, whose self-immolation, provoked by unending privation and the intolerable humiliation of a policewoman's face-slapping assault, set off the revolution. The store had sold several hundred copies of *Le ripou* since January, Hmaïdi said.

Some time earlier, in Damascus, I had visited a bookstore in search of a reasonably non-hagiographic biography of Syria's hereditary dictator, Bashar al-Assad. I could not find a single one, only book-length condemnations of Western treachery, and copies, in three languages, of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. It was a suffocating little shop. The Librairie al Kitab, by contrast, is a joyous place: little else in the world could give a visitor from a free nation as much happiness as the sight of a bookstore in a once-totalitarian state selling, finally, the books it wants to sell, without fear of imprisonment and ruin.

It is true that Ben Ali, for all his now well-cataloged sins, was not a top-tier Middle Eastern tyrant. His secret police operated with a degree of refinement, at least in comparison with the thuggish practices of Hosni Mubarak's secret agents; and his cult of personality was underdeveloped, certainly when compared with that of his neighbor to the east, Muammar Qaddafi. But Ben Ali was a virtuoso thief, a ravenous looter of the state treasury. The new head of the Central Bank of Tunisia, Mustapha Kamel Nabli, brought back from self-imposed exile to help right his country's broken economy, described his work so far as an adventure in forensic accounting. "Anything they could steal, they stole," he told me. "I think it will take years for us to understand the extent of the corruption. The family of Ben Ali treated Tunisia as their personal property."

Ben Ali's wife, Leïla Trabelsi, an arriviste hairdresser who would dispatch government airplanes to Saint-Tropez for shopping trips, carried herself as if she were the uncrowned queen of Carthage. Her daughter and son-in-law maintained a mansion of extraordinary size and tackiness on the Mediterranean, whose grounds included a very Uday Hussein-esque enclosure for a pet tiger named Pasha. On at least one occasion they sent a government aircraft to Europe to fetch their favorite frozen yogurt. Before they fled to Saudi Arabia, Ben Ali and his wife reportedly looted the Central Bank, taking as much as a ton and a half of gold bullion. All told, the family may have stolen billions of dollars from the treasury. Thirty percent of young people in Tunisia are unemployed.

A former American ambassador to Tunisia, Robert Godec, told me recently that the family's brazenness infuriated ordinary Tunisians. (His acerbic observations about Ben Ali's family, made in cables later exposed by Wikileaks, are believed by many Tunisians to have provided a crucial spark to the anti-Ben

Ali movement.) “My sense was that there was profound anger at Ben Ali, his wife, and many of their family members,” Godec said. “When the family wanted a piece of land, the local municipality would tell the owner there was a problem with the title. Then the title would be suddenly transferred to an entity controlled by someone in the family. You can understand how people could become quite angered by this.”

Godec, like other American officials, warned Ben Ali about his sinking reputation, but the president, he said, had no patience for reproachful Americans. And of course, American diplomats understood that there was utility for the United States in maintaining close relations with Ben Ali. Like Mubarak (and even the late-stage Qaddafi, who enjoyed a several-year period of *détente* with the U.S.), Ben Ali was a foe of Islamic radicalism, and his intelligence services provided not-inconsequential help in the American campaign against al-Qaeda. “Whenever we raised issues of political freedom or corruption, the answers were always the stock answers: ‘We’re threatened by the Islamist party, we’re facing extremists, you Americans don’t understand that we’re your only true friends.’”

Of course, various American administrations, embracing the “realist” notion that stability in Middle East countries brought about through repression could be maintained in perpetuity, accepted Ben Ali’s self-interested analysis of his centrality to the struggle against terrorism, even though Tunisia has the most secular of North Africa’s populations, and one of the most highly educated.

It is this history of sometimes full-throated American support for Ben Ali’s leadership that accounts for the brisk sales of many anti-American books, some of them screedish, in the Librairie al Kitab. “Those books are popular,” Kamel Hmaïdi said. “The books about Ben Ali are more popular.”

