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## Bacevich: What the Arab Movie Riots Mean for U.S. Foreign Policy

**The death of a U.S. ambassador raises questions about America's foreign-policy assumptions.**

by Andrew J. Bacevich

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Visibly shocked and grief-stricken, Hillary Clinton gave voice to a question many Americans were asking last week: “How could this happen in a country we helped liberate, in a city we helped save from destruction?” She was responding to the news that the U.S. ambassador to Libya and members of his staff had been killed during an attack on the American Consulate in the cradle of the Libyan revolution, Benghazi.



The Tahrir Square protesters wanted more than just a change of presidents. (Johann Rousselot)

The question is as apt as it is poignant. America's role in helping to topple the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi had been counted as one of the Obama administration's few clear-cut foreign-policy successes. Good had triumphed over evil. Prompt and timely action by the United States had averted genocide. When victorious rebels finally dragged Gaddafi from a culvert and killed him, Clinton summed it up crisply: "We came, we saw, he died." The outcome seemed definitive.

As it turned out, things weren't as simple as they looked. In the Arab world, the overthrow of tyrants—however welcome—settles little and unsettles much. The story has been the same in Iraq, Egypt, and Yemen. In all likelihood it will repeat itself yet again if the Free Syrian Army prevails in its struggle against the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

But why the Arab anger against the United States? Why the absence of gratitude among the very people the United States helped save, in the very countries Americans helped liberate? The way Secretary Clinton frames the question practically guarantees a self-satisfying but defective answer. Still, don't blame her: the rest of the foreign-policy establishment isn't doing any better.

The question is predicated on three propositions that are regarded as sacrosanct in the venues where U.S. policymakers and would-be policymakers congregate and exchange business cards. First: humanity yearns for liberation, as defined in Western (meaning predominantly liberal and secular) terms. Second: the United States has a providentially assigned role to nurture and promote this liberation, advancing what George W. Bush once termed the Freedom Agenda. Third: given that America's intentions are righteous and benign—okay, maybe not always, but most of the time—the exercise of U.S. power on a global scale merits respect and ought to command compliance.

Belief in these three propositions depends on viewing history as ultimately a good-news story. If the good news appears mingled with bad, the imperative for the faithful is to try harder. Forget about Baghdad and Kabul: onward to Damascus and Tehran.

Yet history is not a good-news story. Its destination and purpose remain indecipherable, even (or especially) to an “intelligence community” that purports to peer into the future, but cannot even provide adequate warning of attacks on U.S. diplomatic facilities. Not that our civilian thinkers are doing much better. These days the shelf life of the Big Idea that’s marketed as explaining everything in three words or less—Unipolar Moment, End of History, Clash of Civilizations, Indispensable Nation—is about six months.

What’s the next surprise lurking just around the bend? Long before last week’s sudden eruption of anti-American violence across the Muslim world, the answer to that question was clear: God knows, and he’s not saying.

The notion that American power can be counted on to deliver American-style freedom is particularly wrongheaded when applied to the Muslim world. The problem is not that Arabs, Iranians, Afghans, or Pakistanis have an aversion to freedom. On the contrary, they’ve provided abundant evidence that they hunger for it. Rather, the problem is that 21st-century Muslims don’t necessarily buy America’s 21st-century definition of the term—a definition increasingly devoid of moral content. Instead, the varied inhabitants of a dauntingly complex Islamic world want to decide for themselves what the exercise of freedom should entail. Many of them believe it should consist of something more than individual autonomy and conspicuous consumption.

What they are demanding, in short, is their collective right to self-determination. That desire has made them seem stubbornly unreceptive to outside tutelage, and painfully sensitive to perceived expressions of disrespect, no matter how insignificant the source—even in the form of a preposterously bad film made by some demented jackass. Insults directed at the Prophet Mohammad are going to provoke a hostile response among the world’s Muslims, much as Christians once reacted to the heresies propounded by those who dared to question the doctrines and prerogatives of the Holy Roman Church. Back then, defying the pope could land you in serious trouble.

The problem with the foreign-policy tradition to which Secretary Clinton adheres (and to which any secretary of state appointed by a President Romney undoubtedly would also subscribe) is that it refuses to allow Muslims to set their own course. In fact, U.S. foreign policy is fundamentally incapable of permitting it. For Washington simply to step aside, letting Libyans and Egyptians work out their own problems in their own way, would imperil certain moderately important American interests. More important, it would imply giving up the illusion that the United States models freedom in its truest form and that it can identify and direct history’s course. In effect, it would concede the limitations of American power and American perspicacity.

This country’s political class is unwilling to make any such concessions. That much is obvious to anyone who bothered to watch the twin celebrations of American exceptionalism that constituted the Republican and Democratic national conventions. Several commentators noted the paucity of attention given by either party to the war in Afghanistan, now approaching its 11th anniversary with victory nowhere in sight. With even greater justification they might have noted the two parties’ reticence regarding the even more disastrous and utterly unnecessary Iraq War. Seldom

has the American propensity for turning away from unpleasant facts been more vividly and irresponsibly displayed. This avoidance testifies to a refusal to learn.



Egyptian revolutionaries shared a desire with other Muslims: self-determination. (Johann Rousselot)

The murder of Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and his colleagues was a despicable act. The Obama administration is right to demand that the Libyan government bring the perpetrators to justice, and the United States should apply whatever pressure is necessary to ensure compliance. Yet whatever the outcome of this particular crisis, the underlying problems will remain unaltered between the United States and the nations of the Islamic world.

Diplomats like Ambassador Stevens are willing to put their lives at risk “because they believe that the United States must be a force for peace and progress,” Secretary Clinton said last week. Who could doubt her sincerity? But in the face of decade upon decade of contrary experience, what could possibly convince Libyans or Egyptians, Iraqis or Iranians, Afghans or Pakistanis that such faith in America’s idealism has any basis in fact? No doubt the United States has helped on occasion to advance the cause of peace and progress in the Islamic world. Washington did finally abandon the dictatorship of Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak. But it happened only after decades of unstinting support for his regime. The United States has aligned itself all too often with the forces of despotism and oppression. And this tendency has persisted even on Secretary Clinton’s watch; just look at the U.S. response to the Arab Awakening’s appearance in Bahrain.

Sometimes the only remedy for a badly damaged relationship is to give it a protracted cooling-off period. Time and distance may not make hearts grow fonder, but they can allow old grudges to ease. Stay away from your philandering ex-husband awhile and the old rogue might not seem so bad after all.

Such a breathing spell is very much in order for America’s dealings with the nations of the Islamic world. No preaching; no getting in their knickers; please, God, no “nation building.” For how long? Given the poisonous nature of existing relations, an intermission of something like a century sounds about right.

In the meantime, if we Americans think we have something to teach others, let's do it as exemplars—that is, assuming we're willing to close the yawning gap between the values we loudly profess and the way we actually behave.