

The Winter of Our Torment: Reevaluating U.S. National Security and the Middle East

“The debate between democracy and security is no longer a question of trading off long-term democratic reform for short-term security cooperation. When it comes to reform and stability, the long term has arrived.”¹ The Arab Spring revolutions may have unleashed the possibility of some form of democracy, but they also amplified the complexities and volatility in the Middle East that have always uniquely challenged the United States and the rest of the world. With the hiatus provided by the U.S. elections over, the time to reevaluate U.S. policies on the Middle East is here.

The September 2012 Benghazi attack made it very clear that, “bold words and support for democratic aspirations are not enough to engender good will in this region, especially not when hampered by America’s own national security interests.”² In the nearly two years since long-standing autocratic regimes across the Arab world were toppled by pro-democracy movements, nation-building has proven to be a daunting task. Inexperience with self-governance and weak civil society institutions compounded existing political, social and economic vulnerabilities. “An even bigger worry in Yemen and Libya, and of course Syria, is that weakness or even chaos might replace tyranny, creating a safe haven for terrorists and making life intolerable due to the spread of crime and tribal and sectarian violence.”³ For example, General Carter Ham, head of the U.S.’s Africa Command, stated that the militants who carried out the attacks that claimed the lives of Ambassador Chris Stevens and three others in Libya probably had links to al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.⁴

Aside from the security and intelligence failures, the Benghazi attack also “points to a limitation in the capabilities of the American military command responsible for a large swath of countries swept up in the Arab Spring.”⁵ Decisive military intervention in the Libya revolution that brought down Muammar Gaddafi had been a NATO-led allied effort.

Where Libya was met with a coordinated international action, the response to Syria has been piecemeal, lagging or non-existent. Although violence has claimed the lives of more than 36,000 people since the uprising began in March 2011, Syrian President Bashar Assad vows to keep fighting. While “opposition forces in Syria have not had a unified vision for the country or single military plan to oust [Assad],” they have agreed to unite under newly established National Coalition Forces of the Syrian Revolution.⁶ Like Libya, “the lack of cohesion in the [Syrian]

¹ Tamara Cofman Wittes, “Supporting Arab Transitions: Four Challenges for the Next U.S. President,” The Brookings Institution, November 6, 2012, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2012/11/06-arab-transitions-us-president-wittes>.

² Helene Cooper and Robert F. Worth, “In Arab Spring, Obama Finds a Sharp Test,” *New York Times*, September 24, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/25/us/politics/arab-spring-proves-a-harsh-test-for-obamas-diplomatic-skill.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

³ Daniel L. Byman, “A Less Nimble America in the Arab World,” The Brookings Institution, November 8, 2012, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2012/11/08-america-arab-world-byman>.

⁴ John Irish, “Qaeda links to militants in Libya envoy attack: U.S. general,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 14, 2012, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/sns-rt-us-mali-usa-libyabre8ad13c-20121114,0,1180747.story>.

⁵ “Libya – The Benghazi Attacks,” *New York Times*, accessed November 14, 2012, <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/libya/index.html>.

⁶ “Arab League recognizes new Syrian opposition coalition,” *CNN.com*, November 12, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/11/12/world/meast/syria-civil-war/index.html>.

resistance was, and is, opening up space for jihadist groups such as Jabhat al Nusra, which has stepped up its campaign of suicide bombings and joined Free Syrian Army units to capture military bases” and given Islamist factions a growing presence.⁷

Unlike Libya, Syria could potentially become a regional conflict. More than 407,000 Syrian refugees have fled into neighboring Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq, with some 108,000 in Turkey alone.⁸ Ankara, which Assad had considered friendly, has been outspokenly critical of its southern neighbor. Assad’s pursuit of opposition forces have also led to a number of cross border incidents. In June, Syria shot down a Turkish Air Force reconnaissance jet near the Turkish-Syrian border. Since October, at least seven Turkish civilians have been killed by Syrian mortar fire.⁹ Turkish forces have been “on standing orders to respond with two rounds of mortar fire for every one Syrian shell that lands on Turkish territory.”¹⁰ Prepared to go to war to defend itself, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan asserted, “We are not interested in war, but we’re not far from it either.”¹¹ NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen declared that the organization was already prepared “to protect and defend Turkey, our ally.” Turkey has called for “more robust action from world powers, including the possible deployment by NATO of Patriot surface-to-air missiles on the Turkey-Syria border” and a buffer zone inside Syria.¹²

