

Iraq

How does this country fit within the Arab Spring controversy?

Even though Iraq is not commonly understood as a site of the Arab Spring there has been a resurgent series of public demonstrations. Perhaps most notably these protests can be seen as a site of nationalism as the public increasingly resists a long-term US presence.

Jonathan Steel, The Guardian, April 25, 2011, "Iraq's own Arab spring"

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/apr/25/united-states-troop-presence-iraq-long-term>

Stretched close to the limit by combat in Afghanistan and determined not to get into a ground war in Libya, **the Pentagon is stepping up the pressure to maintain a huge US troop presence in** today's largely peaceful **Iraq**. What might seem at first sight strange and unnecessary is in fact fully in line with the ambitions of those who planned the invasion eight years ago. Whether neocons or "realists", they always wanted to have a long-term political and military footprint in the northern sector of the Middle East, strategically placed between Syria and Iran.

As with so many elements of the geopolitical strategy he inherited from George Bush, Barack Obama has gone along with it. So it should be no surprise that Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the joint chief of staffs, was in Baghdad on Friday urging the government to amend the agreement under which all US forces have to leave Iraq by the end of this year. Robert Gates, the US defence secretary, was in the Iraqi capital on a similar mission a few weeks earlier.

Both Sunni and Shia protesters were on the streets last week to denounce the US plans, united by a common sense of nationalism that has not been seen since the first year of the US occupation, before sectarian divisions were artificially inflamed. **In Mosul around 5,000 people**, including provincial council members and tribal leaders, **rallied against any extension of the US presence**, while supporters of the Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr marched in Baghdad.

A revival of national pride played a large role in persuading the prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, to stand firm against the Bush administration in its last months of office when the White House was forced to agree to withdraw all combat troops from Iraq last summer **and accept a deadline of the end of this year for the remaining 47,000 to leave.**

Mullen and Gates have been warning the Iraqi government that the risk of Arab/Kurdish clashes over the country's oil deposits around Kirkuk and a lingering threat from al-Qaida require US troops to stay. The counter-argument is that Iraq has survived the withdrawal of US combat troops for nine months without any breakdown of security. At a time when Arabs throughout the region are struggling to win their rights and dignity, why should Iraq submit to the humiliation of a large US ground force that no other Arab country in the region consents to?

Unlike the end of 2008, when the agreement on US forces was reached, Sadr now has a contingent of ministers in government, and it should be easier for Maliki to resist the Americans. He is facing his own "Arab spring" pressures after thousands joined Day of Rage protests in February over unemployment, corruption and lack of electricity. Twenty people died after security forces opened fire. **Maliki would be foolish to give them a new cause to oppose him.**

These protests may be getting less Western press attention, but they are significant.

Joel Wing, Musing on Iraq, May 6, 2011, "How The Media Forgot About Iraq's Protest Movement (REVISED)" <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2011/05/how-media-forgot-about-iraqs-protest.html>

The protests and fighting in the Middle East and North Africa continue to this day. There are still stories about Libya, Syria, Bahrain, and other countries. That's no longer true of Iraq. It got a little coverage in the beginning of the year, but no more. The media, even for those few organizations that maintain bureaus in Baghdad, has forgotten Iraq's demonstrations. It used to be the number one news story in both the United States and England. **Now it usually only gets mentioned when terrorists blow something up. That gives a very distorted view of the country, and ignores how it is going through the same youth-led transformations as other nations in the region. Unfortunately, what becomes of it will largely be unknown for those outside of the Middle East, except for those that actively search for news on Iraq because the western media has lost interest.**

The somewhat unique economic situation in Iraq is fueling this opposition.

Jane Arraf, The Christian Science Monitor, May 24, 2011, "Iraq's Arab Spring: Protests rise against persistent poverty in oil-rich nation" <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0524/Iraq-s-Arab-Spring-Protests-rise-against-persistent-poverty-in-oil-rich-nation>

While other Arab countries are rising up against dictators, Iraq's is already gone – Saddam Hussein, toppled eight years ago, is now almost a distant memory for younger Iraqis. But **Iraqis are taking to the streets to ask why millions are living in poverty in one of the most oil-rich countries** in the world. Cellphone repairman Majid Abdul Khalif, who is so patriotic he named his son Iraq and his daughter Baghdad, is incensed he can't find a full-time job or buy a house.

"I'm Abu Iraq [the father of Iraq] and I don't have a home!" says Mr. Abdul Khalif, wrapped in an Iraqi flag at Baghdad's Liberation Square.

Like millions here, he's grown up with the expectation that the government would take care of him. Those **unfulfilled expectations and the loss of billions of dollars to mismanagement and corruption has proved a volatile combination in a country where oil revenue will barely keep pace with the growing population. Protests have already forced the resignations of governors in three southern provinces seen as particularly corrupt.**

Millions of people still rely on government food rations, about 1 in 6 live in poverty on about \$2 per day, **and almost 40 percent of Iraq's 30 million people are under the age of 15.**

"Iraq is a difficult case," says Simona Marinescu, senior economist with the United Nations Development Program in Iraq. "Iraq is not a country with no resources ... **Iraq is a country that has the very strange situation in which the needs of this country grow at a similar pace with revenues – so no matter how much money comes into the budget, their development needs, their basic needs are growing similarly.**"

Iraq recently recalculated its oil reserves to reflect undated technology and now says it has the world's second-biggest oil reserves. With oil prices topping \$110 a barrel, that is an extraordinary resource.

But **with billions of dollars needed to modernize the oil industry after decades of neglect, it will be years before a significant portion of Iraq's oil revenue will go to anything else. And while the oil industry provides revenue, it will never create large numbers of jobs.**

"I think there's an understanding that they have to change things; I don't think Iraq – with a population this young and this fast growing – is ever going to be a petro-state," says a US embassy official who asked not to be identified. **Over the next three to five years, they're going to spend almost all the extra revenue they earn just paying for the infrastructure to get the oil out of the ground and export it.**"

As the protests continue the security forces are cracking down.

Amnesty International, April 28, 2011, "Days of Rage: Protests and Repression in Iraq"
<http://web.docuticker.com/go/docubase/64246>

Tens of thousands of Iraqis have taken to the streets since early February 2011 to protest against the lack of water, electricity and other basic services, rising prices, unemployment and endemic corruption, and to demand greater civil and political rights. In the Kurdistan region of Iraq, demonstrators have also protested against the two main parties that have dominated local politics for decades and monopolized state resources.

Protests initially erupted in Iraq in mid-2010 over the government's failure to provide basic services, but then stalled. For example, on 19 June thousands of people protested in Basra against the frequent power cuts. According to reports, at least one person was killed in front of the provincial council building when police fired on stone-throwing demonstrators. In response to this and other protests, the Electricity Minister resigned and on 25 June the Interior Ministry issued new regulations that make it extremely difficult to obtain official authorization to hold protest meetings or demonstrations.

The successful popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011 encouraged Iraqis to defy the restrictions and resume demonstrations. Many protesters widened their calls to demand the resignation of local and central government representatives, or to protest against restrictions of civil and political rights. Protests built up until 25 February, when tens of thousands of demonstrators marched in cities across Iraq, including the Kurdistan region, in support of what they termed a "Day of Rage".

The various forces under the control of the authorities and political parties, including security guards, armed forces and security forces, **responded from the start with excessive force, killing and injuring protesters, and with frequent arrests.** The first fatalities were on 16 February in the eastern city of Kut in Wasit province, and on 17 February in Sulaimaniya in the Kurdistan region. Activists told Amnesty International that **the ferocity of the crackdown following the "Day of Rage" led to a decline in the number of protests in subsequent weeks, although protests have continued.**

Electricity demands will produce unrest, but government won't topple

Aseel Kami, Reuters, May 18, 2011, "Analysis - Power protests threaten Iraq government"
<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/18/uk-iraq-politics-electricity-idUKTRE74H2YR20110518>

Iraq's punishing summer heat will fuel angry street protests over the nation's feeble power supply but the rallies are unlikely to topple the government, even if some ministers are sacked as scapegoats.

The electricity grid, hobbled by years of war and under-investment, will probably supply less than half of Iraq's 15,000-megawatt peak demand this summer as temperatures head to 50 degrees Celsius plus.

An emergency plan to place temporary generators around the country is a year away and faces major problems, officials say.

The power issue is one of the most visible benchmarks for Iraq's nascent democracy and among the most frustrating elements of Iraqi life more than eight years after the invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein and unleashed war and chaos.

"There will be crisis and shortage this year," said Laith al-Mamury, head of contracts and investment at the electricity ministry. "The gas, diesel and thermal turbines which we made contracts to buy will not be ready ... this summer."

What impact that might have on a fragile governing alliance of Shi'ite, Kurdish and Sunni political blocs is a big question facing Iraq in coming weeks, with sweltering heat likely to drive Iraqis out of their un-airconditioned homes and onto the streets in protest.

"I expect that a lot of people will go out. They will not endure the heat. That will put the government under pressure," said Yaseen al-Bakri, a political science professor in Baghdad.

"But for the government to resign, no, I do not believe that will happen... I believe there will be firing of some ministers who will carry the burden ... they will be scapegoats."