I cut short my shopping when I heard a commotion outside the store. Demonstrators were marching in the direction of the Interior Ministry. The only thing more thrilling to an American heart than the sight of a once-censored bookstore selling what it wants to sell is the sight of young citizens of a formerly authoritarian country gathering to demand their rights.

The Interior Ministry building was surrounded by coils of concertina wire; armored personnel carriers and Humvees were parked inside the wire, and soldiers patrolled the perimeter, though it was unclear whether the soldiers were meant to protect the ministry from the protesters, or the protesters from the remnants of the secret police. The demonstrators, marching up from the Casbah, which was the scene of much of the violence of the January revolution, were mainly young people in their teens or 20s, and they were vociferous, even volatile. I joined the crowd. Hundreds of these demonstrators pressed right up to the concertina wire. One of the signs, interestingly, carried the *Shahada*, the Muslim profession of faith. Another read in English, OUR FREEDOM CAN’T WAIT—MALCOLM X.

I asked the demonstrators around me, “What are we protesting today?” A university student named Latifa said, “The Interior Ministry refuses to let women be photographed for their identity cards wearing the hijab,” the traditional head covering religious Muslim women wear—and in some countries, are compelled by law to wear. “They force women to remove the hijab,” she continued. “This is an insult to Islam. We are demanding that the ministry allow us to wear the hijab at all times.”

Oh.

Just then I noticed that a number of the young men in the crowd were bearded, and that many, though

certainly not all, of the women kept their hair covered. These protesters did not conform to the stereotype of the typical secular Tunisian, yet here they were, in numbers. “Our leaders will understand that Tunisia is a Muslim country,” one of the demonstrators, an unemployed college graduate named Ezzedine Brahim, told me. Brahim described himself as a “youth supporter” of the main Tunisian Islamist party, Ennahda, which was recently made legal after a 20-year ban. He said he was convinced that Islamist-led parties would come to dominate Tunisian politics. My expression must have betrayed me, because he continued: “Yes, everyone says that Tunisia is a secular state, but what they don’t understand is that underneath everything, we are Muslims. The power of Islam has been released.” I asked him a bellwether question: Do you believe women should be made to wear the hijab in public? He answered, “We are striving for a society in which women understand that they are expected to be modest.”

Would you compel them to wear the hijab, if you gained power? “There is no compulsion necessary,” he said. “In a just society, men and women would understand the roles they are supposed to play.”

Suddenly there was another commotion; a group of protesters had split off and seemed to be harassing a middle-aged man in a dark suit. “You are an enemy of Islam!” one of the protesters yelled, as the man scurried away. I did not know it yet, but this man was my next appointment. He was Abdelhamid Largueche, a well-known academic and proponent of secularism, as well as a member of the recently created Committee for the Protection of the Revolution, a body of 71 Tunisians meant to advise the government. When we met later at a nearby hotel, he said, “If those people take over this country, I’m finished.”

“Will they take over?” I asked.

“This is hard to imagine. There is a silent majority of Tunisians who don’t want these Islamists near them. Religion is a private affair here, more than most any other Arab nation,” he said. “Our revolution is an exceptional revolution. It calls for modernity. But as we know from history, they do not need the support of the majority to get their way.”

I asked Largueche whether he thought the demonstrators would get their way on the hijab. “Let us hope that this is not representative of the future,” he said.

Later that day, I was on the phone with a Tunisian acquaintance who mentioned the creation of a local Salafist party. This surprised me. Salafists are ascetic medievalists—they are considerably more immoderate than the Muslim Brothers, who are themselves not archetypes of moderation. (The Saudi Arabian Wahhabi clerical elite are Salafists, for example.) Meeting a Salafist in ostensibly secular Tunis is like finding a Tea Party member on the Berkeley City Council. But these sorts of disorienting moments are becoming common in the Middle East.