U.S. officials have reportedly confirmed that a post-election revision of Washington's Syria policy was under way, but “The question is: what to do?”¹³ That question is further complicated by Syria’s increasing tensions with Israel. In November, Israel launched several missiles into Syria in response to small arms and mortar fire, including a Syrian mortar round from fighting across the disengagement line that hit the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights. Assad, however, likely has no interest in escalating hostilities with Israel. As Israeli Strategic Affairs Minister Moshe Yaalon pointed out, “All he needs now would be for us to hit him.”¹⁴

There is little question about Israel’s willingness to engage is Gaza, ruled by Iran’s proxy, Hamas. The two sides have exchanged hundred of strikes, even during a short-lived truce for the Egyptian Premier’s visit to Gaza. In calling for an end to the violence, Tony Blair, former British Prime Minister and Middle East envoy, admitted that “I don’t think we should be of any

⁷ Tim Lister, “After the election, a new push on Syria,” *CNN.com*, November 12, 2012, http://www.cnn.com/2012/11/12/world/meast/syria-five-things/index.html?hpt=hp_c1.

⁸ “Syrian opposition leader expects more from U.S.,” *CNN.com*, November, 14, 2012, http://www.cnn.com/2012/11/14/world/meast/syria-civil-war/index.html?hpt=hp_t3.

⁹ “NATO will defend Turkey in conflict with Syria, says chief,” *NBCNews.com*, November 12, 2012, http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/11/12/15117739-nato-will-defend-turkey-in-conflict-with-syria-says-chief?lite.

¹⁰ Anthony Faiola, “In Turkey, Syria poses a new test for Erdogan’s authority,” *Washington Post*, November 3, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/in-turkey-syria-poses-a-new-test-for-erdogans-authority/2012/11/03/12c5fcfe-2445-11e2-92f8-7f9c4daf276a_story.html.

¹¹ Liz Sly, “Turkey retaliates against Syrian fire for 3rd day,” *Washington Post*, October 5, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/turkey-counters-syrian-fire-for-third-day/2012/10/05/83de80f0-0f2f-11e2-ba6c-07bd866eb71a_story.html.

¹² “NATO will defend Turkey in conflict with Syria, says chief,” op.cit.

¹³ Peter Apps, “Elections over, U.S cautiously mulls Syria options,” *Reuters*, November 12, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/11/12/us-usa-syria-strategy-idUSBRE8AB1DA20121112>.

¹⁴ Douglas Hamilton, “Israel's next war may be with Gaza, but not Syria,” *Reuters*, November 12, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/11/12/israel-war-idUSL5E8MC7GI20121112>.

doubt at all that if this situation continues and it escalates, it's going to be really serious and tragic – not just for Israelis and Palestinians, but actually it will cause a huge amount of upheaval right across the region, and this is a region, as you know, that doesn't require more upheaval right now.”¹⁵

The recent escalation of violence between Israel and Gaza includes another interested party – Iran. “We should not lose track of the fact that while this is ostensibly an Israel-Hamas-Egypt issue, the real culprits are in Tehran.”¹⁶ Hamas’ increased aggression likely reflects Iran’s recent muscle-flexing. For example, Iranian warplanes fired at an unmanned American military surveillance drone claiming it entered Iranian airspace over the Persian Gulf. Iran’s nuclear ambitions, however, are still on the U.S. foreign policy radar. In his first press conference after re-election, President Barack Obama declared, “we’re not going to let Iran get a nuclear weapon. But I think there is still a window of time for us to resolve this diplomatically.”¹⁷

While some issues may be resolved diplomatically, it is likely that conditions across the region will get aggressively worse before they get any better. “In the Middle East, America’s long-term interests will demand continued, perhaps intensifying, American engagement. American status as a global power, her interests in reliable energy flows to global markets and her interests in security for regional partners, mean that the Middle East matters as much to the United States today as ever.”¹⁸ If current events haven’t made it clear that the U.S. needs to hasten its review of Middle East policy, then it will be a long, harsh winter in Washington.

¹⁵ Josh Levs, Sara Sidner, and Talal Abu-Rahma, “Rockets pound Israel, Gaza as Netanyahu alleges 'double war crime',” *CNN.com*, November 15, 2012, http://www.cnn.com/2012/11/15/world/meast/gaza-israel-strike/index.html?hpt=hp_c1.

¹⁶ Jennifer Rubin, “Obama must deal with Egypt and Iran,” *Washington Post*, November 16, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/post/obama-must-deal-with-egypt-and-iran/2012/11/16/070ae226-2f96-11e2-9f50-0308e1e75445_blog.html.

¹⁷ “Transcript of President Obama’s News Conference,” *New York Times*, November 14, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/14/us/politics/running-transcript-of-president-obamas-press-conference.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹⁸ Wittes, op.cit.