Iraqi revenue will be used to prevent government collapse

Aseel Kami, Reuters, May 18, 2011, "Analysis - Power protests threaten Iraq government"
<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/18/uk-iraq-politics-electricity-idUKTRE74H2YR20110518>

Bahaa al-Araji, a senior member of the Sadrist political bloc in parliament, a key faction in Maliki's coalition, doesn't rule out the possibility the fragile coalition could fall.

"If we see that dictatorship in other countries has led to the fall of governments, it is possible electricity in Iraq could lead to the fall of the whole regime," Araji said.

But analysts note the government may be able to deploy huge oil profits -- Iraq budgeted for \$76.50-a-barrel oil but world prices have been running around \$100 for months -- to cool public anger with increased food rations and jobs programs.

"We are facing a considerable increase in oil prices and subsequently high revenues for the Iraqi government. It could play with these revenues to bribe the citizens," said Yahya Kubaisi, an analyst at Iraq's Institute for Strategic Studies.

"Yes, there will be protest movements. But we cannot say that these protests will lead to the fall of the government."

What would debates about this country look like?

In some ways, Iraq may be the easiest country to envision if included in the topic. The substantial US role in the development of the new Iraqi event ensures that there are strong ties to a variety of mechanisms.

Unquestionably part of the tension about Iraq is that they currently receive a large amount of US democracy assistance.

Iraq/Afghanistan receive half of US democracy assistance

United States Government Accountability Office, Report to Congressional Committees, September 2009 “DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE: U.S. Agencies Take Steps to Coordinate International Programs but Lack Information on Some U.S.-funded Activities” http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PCAAB950.pdf p. 9-10

In fiscal years 2006 through 2008, funds allocated for the GJD strategic objective were provided for democracy assistance programs in 90 countries around the world. Almost half of all democracy funding over this period was spent in Iraq and Afghanistan; the next highest funded countries, Sudan, Egypt, Mexico, Colombia, and Russia, accounted for more than 25 percent of the remaining GJD funding allocated to individual countries other than Iraq and Afghanistan. Of the 20 countries with the largest GJD allocations, 8 have been rated by Freedom House, an independent nongovernmental organization, as not free; 8 have been rated as partly free; and 4 have been rated as free.¹⁶

This obviously creates a tension of where it is either useful because Iraq has lots of democracy assistance programs or if this is a problem because of uniqueness concerns.

The status quo trend is clearly to a reduction these funds.

Stephen McInerney, Director of Advocacy for the Project on Middle East Democracy, April 2010, “The Federal Budget and Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2011: Democracy, Governance, And Human Rights In The Middle East” p. 3 <http://www.boell.org/downloads/fy11-budget-analysis-final.pdf>

The administration is leaving Iraq’s governance to Iraqi institutions. • As the U.S. military draws down its presence in Iraq, the budget is also beginning to decrease large-scale bilateral funding for democracy and governance in Iraq, which is reduced 46% from existing levels

Budget pressures creates uncertainty for US support for Iraqi transition

Sean Kane & William Taylor, United States Institute of Peace, May 16, 2011, *The United States in Iraq: Options for 2012*, http://www.usip.org/files/resources/The_United_States_in_Iraq.pdf p. 1-2

The U.S. role in Iraq is transitioning from military-led to civilian-led with ambitious goals that embody the once unthinkable hope for positive outcomes from a domestically polarizing conflict: an Iraq that is sovereign, stable, self-reliant and can contribute to peace and security in a region of the world vital to U.S. interests. With a December 2011 deadline looming for the withdrawal of U.S. troops, the United States and the new Iraqi government are attempting to define how a long-term strategic partnership across the diplomatic, economic, security and cultural fields can further these goals.

This military-to-civilian transition in Iraq involves the State Department and a plethora of civilian agencies taking on tasks ranging from traditional diplomacy and development assistance to police mentoring, military modernization, and managing and providing protection to an estimated 17,000 employees and contractors in an improving but still lethal environment. Adding to an already challenging situation on the ground, **the unique nature of the current fiscal cycle has further increased the degree of difficulty by creating uncertainty as to what resources will be made available to the State Department to accomplish its new multifaceted mission.**

In a time of unparalleled financial and economic pressures at home, there are no easy ways to escape this conundrum. Yet the stakes are high. The success or failure of the military-to-civilian transition will determine not just whether the U.S. achieves some return on its costly eight-year investment in Iraq, but also represents a testing ground for the U.S.'s ability for war termination of the asymmetrical conflicts that defined the first decade of the 21st century. The lessons learned from winding down the Iraq war could help to inform the scheduled transition in Afghanistan by 2014, as well as future cases where civilian agencies take over from the military in post-conflict or post-disaster settings.

Unfortunately the question remains about how central democracy assistance is to the Iraqi transition. For example, even with the reduction in democracy assistance there is an increase in assistance for military and security forces.

Stephen McInerney, Director of Advocacy for the Project on Middle East Democracy, April 2010, "The Federal Budget and Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2011: Democracy, Governance, And Human Rights In The Middle East" p. 40 <http://www.boell.org/downloads/fy11-budget-analysis-final.pdf>

President Obama demonstrates a willingness to leave Iraqi governance to Iraqi institutions while scaling down the U.S. military presence. As the U.S. military draws down its presence, the budget begins to draw down large-scale funding for democracy and governance in Iraq. Whereas funding for democracy and governance had remained at more than \$300 million annually for the past four years, the current budget request cuts of \$175 million. This reduction in GJD funding is accompanied by large increases in assistance to the Iraqi military and security forces as they prepare to maintain stability amid the withdrawal of tens of thousands of Western soldiers.

This concern for other forms of assistance can be seen in the context of solvency advocates that argue for items like police training.

Sean Kane & William Taylor, United States Institute of Peace, May 16, 2011, *The United States in Iraq: Options for 2012*, http://www.usip.org/files/resources/The_United_States_in_Iraq.pdf p. 2

Police Development: In October 2011, responsibility for training Iraq's police will shift from the Department of Defense to the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL). INL, the Department of Justice and others will work on professionalizing police management and shifting the police from counterinsurgency operations to community policing and rule of law reform. The goal is a police force that, unlike in Egypt or Tunisia, protects the population rather than the state. Police development is therefore key to building a stable Iraqi democracy and is planned to include some 190 advisers around the country.

This isn't to argue that there isn't a relationship to democratic institutions. The concern for building faith in public institutions is a frequently referenced.

Jane Arraf, *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 24, 2011, "Iraq's Arab Spring: Protests rise against persistent poverty in oil-rich nation" <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0524/Iraq-s-Arab-Spring-Protests-rise-against-persistent-poverty-in-oil-rich-nation>
(*Simona Marinescu, senior economist with the United Nations Development Program in Iraq*)

The Iraqi government has made concessions to the demonstrators – delaying the purchase of American F-16 fighter jets in order to put more money into the ration system and announcing more government jobs. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in response to demonstrations in February promised a 100-day review of underperforming ministries but has since made clear that Iraqis should not expect services to improve in 100 days.

Marinescu and others say the **changes being undertaken are needed for political stability as well as economic reform.**

"Right now in the middle of all these frustrations the economy is not creating jobs, the services are not being delivered the way they should – where is their mistrust placed? In politicians," says Marinescu, a former labor minister in Romania. **"You can create stability going from all directions, from top to bottom by delivering and communicating, from bottom to top by giving trust to policymakers."**

"In a poor country you cannot create a strong democratic tradition – it is impossible," she says. **"A poor people will never trust a government and a political system unable to deliver."**

How would including this country influence the overall topic?

At this point I would recommend not including Iraq in the topic because I feel it is a poor fit within the bulk of the topical countries. The size and scope of US assistance, both democracy and otherwise, does undermine the unique rationale for small changes of democracy assistance. There is also the concern that its inclusion would offset the discussion of other countries. When added with the recent historical overlap with the high school topic relating to military commitments, there should be serious concern about what including Iraq would provide unique benefit to the topic. Even though there are more compelling mechanisms to approach Iraq, I do feel teams would be tempted to debate Iraq at the exclusion of other countries.

Iran

How does this country fit within the Arab Spring controversy?

Iran may be considered the first nation to experience the Arab Spring demonstrations. Even though the green movement didn't dislodge the Iranian government it dramatically changed the political climate in Iran today. The recent wave of demonstrations across the region is now both a challenge and opportunity for Iran.

Farideh Farhi, Affiliate Graduate Faculty and Lecturer, University of Hawaii at Manoa (Interviewed by Bernard Gwertzman, Consulting Editor, CFR.org), April 7, 2011, "Managing Arab Spring's Fallout in Iran" <http://www.cfr.org/iran/managing-arab-springs-fallout-iran/p24617>

Is the Iranian government concerned about what is happening in the Arab world? Are the leaders worried that the revolution might cross their borders? The February crackdown suggests they are. The fluidity of the situation makes the coming year for Iran very important, because the Iranians are trying to figure out how these major regional changes will impact Iran's regional interests as well as its domestic politics.