IN THESE EARLY DAYS of the Arab revolt, President Obama and his administration, already busy with other wars, are struggling for clarity. At a time when policy makers are wrestling with what might be called, in a nod to the president, the fierce incoherence of now, the administration has to bring about the marginalization of anti-modern, anti-Western, Islamist-oriented political parties, while not seeming to be working toward that goal. It has to continually decide which governments of the Middle East deserve the support of the United States and which deserve abandonment. This question points up a core contradiction of the moment: at the same time America is working for permanent and

dramatic democratic change in certain republics of the Middle East, it has, 235 years after freeing itself from the rule of a despotic king, gone into the monarchy-maintenance business, propping up kings, emirs, and sheikhs who, though they may be as venal as Ben Ali, Qaddafi, and Mubarak, have oil the West needs, and who serve as a counterbalance to the greatest threat facing the U.S. in the Middle East, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Creating an overarching doctrine suitable for the moment is an almost impossible task, particularly during a crisis that demands from American policy makers analytical humility, doctrinal plasticity, and a tolerance for contradiction. Analytical humility is called for because the trajectories of the Middle East's revolutions are still difficult to discern, and because it is not yet clear that tyranny is, in fact, in permanent eclipse. Doctrinal plasticity, which in a less value-neutral way could be called hypocrisy, is a necessity because, while it is true that President Obama, to the surprise of many, has shown himself to be more of a liberal interventionist than a cold-eyed realist, it is also true that America retains fixed, and vital, interests across the Middle East, interests that have already forced America to side with monarchs over the masses they rule. And a tolerance for contradiction is vital not only because America's democratically elected government is scrambling to keep monarchs on their thrones, but because people across the Middle East are embracing American ideals—freedom of speech, financial transparency, leaders who are chosen by the people and are accountable to them—while at the same time distancing themselves from America itself, and rejecting American assumptions about what freedom is meant to look like.

As it happened, the day before the pro-hijab demonstration, Hillary Clinton had made a flash visit to Tunis, in order to praise the revolution, meet with the leaders it had brought to power, and listen to rank-and-file citizens, including and especially women, whose place in the world is a main preoccupation of her tenure as secretary of state. Her most public event on this visit took place at a television studio outside Tunis, before an audience of mainly young people, few of whom, judging by appearance, seemed to be traditional Muslims. "One of the reasons I'm so optimistic about Tunisia is because women in Tunisia have played a role in the professional, public, economic life—every aspect of life in Tunisia—since independence," Clinton told the crowd, which, in the main, greeted her warmly. (Tunisia achieved independence from France in 1956.) "I have met with, by now, I would imagine, many, many hundreds of leaders everywhere. And it is so rare when a leader raises with me the pride he has in the women of his country. I often raise it with them. I'll say, 'You can't really be fully developed if you don't use the potential of 50 percent of your population.' The president, the prime minister, and the foreign minister all raised it on their own. And they said, 'There will be no going back in the democratic revolution of Tunisia for our women; they will be full participants.'"

Clinton's campaign for women's enfranchisement is, of course, well known across the world, and even an inadequately briefed prime minister of a small nation (particularly one seeking an increase in American financial aid) would know to preempt Clinton's exhortations by touting his own deeply felt feminism. But it's also empirically true that Tunisia is an outlier in the Arab world on matters related to women. In Cairo, a woman's uncovered head has become something of an unusual sight, but in Tunisia it's the norm. Which is why the pro-hijab demonstration in Tunis gave me whiplash, and which is why I raised it with Clinton when I saw her at her State Department office a few weeks ago. She discussed the issue of hijab-wearing, and all that it signifies, in a measured way. Her main worry, she said, is

legislation that would mandate the wearing of the hijab.

“What I want to see is the freedom to choose,” Clinton said. “My model would be our own country. Women are able to dress as they choose in accordance with their own personal desires, and I would like to see this available for women everywhere, so that there is no compulsion.” The Obama administration has maintained a flexible, even positive, attitude about the hijab (unlike the French government, which sees covered women, and particularly fully veiled women, as a threat to the country’s national security, and to its cultural identity). In a speech delivered in Cairo in 2009, President Obama, in the course of attempting to reset America’s relations with the Muslim world, even boasted of America’s tolerance for the hijab:

Freedom in America is indivisible from the freedom to practice one’s religion. That is why there is a mosque in every state of our union ... That is why the U.S. government has gone to court to protect the right of women and girls to wear the hijab, and to punish those who would deny it.

