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In the Middle East protests, a seismic shift

By Fareed Zakaria
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We are in the midst of a [revolution in the Middle East](#), one that has unleashed long-suppressed forces that will continue to send shock waves across an [arc of countries](#) from Morocco to Iran. We are all looking at each crisis individually as it breaks out. But if we step back we can see that this is really a seismic shift and that it will in time reverberate throughout the region.

For the first time in perhaps a millennium, the Arab people are taking charge of their own affairs. Since the 11th century, after conquests by Mongol, Persian and Turkish armies, Arab lands have been controlled by foreign powers. Most of these lands were ruled by the Ottoman Empire for centuries. By the late 18th century, as Ottoman power waned, the era of European expansion began, and for the next 150 years the Middle East fell under its sway. In the aftermath of World War I, Britain and France carved up the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, creating most of the modern Middle Eastern states.

After World War II, as Europe's empires collapsed, the Middle East became a region of intense superpower rivalry. Moscow and Washington lined up a set of allies, to which they each promised military protection and aid. Then the Soviet empire crumbled, and the United States became the sole outside power. Most Arab countries had to make their peace with Washington - Libya's renunciation of its nuclear program being a vivid example. Iran has tried to set itself up as the alternative power balancing American hegemony, but it has had limited success outside of Lebanon.

Throughout this almost 1,000 years of foreign domination, the Arabs always had local rulers. But these sheiks, kings and generals were appointed or supported by the outside imperial powers. Most of the Middle East's monarchies were created out of whole cloth by the British - Saudi Arabia being the important exception. These local rulers were more skilled at negotiating up, to the imperial authorities, than they were at negotiating down, to their people. They ruled their people not through negotiations but by force and bribery (once the oil money began to flow).

Over the past few years, two major American shifts have opened up the Middle East. The first was Washington's recognition that American support for the region's dictators has bred a vicious strain of Islamic opposition - violent and deeply anti-American. Since then, Washington has been publicly and privately more ambivalent in its support for Middle East rulers, pushing them toward reform. (This is well documented by the WikiLeaks cables from the Middle East.) The second has been the waning of American power itself. The Iraq war and its bloody aftermath, a still-chaotic [Afghanistan](#), and an Israeli-Palestinian deal that seems as far away as ever all highlight the limits of American power.

Both George W. Bush and Barack Obama deserve some credit for what has happened. Bush put the problem of the Middle East's politics at the center of American foreign policy. His articulation of a "freedom agenda" for the Middle East was a powerful and essential shift in American foreign policy (as I wrote at the time). But because so many of Bush's policies were unpopular in the region, and seen by many Arabs as "anti-Arab," it became easy to discredit democracy as an imperial plot. In

2005, Hosni Mubarak effectively silenced a vigorous pro-democracy movement by linking it to Bush.

Obama has had a quieter approach, supporting freedom but insisting that the United States did not intend to impose it on anyone. As unsatisfying as this might have been as public rhetoric, it has had the effect of allowing the Arab revolts of 2011 to be wholly owned by Arabs. This is no small matter, because the success of these protests hinges on whether they will be seen as organic, indigenous, national movements.

So far the Obama administration has handled each crisis as it has erupted, balancing the interests and opportunities presented in each country. That is understandable in a fast-moving, fluid situation. Bahrain is a [close ally](#) - hosting an American naval base - with a somewhat reformist monarch. [Libya](#) is a repressive, rogue state with a [cruel and crazy man at its helm](#) - and Washington should move far more forcefully against him. But at some point, the Obama administration will have to step back and think about a new American strategy for a Middle East that is in the midst of this historic change.

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