They do watch events in the region. Not only because of what might happen inside Iran, but also because of their own geo-political interests in the region. They're quite happy about some developments, and in other cases they have tremendous concern. Like the United States, the Iranian government looks at what is happening in the Arab world in a very differentiated manner. **When events began to open up democracies in Tunisia and Egypt, the Iranians had quite a bit of concern about implications inside Iran.** In fact Ayatollah Khamenei gave a Friday prayer speech that was partially in Arabic, and many people in Iran thought that was an attempt to try to reframe the events that were going on in Egypt and Tunisia as an extension of an Islamic revolution rather than a democracy protest movement.

But at the geopolitical level, Iranians judged that the sentiment of the Arab public will ultimately be more along the same lines the Iranians have taken in terms of their positions on the Arab/Israeli conflict. So, democratization in Egypt and Tunisia is something that Iranian leaders see as positive. On the other hand, the Iranian leaders have approached the Libyan crisis with ambivalence. They have condemned Qaddafi, [but] they have serious concerns about American and NATO's military involvement in Libya and have tried to frame the American involvement in terms of oil interests and compare that to lack of attention on the part of the United States in terms of the suppression in Bahrain [where a Shiite majority has been subjected to repression by the ruling Sunni monarchy]. They have tried to highlight hypocrisy that they consider to represent American foreign policy. **On the other hand, they've been very quiet about what is happening in Syria. You hardly can find any reporting of Syrian protests because, obviously, any change in Syria--an important ally--represents a major concern to Iranian interests. Like everyone else in the region, they really do not know where all these things are going. The fluidity of the situation makes the coming year for Iran very important, because the Iranians are trying to figure out how these major regional changes will impact Iran's regional interests as well as its domestic politics.**

Iran will continue to monitor these changes, but the upside for Iran is a real opportunity for expansion of their influence.

Suzanne Maloney, Senior fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, February 23, 2011, Financial Times, “Iran will benefit from this Arab spring”
<http://cachef.ft.com/cms/s/0/090f291a-3f92-11e0-a1ba-00144feabdc0,s01=1.html#axzz1NhlTPSwL>

As upheaval sweeps the Middle East, optimists have hoped that Iran would soon follow Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. In fact, the opposite has happened. As shown by its audacious decision to dispatch warships through the Suez Canal for the first time in 31 years, the Iranian leadership expects to emerge from the regional turmoil further entrenched and emboldened.

With a revived opposition mounting a number of large protests, **the Islamic Republic ought to be looking across the region with trepidation. Instead its leadership sees the turmoil across the Arab world as confirmation of its ascendancy as a regional power, and America’s decline. Tehran is revelling in analogies between Egypt and Tunisia, and its own revolutionary inception. And despite the resurgence of the “green movement” opposition, Iranian leaders remain confident about their ability to beat back dissent** and buy off a conflict-weary population.

They are also savvy enough to recognise that those new Arab leaders who emerge are likely to trumpet nationalist sentiments, and are unlikely to embrace the Islamic Republic. Still, regime change will inevitably produce governments that are less compliant to Washington, and less hostile to Tehran. The American experiment in Iraq has taught Iran’s ageing revolutionaries that the eviction of an old antagonist is more than sufficient for the purposes of enhancing influence.

Unless the protests shift to inside Iran it is possible to imagine how Iran will be the ultimate benefactor of these political changes.

Suzanne Maloney, Senior fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, February 23, 2011, Financial Times, “Iran will benefit from this Arab spring”
<http://cachef.ft.com/cms/s/0/090f291a-3f92-11e0-a1ba-00144feabdc0,s01=1.html#axzz1NhlTPSwL>

Meanwhile, **the only meaningful American allies left standing in the region – Saudi Arabia, and the other smaller Gulf states – suddenly seem out of step with Washington, and are looking nervously inward.** Instead of the creeping isolation that President Barack Obama’s administration has sought to impose, **Iran’s regional prospects suddenly look downright expansive.**

The priorities that have animated American regional policy for three decades – advancing the Arab-Israeli peace process, countering violence and extremism, energy security and protecting US allies – is now much more challenging to advance. Without lifting a finger, the Islamic Republic has seen US capabilities weaken across the entire Middle East.

Most importantly for Tehran, all the leverage the US administration has sought as a means of pressuring Tehran to constrain its nuclear programme now looks ephemeral. Sanctions will continue to pinch, but high oil prices and a newly hospitable regional environment will enable an ever more recalcitrant Islamic Republic to evade international demands to curtail its enrichment programme.

Though it has neither inspired the Arab unrest nor conspired to advance it, **Iran will be the main beneficiary of regional instability,** just as it was in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq. **Eventually the force of democratic activism will overcome the regime’s capacity for repression. Unfortunately this may take a long time, while Mr Obama’s administration faces a dilemma over its next steps today. And when the smokes clears, it may well find that Iran, not democracy, is the real victor from this Arab spring.**

The news is not all good for Iran. The rising political opposition to current regimes could spill over to Iran's allies and Iran itself. Iran's geopolitical situation could weaken as Egypt becomes a more independent force.

Simon Tisdall, The Guardian, May 18, 2011, "Iran has been isolated by the Arab spring"
<http://www.pkarticleshub.com/2011/05/18/iran-has-been-isolated-by-the-arab-spring/>

Nerves are fraying in Tehran as initial glee over Arab spring upheavals turns to alarm. Iran welcomed the fall of its old enemy, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. But the uprising now threatening its key Arab ally, the Syrian regime of Bashar Al-Assad, is a different matter altogether. Worse still, the thought that the region's revolutionary mood may inspire Iran's own much-bludgeoned green opposition to rise again inspires real fear.

Snap judgments in Washington and Jerusalem that Iran would be a main beneficiary of the collapse of the old Arab order now look wide of the mark. Infighting within the regime is matched by, and linked to, rising strategic uncertainty abroad. For these and other reasons, such as the gathering impact of nuclear-related sanctions, **the era of cocky Iranian international defiance may be drawing to a close.**

Amid the Middle East maelstrom, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei – Tehran's terrible twins – suddenly look off balance, vulnerable, and at odds.

Khamenei tried initially to hijack the Arab liberation movements in the name of Iran's illiberal theocratic brand, shamelessly sidestepping the brutal suppression of Iran's own democratic revolt in 2009. "What I firmly announce is that a new movement, with the grace of God, has started in the region," he said in his Persian new year message in March. "This widespread awakening of nations, which is directed towards Islamic goals, will definitely become victorious."

Significantly, Khamenei did not mention Syria. But as unrest there and elsewhere has intensified, and as the essentially secular, wholly temporal, democratic thrust of that unrest has become undeniable, he and other Iranian leaders have largely abandoned the attempt to portray it as spreading Khomeini-ist revolution. Instead they complain about Nato intervention in Libya and a US-Israeli "plot" to topple Assad.

The stakes are undoubtedly high. Syria's importance to Shia Iran as a prime conduit to Hezbollah in Lebanon, as a base for Hamas leaders running Gaza, as a frontline ally in the confrontation with Israel and the US, and as a political and commercial pathway into the Arab world is hard to exaggerate. But Tehran may reluctantly share western analysis that, regardless of Assad's fate, the political balance between the minority Alawi Shia regime in Damascus and the Sunni majority has shifted irreversibly – to Iran's distinct disadvantage.

A flurry of recent statements indicated rising Iranian anxiety. Speaking in Turkey, Ahmadinejad said there was "no need for foreign intervention" in Syria, as if anybody was contemplating it. Foreign ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast accused western media of exaggerating the violence. And an official statement urged government and protesters to compromise in the interests of anti-Zionist solidarity.

"If Assad survives, he will have to establish some distance from Iran to appease Sunni protesters," said American commentator David Ignatius, quoting US officials. **"If he's toppled, Syria is likely to be ruled by a Sunni-dominated regime that will be more hostile to Iran."**

The negative implications for Iran of the Arab revolts do not stop with Syria. The shotgun wedding between the rival Palestinian factions Hamas and Fatah, after years of bitter estrangement, has been widely attributed to the Hamas leadership's new sense of insecurity in its habitual Syrian base. But **it was also the product of a new assertiveness by Egypt, whose summary disposal of the slavishly pro-American Mubarak has begun to restore Cairo's authority as the leading Arab power and an honest broker of inter-Arab disputes.**

An Egypt less in thrall to Washington, and more prepared to defy Israel (for example, by permanently opening the Gaza crossings) **could in theory benefit Tehran. But a more democratic and politically stronger, independent Egypt would also be a formidable rival and check on Tehran's regional ambitions**

What would debates about this country look like?

Even with a more narrow mechanism like democracy assistance, there is debate about how the US could best support the Green Movement. The following is a good example of how the US can support civil society in a variety of sectors.

Ray Takeyh, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, February 17, 2011, Washington Post, "The U.S. must empower the Green Movement" <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/16/AR2011021606440.html>

As Iran's streets erupt with pro-democracy demonstrations, it is all too obvious that the only option the United States has in altering the Islamic Republic's behavior is to support the Green Movement.

The clerical oligarchs have tried hard to prevent the contagion of democracy from afflicting their nation. Despite their maladroitness attempt to establish a moral continuity between Iran's 1979 revolution and the recent uprising in Egypt, and their threats of violence and retribution toward those who protest, the mullahs have failed to reclaim their citizens.

It is too facile to suggest that the wave of protests rocking the Middle East was born in Iran, but it is not too simplistic to stress that Iran will not be left behind in the march for freedom.