This particular assertion in the Cairo speech was not met with joy by some Middle Eastern women’s-rights activists I spoke with at the time, women who believed that the U.S. should do nothing to celebrate the hijab—something that many Muslim women hope to shed when they come to America.

When Clinton talked to me about the hijab, however, she made clear that an attempt to pressure women in any way to cover themselves—anything on “the continuum of compulsion”—would represent a red line for her. “When people start to say that there are certain things that women should not be permitted to do, and the only way we can stop them is pass laws, like you can’t drive in Saudi Arabia, or you can’t vote ... that’s a red line, and that infringes on the rights of women. Therefore I am against it. Any society in the 21st century that is looking toward modernization, and certainly [any society] claiming to be democratic, needs to protect the right to make these choices.”

This was a blunt message, delivered, quite obviously, in the direction of conservative religious forces; the secretary of state, correctly, sees the forced imposition of the hijab as a proxy for the ascendance of fundamentalist Islamism. So I asked her about the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, and of parties espousing ideologies similar to that of the Brotherhood. As winter turned to spring, it was becoming clear in Egypt that the Brotherhood, whose strength was downplayed by most Western commentators during the early days of the revolt in Egypt, was emerging as a power broker of surpassing importance.

The Muslim Brotherhood is a global organization with autonomous branches, some more radical than others (the terrorist group Hamas, in Gaza, is a Muslim Brotherhood offshoot, for instance). There is a diversity of opinion, but those who affiliate with the Brotherhood believe, generally, in the primacy of Muslim law; in the supremacy of Islam; and in the idea that women and men should play their traditional roles in society. They also tend to believe that the West (and Israel, the country they consider a Western outpost in the Middle East) seeks, through conspiracy, to undermine their way of life. American analysts are spending a great deal of time studying the Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere (the Brotherhood’s Jordan branch, the Islamic Action Front, is that country’s most potent opposition political force), and there is some debate, in and out of administration circles, about the true views of the organization, especially in Egypt. Since the Arab revolution began, the Muslim Brotherhood has shown signs of fracturing along ideological lines, but its leaders have proved somewhat adept at playing politics, particularly that aspect of politics in which hard questions are

ducked. I recently had a conversation with Mohamed Morsy, one of the Brotherhood's senior leaders, in which he refused, to an almost comical degree, to grapple with two simple questions: Could the Brotherhood support a Christian for the Egyptian presidency? Could it support a woman? (The Brotherhood's 2007 draft party platform, from which the organization is now trying to distance itself, makes clear that a Christian could not serve as president of Egypt.)

"Which Christian?" Morsy responded when I first asked.

I explained: not a particular Christian, but any Christian.

"There are no Christians running for president," he said.

Yes, I know. It's a theoretical question.

"This is a nonsense question," he said. So I asked him if the Brotherhood had ideological objections to a woman's running for president.

"Which woman?" he asked.

It is worth remembering, particularly at a time when the Muslim Brotherhood is attempting to soften its image, that the group's essential platform remains unchanged. The Muslim Brotherhood's avowed creed is "Allah is our objective. The Prophet is our leader. Quran is our law. Jihad is our way. Dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope."

I asked Clinton whether she worried about the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology, particularly as it related to the future of women in the Arab Middle East. "Well, I think we don't know enough yet to understand exactly what they're morphing into. For me, the jury is out," she said. "There are some Islamist elements that are coming to the surface in Egypt that I think, on just the face of it—they're coming out of jails, coming out of the shadows—are inimical to a democracy, to the kind of freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of conscience that was the aspiration of Tahrir Square."

This was, if anything, an even more measured answer than one expects from Clinton. But in this fluid period, when there is a reasonable chance—not a large one, but still a reasonable one—that the Muslim Brotherhood might splinter, or perhaps even find itself in vigorous competition with more-secular-minded parties, Clinton and Obama recognize that the Brotherhood could turn harsh American criticism into a campaign advantage, particularly among more rural, poorly educated, and traditionalist voters.

