For War or Peace

Issues of war and peace in the twenty first century

On the Wrong Side of History in the Middle East Adil E. Shamoo

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By Adil E. Shamoo, January 31, 2011

For over sixty years, the U.S. and the West wanted stability in the Middle East while dividing and conquering the area. They installed and supported puppets, despots, and corrupt and totalitarian regimes as long as they did our bidding. The West had no plans to bring freedom and democracy to Middle Eastern countries. Granting sovereignty to Middle Eastern countries was furthest from the minds of Western leaders.

The immolation of a street merchant December 28 last year brought Tunisia to the front of the line of Arab countries trying to break free. Now people around the Arab world are lighting fires to the powder keg of Middle Eastern misery: abject poverty, corruption, and violation of rudimentary elements of human rights.

The brush fire spread to Egypt, Jordan, Algeria and Yemen with thousands of young and old demonstrators, not belonging to any specific group, demanding the ouster of their corrupt regimes. In Jordan, the demonstrators demanded that the Prime Minister step down. In Yemen, the demonstrators demanded the ouster of the corrupt President ruling the country for three decades.

Egypt, the center of gravity for Arabs, has had the most vociferous demonstrations. In cities across Egypt, Egyptians are demanding the ouster of Hosni Mubarak – their ruthless ruler for three decades. Mubarak's answer was to send his goons of security forces to intimidate the demonstrators without success. Mubarak's final gambit was to appoint former top military professionals and loyal supporters such as Omar Suleiman as Vice-President. Suleiman's brutality as the former head of security services known for the torture and rape of political prisoners helped to spawn large numbers of al-Qaeda leadership.

As an Arab-American raised in Middle East, I was always baffled by America's claim of being the beacon of freedom and democracy while consistently supporting regimes in the Middle East headed by kings and dictators who killed, imprisoned, starved, tortured and on occasion raped their people in order to stay in power. Unfortunately, this policy remains the same today. The American people are ill-informed about the Middle East because of scant and biased reporting. So, it is not surprising that some of the mainstream media is surprised at the events

in Middle East. At present, our media portrays the U.S. policy as balancing stability and support of corrupt regimes with instituting some reforms. But we need to recognize the need for true change in these regimes.

For decades, the pundits in America belittled the Arab streets' reaction to political events. But, they are now silent since they never understood or did not want to understand the extent of oppression the Arab people are under with our active support. We gave these regimes massive military hardware; we trained their security services; and we provided them with intelligence information to suppress their people and remain in power. Today we are doing the same thing. If the U.S. policy towards Middle Eastern countries truly is changing, we need to have overt and covert operations congruent in goals and practice. For decades, the Arab streets were aware of our support of their regimes, and have held us complicit. This is the root of anti-American sentiment. We are reaping the results of seeds we planted long ago.

The Obama administration's policy towards Middle East and Muslims in general has been slightly better than Bush's policies in tone and substance since Obama's speech at Cairo University in 2009. Secretary Clinton's first reactions to the event in Egypt were muted and tilted towards stability. She shifted her rhetoric slowly to acknowledge the struggle of the Egyptian people and on Sunday (1-30-11) talk shows she actually admitted the need for a plan to "transition to a democratic regime." President Obama gave mild support and later on YouTube interview became Mr. Obama's position became more assertive as the events unfolded. The least helpful and inappropriate comment came from Vice-President Biden claiming that Mubarak is not a dictator. The Egyptian demonstrators are now demanding that the White House condemn Mubarak.

Our policies towards Middle East are shaped by strategic needs, oil, and support for our friendly countries – primarily Israel, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. After 9/11, our rhetoric and actions became even more abhorrent, as we labeled any Arab not in agreement with our policies in the Middle East as terrorists, in order to mute free-flowing discussions regarding our policies in the region. Our policy since 9/11 has added the requirement of collaboration with us against the terrorists as a litmus test to the strength of our relationship. Thus, regimes that are helping us weed out the terrorists receive strong support from us to help stabilize and remain in power by covert and over means. Our policy is contradictory. The mere support of these corrupt regimes creates terrorists against the United States. Somehow we think if we perform these activities covertly and lie about it, the Arab people would not know about it. Of course, the unconditional U.S. support of Israel towards the Palestinians adds another complicating and negative dimension.

Our policy towards the Middle East should take a 180 degree turn. We should support, without any qualifications, the Arab people's yearning for freedom and democracy. We should not support the corrupt regimes regardless of the short-range benefits. In the long run, we may not get every Arab free country's friendship but in the long run we will get their friendship and will serve our strategic goals. For example, we react negatively to the Hezbollah-supported newly designated Prime Minister but in the long run we plant the seed of respect to the people of Lebanon to work out their differences. More importantly, the policy of supporting the people is the right policy consistent with our American values.

The time for mere reforms in Middle East has past. The choice is between lack of freedom and democracy, police-state, torture and rape on one side and the respect of human values that encompass freedom, democracy and sovereignty on the other. The U.S. has one choice to make

of supporting the inevitable rise of the people for self-government. The U.S. must change its policy for our sake and the sake of Middle East and more importantly it must be on the right side of history. The revolution may not succeed, or may get co-opted, or it may fail today but surely will succeed tomorrow.

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