The Middle East is undergoing one of its most momentous transformations since achieving independence from imperial rule. Although the canard of Islamist takeover has unsettled many pundits and policymakers, the bottom line is that the region has left behind its infatuation with revisionist ideologies. In the streets of Arab capitals we are witnessing the passing of the age of ideology, as neither pan-Arabism, with its **promises of modernity, nor Islamism, with its pledges of authenticity, can redeem the region's autocrats. The restive youth and the overburdened middle class can no longer be tempted by faded orthodoxies and false shibboleths that conceal the reality of repression and corruption. In retrospect, **the Green Movement that arose after Iran's disputed presidential election in 2009 was not so much a catalyst but a harbinger of this new epoch.****

As exhilarating as the early stages of the region's political transition may be, **democratic upheaval is likely to narrow the conventional options of addressing the threat of Iran's nuclear program. Great powers such as Russia and China that place a premium on stability are unlikely to agree to more economic sanctions. The Arab states preoccupied with renegotiating their national compacts will be reluctant to participate in efforts to isolate the Islamic Republic. And the military option that was always unattractive has now become implausible;** it would be rash to employ force against Iran's suspected nuclear installations and radicalize the Arab populace just as forces of moderation and democracy seem ascendant. All is not lost, however. **The only durable solution to Iran's nuclear conundrum was always empowerment of the Green Movement.** Tehran's callous leadership, indifferent to the financial penalties of its nuclear truculence, was hardly prone to make cost-benefit assessments and constructively participate in negotiations. **Although it has been customary** since the disputed presidential election of 2009 for the Washington establishment **to pronounce the demise of the Green Movement, the battered Iranian opposition has succeeded in de-legitimizing the theocratic regime and enticing a significant portion of the population to contemplate life beyond the parameters of clerical despotism.** Citizens' disenchantment was mirrored by the steady stream of defecting regime loyalists, who have forsaken their revolutionary patrimony. **The breakdown of ideological controls in Iran is bound to affect the cohesion and solidarity of its security services.** Deprived of popular credibility or a convincing dogma, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei may not even be able to enforce his rule through fear.

The key challenge for the United States is to find ways to connect with the Green Movement. As important as social media or rhetorical declarations may be, **such measures are limited.** The model of Eastern Europe is instructive, as the West managed to covertly use a range of institutions, such as the Catholic Church and labor unions, to funnel assistance to dissidents. **Several parts of Iranian civil society - labor syndicates, savvy youth, clerical dissidents, liberal protesters and universities - exist in a state of perpetual rebellion; they deserve to be beneficiaries of American advice and assistance.**

Whether motivated by idealism or a desire to advance practical security concerns, **the West must recognize that the only thing standing between the mullahs and the bomb is the Green Movement. The demise of the Islamic Republic is inevitable.** Should the Middle East move toward realizing the aspirations of its citizens, and embrace pluralism and accountability, it is hard to see how a retrogressive clerical tyranny can persist in the region. **During the democratic transition, there is still the challenge of tempering Iran's pernicious ambitions, and the mullahs' penchant for terrorism must still be addressed.** The chimera of a diplomatic solution should no longer blind the international community to Iran's political vulnerabilities. **In the end, the most effective means of disarming the Islamic Republic and ending its reign of terror is to invest in the indomitable Green Movement.**

Other examples of topical action include support for internet and media freedom as a means of empowering the Iranian resistance.

Geneive Abdo, Director of the Iran Program at the National Security Network and the Century Foundation, February 18, 2011, Foreign Affairs, "How U.S. Support Could Lead the Opposition to Victory" <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67458/geneive-abdo/green-movement-20>

After the protests in 2009, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps established a cyber defense command to counter online political activism, making Facebook and Twitter inaccessible to those without filter proxies bought in the West. On Monday, the regime banned Iranians from organizing; blocked BBC Persian, a main source of information in Iran (much as Al Jazeera is in the Arab world); and put the de facto leaders of the Green Movement under house arrest. Iranian leaders have announced that they will create a special court focusing on "media crimes," **a move that will surely deter even more journalists and citizens from using the Internet to disseminate information about the protests.** Even the regime's moderate conservatives, such as Parliamentary Speaker Ali Larijani, have been quick to demand that opposition leaders face trial for the most recent protests, some even calling for their execution. Of course, the Egyptian government also shut down the Internet -- but only for one day during the heat of the protests. And unlike Egypt's military, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard cannot be counted on to sit on the sidelines.

Even so, tens of thousands of Iranians reportedly protested on February 14. But if world leaders were to support civil disobedience, for example by making sophisticated technology available to Iranians to counter the regime's manipulation of the internet, the momentum could build for future demonstrations even if the violent security forces started to crack down.

At the moment, Iran's opposition is far less unified in its goals than the Egyptian opposition was during its protests. Some factions want only to reform Iran's theocracy, while others (particularly the younger activists) want to dismantle supreme clerical rule altogether and establish a parliamentary democracy.

The West's endorsement of the movement could strengthen Iran's opposition as a whole but only as long as Washington does not talk of trying to supplant the regime with a Western-style democracy.

The leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood have made clear that Egypt will be a democracy that reflects the religious and cultural values of Egypt, and the United States should not try to dictate Iran's future form of governance.

Washington's public support, moreover, would deprive the Iranian regime of one of its weapons: anti-Americanism. For example, the Iranian government has tried to convince its people that U.S. sanctions are designed to hurt them, not the regime. Some Iranians have been left believing that the United States cares more about security issues -- in particular preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon -- than their well-being. **But far from wanting the United States to back off entirely, a majority say that they would like closer ties with the West,** according to a recent poll from the International Peace Institute.

The debate about supporting the Iranian resistance isn't one sided. Many authors believe more active US support will stigmatize the opposition as western puppets.

Nathan Hodge, Wired.com, July 1, 2009, "Does Iran's Green Movement Need U.S. Aid?"
<http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2009/07/does-irans-green-movement-need-us-aid/>

So what next? **The Obama administration is moving ahead with plans to bankroll Iranian opposition groups, for starters.** USA Today's Ken Dilanian notes that **the U.S. Agency for International Development is planning to dole out \$20 million in grants to support "democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in Iran."** The deadline for those grant applications passed yesterday. **According to Columbia University professor Hamid Dabashi, handing out U.S. taxpayer money to Iranian dissidents is precisely what Iran does not need. "This financial aid is not only a waste of taxpayer money under these severe economic circumstances, but is in fact the surest way to kill that inborn and grassroots movement,"** he writes in a CNN commentary. **"It mostly will be abused by expatriate and entirely discredited opposition groups** ranging from the monarchist supporters of Reza Pahlavi to the members of the Mojahedin Khalq Organization, **and it will in turn strengthen the hand of the regime to denounce the Green Movement as funded by Americans."**

In other words, the United States shouldn't be shopping around for an Iranian Ahmad Chalabi.

The role of U.S.-funded "civil society" programs in supporting pro-democratic movements is a worthy subject for a book. The United States, for instance, helped provide advice and support to Serbia's opposition in its peaceful campaign to topple Slobodan Milosevic; U.S. taxpayers paid for spray paint used to tag walls with anti-Milosevic graffiti. Some U.S. money went to support individuals and groups who helped organize Ukraine's Orange Revolution.

But in both of those cases, U.S. assistance was not the deciding factor: Both Ukraine and Serbia were swept by genuine grassroots movements that sprang up in response to widespread electoral fraud. **Somewhat perversely, U.S. aid to pro-democracy groups has helped authoritarian regimes like Russia promote the idea of the "post-modern coup d'etat":** If you buy the Kremlin's line, the U.S. government is actually pulling the strings behind all these global democratic movements — so by extension, your domestic political opponents are also on Uncle Sam's payroll.

That's precisely what Iran's beleaguered opposition does not need: To be painted as U.S. stooges, monarchist throwbacks, or nutty fifth-columnists. As Noah has pointed out here before, the really hard part is providing the right kind of support to Iranians without undermining their cause.

Extensive accounts and historical comparisons detail how US support would be used against these groups.

Hooman Majd , January 6, 2010, author of *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ*. He advised and interpreted for two Iranian presidents, Mohammad Khatami and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, on their trips to the United States, *Foreign Policy*, “Think Again: Iran's Green Movement It's a civil rights movement, not a revolution.” http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/01/06/think_again_irans_green_movement

"The Green Movement Wants or Needs Foreign Support."

Dead wrong. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is insulting and patronizing to suggest, as many commentators do, **that without foreign help or support the green movement cannot be successful,** that Iranians on their own are incapable of commanding their own destiny.

U.S. President Barack Obama has so far expressed only moral support for Iranians fighting for their civil rights and has rightly articulated the unrest in Iran as a purely Iranian affair. Lacking relations with Iran, Obama can do little to help the green movement, but plenty to hurt it. Coming out squarely on the side of the opposition in Iran is likely to undermine its credibility, and perhaps even lend credence to the government's assertion that the movement is a foreign-inspired plot that will rob Iran of its independence.