Over the past several months, Obama administration officials have spoken more about the establishment of universal red lines (parties espousing violence, for instance, will meet with Obama's disapproval), and about aiding all parties in their attempts to master the democratic process, than they have about the ideological dangers posed by the rise of Islamist-oriented parties. "Our interest in these transitions is to ensure that a broad, diverse set of parties are capable of organizing and mounting competent campaigns," Benjamin J. Rhodes, a deputy national-security adviser, told me, adding that the Obama administration does not want anxiety about the rise of Muslim parties to unduly influence its policies. "The president's view is that we can't let ourselves be driven by fear of change, particularly because change is coming." He went on, "This is not fatalism. You have to take a step back and acknowledge that it is a good thing when people are demanding the same rights that we ourselves

believe in. Indigenous democratic movements are what the U.S. wants, even if they create short-term challenges and complexities.” Another administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity, put it more bluntly: “Do you really think that if we announced ourselves as the enemy of the Muslim Brotherhood that this is going to do anything except help the Muslim Brotherhood?”

En route to Tunis, I had stopped off in Jordan, where I paid a visit to the royal palace. Senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman had passed through a few weeks earlier, to see King Abdullah II. Their visit, I quickly learned, was simultaneously a source of bemusement and irritation for the Jordanian government. The two senators, of course, advocate an assertive foreign policy, and both are associated with neoconservative striving for robust and quick democratization of the Middle East. “They came in and said that Jordan should open up its political space for more parties, and be more aggressive about democratization within the parameters of a constitutional monarchy,” a senior Jordanian official told me. “And then they said, ‘But whatever you do, don’t allow the Muslim Brotherhood to gain more power.’ So they want us to be open and closed at the same time.”

King Abdullah is in a tough spot these days. His popularity is lower than at any other point in his 12-year reign, as discontent—mainly generated by allegations of corruption in his government—takes hold. Jordan, like most Middle East countries, has been a *mukhabarat*, or secret-police, state, but it has always created some space for politics and dissent. The sort of dissent I heard in Jordan on this last trip was unlike anything I had heard before. One Friday morning, I visited Zarqa, a city not far from the capital, Amman. It is a rough, poor place; its most famous son is the arch-terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The Islamic Action Front, the Muslim Brotherhood’s local political party, was holding a rally after prayers. One of its leaders, Zaki Bani Rsheid, stood on the back of a flatbed truck parked on a narrow street as hundreds of men gathered to listen. All along the rooftops stood men from Jordanian intelligence, the Mukhabarat, ostentatiously filming the proceedings. “It is not your job to protect the corruption of the regime!,” Bani Rsheid said, looking to the roofs. “Remember, what is acceptable today will not be acceptable later! Today we are asking for the reform of the regime. Tomorrow we will be asking you for something else!” A threat like that, made aloud, in the face of the secret police, is a new and fraught development in Jordan. “An organization dedicating itself to gaining power through violence has to be stopped,” McCain told me. He noted that the Muslim Brothers in Jordan have publicly sworn off violence, but he said he doubts their sincerity. “Everybody says that the Muslim Brotherhood is being deceiving in adopting a much more moderate image.” The king, McCain said, had taken his point. “He got it. He’s smart.”

The Jordanian monarchy represents the sort of regime the United States finds itself defending. It is not the most difficult regime in the Middle East to defend—throughout the early stages of the Arab revolt, Bahrain’s royal family, engaged in the often violent suppression of the country’s Shia majority, was the problem child of the American monarchy-maintenance program—but Jordan is still governed in a manner inconsistent with the spirit of Tahrir Square, a spirit appropriated by President Obama and Secretary Clinton whenever they speak of the Arab desire for democracy.

Hillary Clinton, as one would expect, doesn’t think much of the charge that the administration is engaged in a sustained campaign of hypocrisy. As the administration’s point person on the entire set of issues roiling the Middle East, she is perceived in dramatically divergent ways. In Cairo, many democracy activists believe she was overly coddling of Mubarak; at the same time, she is the object of

an intense lobbying campaign by leaders of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, who fear, according to ambassadors and foreign ministers I have spoken with, that she has become some sort of moralizing neoconservative. One Gulf official I spoke with asked me earnestly if Paul Wolfowitz, the leading neoconservative theoretician of the previous presidency, was now serving as her adviser. I mentioned to Clinton that she is seen in some quarters as a kind of wild-eyed Wolfowitz. “Oh, no, not that!” she said. “Call me wild-eyed, but not that.”

