



## U.S. Strategy in a Transitioning Middle East: Reviving ‘State Responsibility’

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By Barak Mendelsohn

**Barak Mendelsohn** is Associate Professor of Political Science at Haverford College and an FPRI senior fellow. He is the author of *Combating Jihadism: American Hegemony and International Cooperation in the War on Terrorism* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), and currently is writing a book on al Qaeda’s franchising strategy.

*Abstract: In light of the uncertainty surrounding the Middle East stemming from the Arab Awakening, and the inability of Washington to shape the process of transition, U.S. decision-makers must rethink their strategy for the region in general and for counterterrorism in particular. Reducing U.S. involvement in the region and letting the dust settle will serve American interests better and allow for building healthier relations with Middle Eastern countries. At the same time, since the risk of negative effects on neighboring states that accompany transition must be kept in check, the United States, together with other powers, should lead the international community in reviving the principle of “state responsibility” as a productive way to reduce spillover of conflicts and even provide incentives for actors in the region to limit violence.*

Three years after the beginning of the Arab Awakening, popular perceptions of U.S. policy in the Middle East often reflect two negative, yet radically different, interpretations. U.S. actions appear either to be ad-hoc and reactive on the one hand, or incoherent, and—based on a simplistic comparison between the intervention in Libya and the inaction surrounding events in Bahrain and Syria—even hypocritical on the other. In truth, the magnitude and complexity of the changes in the region would have made the wish to shape developments in alignment with U.S. interests unrealistic even during the heyday of the American imperium. The constraints that Washington faces are even more glaring at a time when its hegemonic status is diminishing. Decision-making challenges are compounded by strong anti-American attitudes throughout the Middle East, which have persisted even with the election of a president who embodied the American quest for an improved image.

The frustration of the Obama Administration is understandable. It seems that the United States simply cannot win: it rarely gets credit for policies designed to

benefit the region's people, and it gets blamed for all it fails to do. It is criticized for meddling in the region, while simultaneously decried for doing too little to help the revolutionary forces that seek to topple ruling dictators, particularly in Syria. The sad reality is that in the near future, little good will come to the United States from the Middle East, and it is time that decision makers acknowledge this. They may believe that the United States is exceptional, required to lead and capable of shaping the world to reflect what it holds as universal values. But in the face of mounting evidence, it is time for greater realism, translated into a strategy, rather than half-hearted ad hoc actions, that will better serve American interests while reducing its footprint in the region.

The United States should not abandon its principles. In fact, at home, it should labor to revive the ideals that made it a source of inspiration to other nations. But at the same time, the United States should limit its proactive promotion abroad considerably. While each of the Middle East nations sorts out the solutions that work best for its unique conditions, the United States should revert to the fundamental principles on which the international society was founded. These principles prioritize the pursuit of order in the international system.

However, rather than simply promoting sovereignty and non-intervention, it should lead the international community in emphasizing the principle of "state responsibility" as a guide for the actions of states. This approach should also serve as a foundation for a more careful counterterrorism strategy. Emerging leaderships in the Middle East should know that state sovereignty will safeguard them from external intervention as long as they fulfill their obligations to the rest of the society of states. Indeed, even during transition, states have an obligation to prevent the use of their territories by terrorist groups. Responsible behavior also implies that Middle Eastern states must abandon the temptation to externalize threats for domestic short-term benefits. Failure to fulfill a state's obligations, thus undermining regional and global security, should make it a pariah.

### **The Middle East: Not Only a Problem of Terrorism**

Three years after demonstrations in Tunisia ushered in a new era, the future of the Middle East is still muddled. While all eyes are currently focused on Syria and the regional conflict the civil war there stirred, the future of the region depends on the restructuring of domestic politics in all the region's states. And although the brutal violence in Syria tends to overshadow developments elsewhere, the transition of the region is more comprehensive and will probably last longer than the Syrian conflict. Change has come, and in all likelihood will engulf even countries where regimes--the Saudi kingdom included--presently seem stable and with a strong grip on power.

The uncertainty surrounding the future of the Arab Awakening was captured well in the competing interpretations of the events' meaning: soon after the Tunisian people toppled Ben Ali some observers depicted an Arab Spring that holds promise for the emergence of striving democracies, while others put forward an ominous view of an Islamist Winter represented by authoritarian states—intolerant domestically and belligerent externally. Although recent developments in

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