That the green movement has survived, and even grown, in the absence of foreign support (even moral support in its inception) **is evidence that Iranians are perfectly capable of maintaining a civil rights movement and agitating for democratic change without the prodding, influence, or support of foreigners. Furthermore, if there is only one aspect of the Islamic Revolution that almost all Iranians can agree on as positive, it's that key events,** such as the spontaneous unrest after the election and all the way back to the revolution itself, **have happened independent of foreign influence.**

The most potentially damaging accusation the government has made against the green movement is that it is a foreign plot to foment a "velvet" or "color" revolution that will once again render Iran subservient to a greater power. But this accusation has not stuck because the movement's leaders have always eschewed any foreign support and framed their fight as a purely Iranian one.

The idea that foreign support is either necessary or important to the green movement's ability to achieve its goals is as preposterous as imagining, say in 1965, that overt Soviet support of the civil rights movement in the United States was necessary for that movement to be successful.

There is also a robust line of criticism that identifies the problems associated with involvement by the National Endowment for Democracy.

Edmund Berger, *Foreign Policy Journal*, May 14, 2011, “Soros and the State Department: Moving Iran towards the Open Society” <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2011/05/14/soros-and-the-state-department-moving-iran-towards-the-open-society/>

Following the distinctive pattern that can be seen here—a youth-based, nonviolent revolt with a color code-name, the aura of capitalist-style market reforms, and the presence of the OSI—it is not surprising that in Iran, like Poland, Georgia, and Ukraine, the close proximity of NED can be found. “There’s talk of a ‘green revolution in Iran,’” wrote conservative journalist Kenneth R.

Timmerman in an op-ed just several days before the election results were to be announced.[15] He continued:

The National Endowment for Democracy has spent millions of dollars during the past decade promoting “color” revolutions in places such as Ukraine and Serbia, training political workers in modern communications and organizational techniques.

Some of that money appears to have made it into the hands of pro-Mousavi groups, who have ties to non-governmental organizations outside Iran that the National Endowment for Democracy funds.

Timmerman holds a special interest in Iran—he’s the executive director of the Foundation for Democracy in Iran, a “US-based Iranian dissident organization” that incidentally receives funding from NED.

In 2009 alone, NED had set aside \$674,506 in grant money for Iranian activities (though in previous years, it had granted as much as \$4,898,000).[16] NED receives the money from United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which “for the last year been soliciting applications for \$20 million in grants to ‘promote democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in Iran,’ according to documents on the agency’s website.”[17] In 2008, the majority of USAID money designated for Iranian ‘democracy building’ that flowed to through the Endowment went to the Center for International Private Enterprise, the Chamber of Commerce’s free market development foundation. Other portions of the money went to the “Research Initiative for Contemporary Iran,” the “Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation,” and the “Association for Civic Society in Iran.”

How would including this country influence the overall topic?

There are mixed reasons to consider including Iran in the topic. Its geopolitical significance will certainly be appealing for discussion. The significance of the protest movement is also apparent in scholarly discussion of the Arab Spring.

The challenge is that including Iran offers a very different set of affirmative opportunities. Prior to their use of force against demonstrators in Libya and Syria, US policy was not actively interested in seeking the overthrow of many nations. Iran, however, has been the target of regime change policies by multiple US presidential administrations. Including Iran will unquestionably introduce a high-profile series of affirmative arguments about nonproliferation and the regional balance of power.

I would not consider Iran to be a core country for the topics, but it can function as a supplement to some wording options. I would recommend that Iran be narrowly considered as an addition to wording options that would need additional countries to create a natural balance of ground. The Iran sphere of influence argument will be very important, even if Iran is not a topical nation. The expansion of US democracy assistance to other nations will further enhance the competition between the US and Iran among these new governments.

Palestinian Territories

How does this country fit within the Arab Spring controversy?

The Palestinian Territories of Gaza and the West Bank may appear an unusual addition to the topic. In the recent controversy about President Obama's new diplomatic efforts toward the Middle East the Palestinian question is often seen apart from the waves of democratization. However there is a way to understand both events as part of a single trend of rising Arab autonomy.

Peter Beinart, senior political writer for The Daily Beast & associate professor of journalism and political science at City University of New York and a senior fellow at the New America Foundation, May 16, 2011, "Israel's Palestinian Arab Spring" <http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2011-05-16/israels-palestinian-arab-spring-jews-and-americans-losing-ability-to-shape-mideast/>

Why did thousands of Palestinians yesterday converge upon Israel's borders? Partly because Syria's war-criminal leader, Bashar al-Assad, and his ally, Hezbollah, wanted them to. But there's more to it than that. Palestinians also marched from Jordan and Egypt, whose governments did their best to stop the protests. In fact, they marched from every corner of the Palestinian world, in a tech-savvy, coordinated campaign. What hit Israel yesterday was the Palestinian version of the Arab spring.

Something fundamental has changed. I grew up believing that we—Americans and Jews—were the shapers of history in the Middle East. We created reality; others watched, baffled, paralyzed, afraid. In 1989, Americans gloated as the Soviet Union, our former rival for Middle Eastern supremacy, retreated ignominiously from the region. When Saddam Hussein tried to challenge us from within, we thrashed him in the Gulf War. **Throughout the 1990s, we sent our economists, law professors and investment bankers to try to teach the Arabs globalization, which back then meant copying us. In a thousand ways, sometimes gently, sometimes brutally, we sent the message: We make the rules; you play by them.**

For Jews, this sense of being history's masters was even more intoxicating. For millennia, we had been acted upon. Mere decades earlier, American Jews had watched, trembling and inarticulate, as European Jews were destroyed. But it was that very impotence that made possible the triumph of Zionism, a movement aimed at snatching history's reins from gentiles, and perhaps even God. Beginning in the early 20th century, Zionists created facts on the ground. Sometimes the great powers applauded; sometimes they condemned, but acre by acre, Jews seized control of their fate. As David Ben-Gurion liked to say, "Our future does not depend on what gentiles say but on what Jews do."

The Arabs reacted with fury, occasional violence, and in Palestine, a national movement of their own. But they could rarely compete, either politically or militarily. We went from strength to strength; they never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity.

That world is gone. America and Israel are no longer driving history in the Middle East; for the first time in a long time, Arabs are. In Tahrir Square, Egypt's young made a revolution. President Obama bowed to reality and helped show Hosni Mubarak the door; Benjamin Netanyahu stood athwart history, impotently yelling stop. **Now Egypt's leaders are doing its people's will, bringing Hamas and Fatah together in preparation for elections. Hamas and Fatah are complying because they fear their own Tahrir Square. They sense that in Palestine too, a populist uprising stirs; that's part of what yesterday's marches were about. For American and Israeli leaders accustomed to Palestinian autocrats and Palestinian terrorists, this is something new.** Netanyahu and his American backers are demanding that Obama rewind the clock, but he can't. **The Palestinians no longer listen to functionaries like George Mitchell. They have lost faith in American promises, and they no longer fear American threats. Instead, they are putting aside their internal divisions and creating facts on the ground.**

What would debates about this country look like?

After Iraq, the Palestinian territories receive some of the largest amounts of democracy assistance. Robust US aid goes to the Palestinian groups that have agreed to the Oslo Accord.

Jim Zanotti, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs, August 12, 2010, U.S. Foreign Aid to the Palestinians, Congressional Research Service, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS22967.pdf> p. summary

Since the signing of the Oslo Accord in 1993 and the establishment of limited Palestinian selfrule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1994, **the U.S. government has committed over \$3.5 billion in bilateral assistance to the Palestinians. Since the death of Yasser Arafat in November 2004, U.S. assistance to the Palestinians has been averaging about \$400 million a year.** During the 1990s, U.S. foreign aid to the Palestinians averaged approximately \$75 million per year. **Despite more robust levels of assistance this decade, Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Hamas’s heightened role in Palestinian politics have made it more difficult to implement effective and lasting aid projects that serve U.S. interests. U.S. aid to the Palestinians has fluctuated considerably over the past five years, largely due to Hamas’s changing role** within the Palestinian Authority (PA). After Hamas led the PA government for over a year, its forcible takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007 led to the creation of a non-Hamas government in the West Bank—resulting in different models of governance for the two Palestinian territories. Since then, the United States has dramatically boosted aid levels to bolster the PA in the West Bank and President Mahmoud Abbas vis-à-vis Hamas. **The United States has appropriated or reprogrammed nearly \$2 billion since 2007 in support of PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad’s security, governance, development, and reform programs, including \$650 million for direct budgetary assistance to the PA and nearly \$400 million** (toward training, non-lethal equipment, facilities, strategic planning, and administration) **for strengthening and reforming PA security forces and criminal justice systems** in the West Bank. **The remainder is for programs administered by the U.S. Agency for International Development** and implemented by nongovernmental organizations **in humanitarian assistance, economic development, democratic reform, improving water access and other infrastructure, health care, education, and vocational training.** In December 2009, Congress approved \$500 million in total FY2010 assistance pursuant to P.L. 111-117, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2010.

The Palestinians receive aid that very much reflects the core tenets of democracy assistance programs.