When I asked her how she squares the inconsistency—working to build democracies in some countries while keeping incompetent monarchs on their thrones in others—she rejected its very existence.

“I wouldn’t accept the premise,” she said. “I think we believe in the same values and principles, full stop. We believe that countries should empower their people. We believe that people should have certain universal rights. We believe that there are certain economic systems that work better for the vast majority of people than other systems. I think we’re very consistent.”

The U.S. needs to work with the monarchies to help them stay ahead of the unrest brewing in their kingdoms, Clinton said, but even if they don’t take American advice—and she was adamant (and the record does, in fact, show) that Hosni Mubarak was offered a great deal of advice that he consistently ignored—the administration will live with what she refuses to see as inconsistencies.

“We live in the real world, and there are lots of countries that we deal with because we have interests in common, we have certain security issues that we are both looking at,” she said. “Obviously, in the Middle East, Iran is an overwhelming challenge to all of us. We do business with a lot of countries whose economic systems or political systems are not ones we would design or choose to live under. We encourage consistently, both publicly and privately, reform and the protection of human rights. But we don’t walk away from dealing with China because we think they have a deplorable human-rights record. We don’t walk away from Saudi Arabia.”

I noted that the Chinese seem frightened by the possibility that the forces unleashed by the suicide of a Tunisian peddler could reach Tiananmen Square. “They’re worried,” she said. “They’re trying to stop history, which is a fool’s errand. They cannot do it, but they’re going to hold it off as long as possible.”

If it is true, to cite one of President Obama’s favorite Martin Luther King Jr. quotations, that the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice; and if it is true that history will sooner or later catch up with the Chinese Communist Party, then why isn’t it also true that history will soon catch up with a collection of superannuated desert monarchs? The answer came, elliptically, when I asked Clinton whether she would be sad to see the disappearance of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Not long ago, Clinton had been criticized for suggesting that Assad himself might be a “reformer,” though she acknowledges that Assad is anti-American in some very consequential ways (and not only in his service to Iran). “Depends on what replaces it,” she said, her answer combining disdain for Assad with a realpolitik understanding that some things out there are, despite the promise of the Arab Spring, potentially more dangerous to U.S. interests than certain dictatorships. For people who have known only dictatorship and who yearn for democracy, this is a hard swallow.

Striking this balance—understanding when the United States absolutely must support leaders it dislikes intensely—will remain the key foreign-policy challenge for the Obama administration, and perhaps its successors, in the coming years. Managing Saudi Arabia’s pre-modern royal family alone is

a herculean task. But the United States will ultimately fail if it forgets its fundamental responsibility to people who are living under the boot of repression, and seek the freedoms Americans already have.

On my most recent visit to the Middle East, I traveled from country to country asking essentially the same question of many different people: How could the United States best serve the interests of democracy and stability? Not a single person I spoke with believed that America was in decline; to a person, everyone agreed that American power was potent. Salafists believed it was potent and malevolent; secular democracy activists believed it could be marshaled benevolently. The most eloquent answer came from Ali Salem, a free-thinking Egyptian playwright whose plays and essays were periodically banned by the ancien régime. I met Salem in a café in the Mohandessin neighborhood of Cairo, on the west bank of the Nile. While we talked, various cartoonists, columnists, and Libyan resistance leaders joined us. Salem is an unusual figure, even among democracy activists in Cairo—he is frankly Americaphilic, in part because he was brought to the United States as a young man through a State Department visitors program. He was bursting with ideas about the roles the U.S. could play in the Middle East—in education, in agriculture, but mainly in teaching leaders about how power corrupts, and about building political systems that resist that corruption. “I believe you have a great thing,” he said. “The great thing is, you have a president for four or eight years, and then out. If you are an enemy of the minister of culture and he bans your plays, you will be banned for only four or eight years. The beautiful idea is to limit the damage one human being can do to another. It’s a beautiful idea. Do you know how beautiful it is?”

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