David Gootnick, Director, International Affairs and Trade, General Accounting Office, May 14, 2010, “Foreign Assistance: U.S. Assistance to the West Bank and Gaza for Fiscal Years 2008 and 2009” GAO-10-623R, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d10623r.pdf> p.1-2

For decades, the United States has worked toward the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, most recently under the 2003 Roadmap for Peace, which calls for an independent Palestinian state coexisting peacefully with the State of Israel.¹ **The United States had obligated more than \$2.9 billion in bilateral assistance to the West Bank and Gaza focused on further developing the Palestinian economic, social services, and civil society sectors and on strengthening the processes, governance, and security-providing capacity of Palestinian Authority (PA) institutions** from fiscal years 1993 through 2009. An additional \$400.4 million is planned for fiscal year 2010. **Since June 2007, when Hamas—a U.S. designated terrorist organization—seized control of the Gaza Strip, the United States has directed most of its assistance to the West Bank.**²

The topic would need to consider that assistance is given to the specific regions, not a nation of Palestine.

Jeremy M. Sharp, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs, July 17, 2009, U.S. Foreign Assistance to the Middle East: Historical Background, Recent Trends, and the FY2010 Request, p. 8
http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PCAAB954.pdf

12 The USAID program in the West Bank and Gaza Strip provides assistance to the Palestinian people through contractors and other non-governmental organizations. The PLO, which represents the Palestinian diaspora, has never received funds from the U.S. government.

Current US law stipulates that US aid cannot go to any Palestinian leadership that refuses to recognize certain fundamental premises about Israel. Only a presidential waiver can avoid this restriction.

Jeremy M. Sharp, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs, July 17, 2009, U.S. Foreign Assistance to the Middle East: Historical Background, Recent Trends, and the FY2010 Request, p. 8
http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PCAAB954.pdf

Since the signing of the Oslo Accord in 1993, the U.S. government has committed more than \$3.3 billion in bilateral economic assistance to the Palestinians, of which more than \$1.8 billion has been provided since FY2004.¹² According to annual foreign operations legislation, **congressionally approved funds for the West Bank and Gaza Strip cannot be used for the Palestinian Authority (PA), unless the President submits a waiver to Congress citing that it is in the interest of national security.**¹³ **Should the Hamas “government” in Gaza form a unity government with the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, a provision in the FY2009 Supplemental Appropriations Act (P.L. 111-32) would allow the U.S. government to provide assistance to a power-sharing PA government of which Hamas is a member if the President certifies that such a government, including all of its ministers, acknowledges Israel’s right to exist and commits and adheres to previous international agreements, including the 2003 Roadmap.**¹⁴

The recently formed unity government is providing a crucial test of this provision.

Andrew Quinn, Reuters, April 28, 2011, “U.S. affirms aid to Palestinians -- for now.”
<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/28/us-palestinians-israel-usa-idUSTRE73R6JL20110428>

Since 1994, the United States has given more than \$3.5 billion to the Palestinian Authority now headed by Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, much of it aimed at strengthening governance and security in preparation for eventual statehood.

"Our current support for the Palestinian Authority, as led by President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad, serves as an important contribution to U.S. efforts to support the building of Palestinian institutions," Bronke-Fulton said.

But with many details of the Palestinian agreement not known, it was unclear if this would continue.

A Congressional Research Service report last year said a potential unity government could drop the development and reform objectives set by the Fayyad administration, which are used as major justifications for current U.S. aid levels.

It also said that as long as Hamas refuses to agree to the basic benchmarks on renouncing violence and accepting Israel, the United States could not legally continue assistance to any government of which it is a part.

The details of the new government will determine if the US can continue to provide assistance to the Palestinians.

Andrew Quinn, Reuters, April 28, 2011, "U.S. affirms aid to Palestinians -- for now."
<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/28/us-palestinians-israel-usa-idUSTRE73R6JL20110428>

The United States will keep aid flowing to the Palestinian Authority, but future help depends on the new Palestinian government, the State Department said on Thursday.

One day after a unity deal between rival Palestinian factions, **the State Department said roughly \$400 million in annual U.S. funding would be reassessed as the policies of the new leadership emerge.**

"The current Palestinian government remains in place and our assistance programs continue," State Department spokeswoman Heide Bronke-Fulton said in an email.

"If a new Palestinian government is formed, we will assess it based on its policies at that time and will determine the implications for our assistance based on U.S. law."

U.S. lawmakers from both parties have warned that the reconciliation deal between the western-backed Fatah party and the Islamist Hamas could imperil U.S. aid if Hamas continues to spurn demands that it renounce violence and recognize Israel's right to exist.

The instability within the Palestinian leadership ensures that the exact composition of this leadership will be difficult to predict.

The Economist, May 26, 2011, "Hamas is itself divided"
http://www.economist.com/node/18745118?story_id=18745118&fsrc=rss

ALL is not well in the camp of Hamas, the Palestinians' Islamist faction that rules the Gaza Strip. **No sooner had its leader in exile, Khaled Meshal (pictured), declared his readiness for Mahmoud Abbas, who heads the Palestinians' more moderate Fatah faction, to relaunch negotiations with Israel, than one of Hamas's leaders in Gaza, Mahmoud Zahar, said Mr Abbas did not speak for the Palestinians:**

"Our programme is against negotiations in this way because they are a waste of time."

Formally Mr Meshal, who is based in Syria's capital, Damascus, speaks for Hamas. **But with turmoil there and uncertainty over the policy of Egypt towards the Palestinians**—it has said it will open its border crossing to Gaza—**Mr Meshal and his exiled coterie have looked homeless and weak. And Hamas leaders in Gaza say they are keen to see the movement's centre of gravity shift back home.**

"The main headquarters of the Hamas movement is in the occupied lands," says Mr Zahar. "Its real weight is there."

Rival visions have worsened the row. Whereas Mr Meshal relies on diplomatic and foreign ties for his influence, Hamas leaders in Gaza depend more on their own resources. Mr Meshal looks to reconciliation with Mr Abbas's Fatah movement as a means to regain a national role, and has long sought a place in the Palestinians' umbrella body, the Palestine Liberation Organisation. But Hamas leaders in Gaza think they already have a big enough platform.

Depending more on friends outside Palestine, Mr Meshal faces pressure from Islamist movements elsewhere in the Arab world to show a more conciliatory face. Hamas's harsh de facto one-party state in Gaza clashes with the idea of an enlightened democratic movement that sister Islamist groups seek to portray.

Mr Meshal's friends speak of a "transformative process" whereby Hamas re-emerges as a pluralist and progressive outfit able to co-operate with other factions to achieve a Palestinian state alongside Israel. But that jars with Gaza's Islamists, some of whom saw the agreement to reconcile with Fatah as a plot to divest Hamas of its hard-won power and to scuttle its Islamist plans. Mr Zahar says Gaza's forces would stay firmly under Hamas control during a proposed year-long interim period leading up to elections. He also rejects the mooted idea that some security forces answerable to Mr Abbas would be allowed back

into Gaza. And he ruled out an agreement on a joint programme with Fatah. Although Mr Zahar stresses an Islamising agenda, Mr Meshal highlights the goal he shares with Fatah of establishing a Palestinian state.

Such tensions could sink the reconciliation accord initialled in Cairo on May 4th. An interim technocratic government, due to be set up within days of the signing ceremony, could take weeks to emerge. The new government is meant to be filled with technocrats, but both factions are bickering over candidates for prime, foreign and interior minister. Mr Abbas has sounded keen for the current prime minister, Salam Fayyad, to stay on. But Mr Fayyad's chances of doing so dipped a few days ago when he had a heart attack in Texas. **True reconciliation is still some way off.**

There is specific literature on the question of the effectiveness of democracy assistance to the Palestinian people. This literature outlines many of the problems such aid has faced in the past.

Geoffrey Swenson, rule of law specialist for the Asia Foundation in Nepal, March 30, 2010, Yale Journal, Volume 5, Issue 1 - Winter 2010: Spotlight on Development, "Promoting Democracy with Neither State Nor Security: U.S. Democracy Promotion Efforts in the Palestinian Territories from the Oslo Accords to the Rise of Hamas" <http://yalejournal.org/2010/03/promoting-democracy-with-neither-state-nor-security-u-s-democracy-promotion-efforts-in-the-palestinian-territories-from-the-oslo-accords-to-the-rise-of-hamas/>

Democracy promotion efforts reflected the deeply flawed assumption that Western-funded advertisements and development projects would make voters overlook the stalled peace process, steadily declining living conditions, constant expansion of Israeli settlements, and Fatah's corruption. Party aid has been largely ineffective, often even counterproductive. NDI and USAID stressed their commitment to vibrant multi-party democracy, yet offered massive technical and financial assistance to the hegemonic party. This aid further distorted Fatah's already dysfunctional incentive structure. Not only did Fatah possess the advantages of incumbency, it also could rely on fears of a Hamas-led government to ensure it would retain major donors' support. Aid effectively functioned as a massive subsidy. This is not purely the fault of U.S. NGOs, as no other major party embraces non-violent democratic practices. It is not clear that party aid, as implemented, furthered the goal of a vibrant, democratic multi-party system.

The solvency advocates recognize these challenges and still argue for important new roles for democracy assistance.

Geoffrey Swenson, rule of law specialist for the Asia Foundation in Nepal, March 30, 2010, Yale Journal, Volume 5, Issue 1 - Winter 2010: Spotlight on Development, "Promoting Democracy with Neither State Nor Security: U.S. Democracy Promotion Efforts in the Palestinian Territories from the Oslo Accords to the Rise of Hamas" <http://yalejournal.org/2010/03/promoting-democracy-with-neither-state-nor-security-u-s-democracy-promotion-efforts-in-the-palestinian-territories-from-the-oslo-accords-to-the-rise-of-hamas/>

The decisions of NGOs, donors, and high-level policymakers leave plenty of room for improvement, but they have made some critical contributions. For example, their work to strengthen Palestine's judiciary has made a major contribution to establishing the rule of law and perhaps, eventually, offering a meaningful check on the still overpowered PA executive. Both peace and democracy will remain elusive without the emergence of a Palestinian state that has the capacity to deal with its citizens' legal claims legitimately and effectively.

Given the realities of Palestine and the limited results of democracy promotion there, President Obama's appropriate response is not abandonment. Rather, he should pursue lofty goals checked by modest expectations, both of which should be underwritten by an unwavering commitment to democratic ideals. The administration's recent announcement of a holistic review of development policy may provide a good first step. **Representative government offers too much promise to languish simply because promoting democracy proved more difficult than initially assumed. Democracy promotion efforts must be made smarter rather than curtailed. The romantic imagery of chivalrous defenders of freedom bringing democracy to the benighted masses contrasts with the tedious truth of what democracy promotion actually entails. Unfortunately, no gallant steeds or broadswords are involved, just voter education and electoral system design. Bold ideological battles or titanic shifts remain rare. Policymakers and American NGOs alike must own up to the hard realities of the craft: promoting democracy is slow and hard work that can take many seasons to bear fruit.**

Among the types of affirmatives, there is discussion of how democracy assistance has helped the Palestinian legal system.

Geoffrey Swenson, rule of law specialist for the Asia Foundation in Nepal, March 30, 2010, Yale Journal, Volume 5, Issue 1 - Winter 2010: Spotlight on Development, "Promoting Democracy with Neither State Nor Security: U.S. Democracy Promotion Efforts in the Palestinian Territories from the Oslo Accords to the Rise of Hamas" <http://yalejournal.org/2010/03/promoting-democracy-with-neither-state-nor-security-u-s-democracy-promotion-efforts-in-the-palestinian-territories-from-the-oslo-accords-to-the-rise-of-hamas/>

On a structural level, assistance from the U.S. Government proved vital to the establishment and continued maintenance of distinct executive, judicial, and legislative branches. While they continue to face major problems - including rampant corruption and waste - their very existence of these three discrete branches constitutes a major success. They were constructed from scratch in a very difficult environment. U.S. NGOs also made notable contributions. The entire PLC membership and most staff (at least prior to the 2006 elections) received training and assistance. Along with the administrative and material assistance, these activities enhanced the capacities of members and the PLC as an institution. Likewise, judicial aid had visible impact, aiding the Palestinian judiciary in becoming extremely independent, especially in comparison to the rest of the Arab world. **Palestinian legal institutions and law schools face chronic resource shortages that U.S. funding helps alleviate. Though many challenges remain, aid generated tangible improvements to the court system and the legal academy.**

How would including this country influence the overall topic?

In some ways including the Palestinian territories resembles some of the tensions associated with including Iraq. In both cases there are already large amounts of democracy assistance programs in place. Both countries are facing future challenges (Iraq through finance and Palestinian through the unified government) that could explain a dramatic drop in current aid. Including either also brings in some of the larger foreign policy interests of the US that may not be the same as those directly influenced by the Arab Spring controversy.

I would recommend that the Palestinian Territories be considered as an option for those resolutions that seek to expand the range of countries. I don't think this represents the central aspect of the topic, but the presence of solvency evidence highlights that, unlike Iraq, this is a place where democracy assistance is much more central to US foreign policy.

I

Saudi Arabia

How does this country fit within the Arab Spring controversy?

Saudi Arabia represents a very interesting challenge for the resolutions. The US has avoided pushing for greater freedom in Saudi Arabia due to security interests. The implications of a destabilized Saudi Arabia have created a great deal of anxiety.

Martin Indyk, Vice President and director of the Brookings Institution's foreign policy program, April 7, 2011, Washington Post, "Amid the Arab Spring, Obama's dilemma over Saudi Arabia"
http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/amid-the-arab-spring-obamas-dilemma-over-saudi-arabia/2011/04/07/AFhILDxC_story.html

There's a crisis in U.S. policy in the Middle East — and it's not about Libya. For weeks the Obama administration has been preoccupied with averting a humanitarian catastrophe in North Africa. But **on the other side of the region, in the oil-rich Arabian Peninsula, a matter of vital, strategic importance awaits the urgent attention of policymakers.**

Over there, the ailing 87-year-old king of Saudi Arabia probably isn't getting much sleep. **Abdullah**, this Sunni monarch of monarchs, custodian of the holy mosques of Mecca and Medina, **can see the flames of instability and turmoil licking at all his borders.** In the south, Yemen is imploding, to the advantage of his al-Qaeda enemies. In the east, Bahrain's Shiite majority has been in such a state of revolt that Abdullah has already sent armed forces to prevent Iran from establishing a "cat's paw" on the Sunni Arab side of the Persian Gulf. In the north, Abdullah sees Iraq's Shiite-dominated government as nothing more than a front for the hated Persians. In the west, a Palestinian majority is demanding that the Hashemite king of Jordan become a constitutional monarch. Meanwhile, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, that other Sunni pillar of regional stability, has already been overthrown.

Historically, in times of trouble, Saudi kings have depended on American presidents to guarantee their external security. But at this moment of crisis, Abdullah views President Obama as a threat to his internal security. He fears that in the event of a widespread revolt, Obama will demand that he leave office, just as he did to Mubarak, that other longtime friend of the United States. **Consequently, Abdullah is reportedly making arrangements for Pakistani troops to enter his kingdom should the need to suppress popular demonstrations arise.**

This presents the Obama administration with a particularly thorny dilemma. Saudi Arabia is the world's largest oil producer and the only one with sufficient excess production capacity to moderate rises in the price of oil. **Instability in Saudi Arabia could produce panic in the oil markets and an oil shock that could put an end to America's economic recovery** (and the president's hopes for reelection). **This would argue for granting an "exception" to Saudi Arabia from the Obama administration's trumpeting of universal rights. Indeed, the soft criticism of Bahrain's Saudi-dictated suppression of its people suggests that this has already become U.S. policy.**

Yet helping the Saudi king effectively erect a wall against the political tsunami sweeping across the Arab world is not a long-term solution. If there's one thing that we can now predict with some confidence, it's that no Arab authoritarian regime can remain immune from the demands of its people for political freedom and accountable government. **To be sure, \$100 billion in subventions from the palace and the promise of 60,000 jobs can help postpone, for a time, the demands** of unemployed Saudi youths. **But political freedom,** transmitted across borders via cable TV and the Internet, **has proved to be a seductive idea. In the end, it will not be assuaged by economic bribes or police-state suppression.**

And the Saudi system is fragile. Power is concentrated in the hands of the king and his brothers, who are old and ailing. The Saud family's legitimacy depends in significant part on its pact with a fundamentalist Wahhabi clergy that is deeply opposed to basic political reforms, such as equal rights for women. **The deep**

structural tensions generated by a 21st-century Westernized elite existing within a 15th-century Saudi social structure have been papered over for decades by oil wealth. If this strange social contract begins to fray, it might tear completely. And over in the eastern quarter, adjacent to Bahrain, where most of Saudi Arabia's oil reserves are located, sits a restive Shiite minority who have been treated as second-class citizens for decades.

Even though they have not yet experienced the active wave of public opposition, it is clear that the Saudi regime is fearful of those protests coming home. The Saudi fear of these revolts has created a dynamic where the Saudi government is promoting repression of protests to stop further revolts.

F. Gregory Gause III, professor of political science at the University of Vermont, May 9, 2011, "Arab Spring: Bahrain and Saudi Arabia" US Institute of Peace, <http://www.usip.org/publications/arab-spring-bahrain-and-saudi-arabia>

Saudi Arabia has played a leading role in opposition to the Arab Spring. What are the implications, both domestic and regional, of Saudi Arabia taking on this role?

The Saudis weathered the storms of the winter of Arab discontent relatively easily. The fact that the government was able to make spending commitments of over \$100 billion in February and March goes a long way to explaining that. So does the general perception that the Saudi security forces would not blanch from repressing protests, particularly in Shia areas of the Eastern Province.

But the regional events really shook the Saudis. They lost their most important Arab ally in Hosni Mubarak. They are increasingly seeing Iran as the big winner in regional politics, not only over the last months, but over the last few years. **Many in the elite see playing the sectarian card as the best way to limit Iranian influence, since there are more Sunnis than Shia in the region. However, this only exacerbates their problems in Bahrain, Iraq and Lebanon, and encourages the kind of extremist salafi reactions in the Sunni community that can produce al Qaeda sympathizers** and others like them.

It is a dangerous regional game. I understand Saudi fears about Iranian power from a balance of power perspective, but **playing the sectarian card will cause more harm for them, and for the U.S., than good.**

What would debates about this country look like?

The current geo-political climate is producing dramatic tensions between the US and Saudi Arabia. Any consideration of including Saudi Arabia as a topic country will acknowledge the tremendous Saudi sensitivity to democratic reforms.

Warren P. Strobel. McClatchy Newspapers, April 19, 2011, “Arab spring' drives wedge between U.S., Saudi Arabia, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/03/24/111034/arab-spring-drives-wedge-between.html>

The United States and Saudi Arabia — whose conflicted relationship has survived oil shocks, the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the U.S. invasion of Iraq — **are drifting apart faster than at any time in recent history**, according to diplomats, analysts and former U.S. officials.

The breach, punctuated by a series of tense diplomatic incidents in the past two weeks, **could have profound implications for the U.S. role in the Middle East**, even as President Barack Obama juggles major Arab upheavals from Libya to Yemen.

The Saudi monarchy, which itself has been loathe to introduce democratic reforms, **watched with deepening alarm as the White House backed Arab opposition movements and helped nudge from power former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak**, another long-time U.S. ally, according to U.S. and Arab officials.

That alarm turned to horror when the Obama administration demanded that the Saudi-backed monarchy of Bahrain negotiate with protesters representing the country's majority Shiite Muslim population. To Saudi Arabia's Sunni rulers, Bahrain's Shiites are a proxy for Shiite Iran, its historic adversary.

"We're not going to budge. We're not going to accept a Shiite government in Bahrain," said an Arab diplomat, who spoke frankly on condition he not be further identified.

Saudi Arabia has registered its displeasure bluntly. Both Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Robert Gates were rebuffed when they sought to visit the kingdom this month.

The official cover story was that aging King Abdullah was too ill to receive them.

The US is very hesitant to place any direct pressure on Saudi Arabia. This situation explains why the US is expanding defense ties, even as the public rancor increases.

Dr. Jo Coghlan, Lecturer in Politics at the School of Social Sciences and International Studies at the University of New South Wales, May 23rd, 2011, “Obama’s Arab Spring Silence on Saudi Arabia Is Deafening” <http://dissidentvoice.org/2011/05/obama%E2%80%99s-arab-spring-silence-on-saudi-arabia-is-deafening/>

Recent events are also ominous. **The Saudis, armed with the best U.S. military technology, are claiming themselves as guardians of the Arab status quo. They have made it clear that they will not accept popular rule anywhere in the states under the Council for the Arab States of the Gulf. It is the status quo (including American support) that is the very thing the Arab Spring protesters want to overthrow. Moreover, America has steadily become wedged itself, accounting for its slow official response to the events that have been occurring in Northern Africa and the Middle East since December 2010.**

Successive American administrations have not as been as strident on human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia as they have been elsewhere. This is the trade off for having Saudi Arabia as an American sphere of influence in the region. Now with the protestors demanding reform, a rejection of regimes backed by outside states for geo-political self-interests, and the delivery of human rights, America is itself wedged and the Saudi’s have been worried about why Barrack Obama might do.

Associated Press has reported that there is a “deepening political divide” between the Obama administration and the rule of King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz. Privately however the U.S. and the Saudi Arabia are quietly expanding defense ties on a vast scale, led by a little-known project to develop an elite force to protect the kingdom’s oil riches and future nuclear sites. **The U.S. also is in discussions with Saudi Arabia to create an air and missile defense system with far greater capability against the regional rival the Saudis fear most, Iran.**

Britain's Amnesty International had already issued a press release ahead saying Obama needed to make it clear that his administration is "committed to promoting freedom, justice and accountability with friend and foe alike". This seems problematic given the Saudi government ranks low on The Economist's Democracy Index.

For a president elected on a platform of change, and with a speech embracing opportunity, Obama's silence on Saudi Arabia is deafening.

A refusal to act, however, threatens a massive Middle Eastern conflict through Saudi provocation.

Martin Indyk, Vice President and director of the Brookings Institution's foreign policy program, April 7, 2011, Washington Post, "Amid the Arab Spring, Obama's dilemma over Saudi Arabia"
http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/amid-the-arab-spring-obamas-dilemma-over-saudi-arabia/2011/04/07/AFhILDxC_story.html

Even if the Obama administration were understandably inclined to leave well enough alone, it cannot afford to do so for other reasons. The Saudis are attempting to erect the wall beyond their borders not only by suppressing the revolt in Bahrain but also by insisting that Jordan's king not pursue the reform agenda he has promised his people. In effect, Abdullah intends to carve out an exception for all the kings and sheiks — Sunni to a man — in Saudi Arabia's neighborhood. It might work for a time. But should this dam break, it could generate a sectarian Sunni-Shiite, Arab-Iranian conflict on one side and an Arab-Israeli conflict on the other. It could spell the end of Pax Americana in the Middle East.

The challenge for the topic is much of the evidence is now focusing on minimizing the negative role of the Saudis in the Arab Spring, not directly on supporting Saudi internal reforms.

Martin Indyk, Vice President and director of the Brookings Institution's foreign policy program, April 7, 2011, Washington Post, "Amid the Arab Spring, Obama's dilemma over Saudi Arabia"
http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/amid-the-arab-spring-obamas-dilemma-over-saudi-arabia/2011/04/07/AFhILDxC_story.html

For all of these reasons, **President Obama urgently needs to negotiate a new compact with King Abdullah. He has to find a way to convince him that defining a road map that leads to constitutional monarchies in his neighborhood, and eventually in Saudi Arabia, is the only effective way to secure his kingdom and the interests of his subjects. Abdullah has been willing to undertake important reforms in the past. But if the king is to be persuaded to embark on this road again, he will need to know that the president will provide a secure safety net of support, rather than undermine him. And he will need to know that the United States will not make a deal with his Iranian enemies at Saudi expense.**

Such a compact would be difficult to negotiate in the best of times. It cannot even be broached in current circumstances unless the basic trust between the president and the king can be reestablished. With a budget crisis at home and turmoil in the Middle East, it's understandable that **Obama has had little time for the personal engagement** with potentates that does not come naturally to him. **But it's not just Abdullah's survival that is at stake. A revolt in Saudi Arabia could sink his presidency.**

How would including this country influence the overall topic?

I strongly believe that Saudi Arabia is a poor choice to be included in the topic. The country is obviously geopolitically important and central to the larger question of how democratic reforms evolve in the Middle East and North Africa. Its role, however, is not generally looked at as a site of US sponsored reform. In an ironic way, Iran and Saudi Arabia both represent important regional powers that are seeking to manage the reforms, not be the subject of such efforts. This concern is relevant because democracy assistance would be a very modest series of proposals when considered against the Saudi state's ability to leverage financial resources to its cause. Saudi Arabia would make more sense as part of a topic designed to directly overthrow regimes, not the focus of our current project.

Instead of trying to squeeze Saudi Arabia into the topic, I would argue that it should be understood as perhaps the central sphere of influence disadvantage. The Saudis are actively working to suppress further democratic reform and it is easy to see how they may work to undermine and retaliate against US democracy initiatives. Consider the following example of how Saudi Arabia may retaliate against the US.

Vali Nasr , Bloomberg News, May 23, 2011, "Will the Saudis Kill the Arab Spring?"
<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-05-23/will-the-saudis-kill-the-arab-spring-.html>

In his speech last week on the Middle East, President Barack Obama left little doubt that America stands with the people of the region in their demand for change. This puts the U.S. on a collision course with Saudi Arabia.

The kingdom has emerged as the leader of a new rejectionist front that is determined to defeat popular demand for reform. One would have expected Iran to lead such a front, but instead **it is America's closest Arab ally in the region that is seeking to defeat our policy.** Though the president made no mention of Saudi Arabia in his speech, in the near term, **dealing with the kingdom is the biggest challenge facing the U.S. in the Middle East.**

Saudi rulers have made clear that they find U.S. support for democracy naive and dangerous, an existential threat to the monarchies of the Persian Gulf. If the U.S. supports democracy, the Saudis are signaling, it can no longer count on its special bond with Riyadh (read: oil).

The Saudi threat is intended to present U.S. policymakers with a choice between U.S. values and U.S. interests. The idea is that either Washington stays the course, supporting the Arab people's demands for reform, and risks a rift with Saudi Arabia, or it protects that relationship and loses the rest of the Middle East.

This is an exciting area for research precisely because, much like all sphere of influence debates, there can be an active discussion if a firm US policy is best to dissuade the Saudis. Consider in this same recent article both affirmative and negative teams can argue their course of action can best address the threat.

Vali Nasr , Bloomberg News, May 23, 2011, "Will the Saudis Kill the Arab Spring?"
<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-05-23/will-the-saudis-kill-the-arab-spring-.html>

Saudi Arabia's new posture is a serious challenge to U.S. policy. Conceding to Saudi demands will put America on the wrong side of a widely popular historical transformation in the region, and thus will only hurt U.S. interests in the long run. Bahrain's heavy-handed suppression of protests has already dented American standing in the region.

Having Saudi Arabia deliberately ratchet up tensions with Iran is also risky. The Persian Gulf monarchies don't have the military muscle to back their aggressive policy toward Iran. Their credibility depends on U.S. support. And if baiting Iran escalates tensions in the Gulf, U.S. interests and the sheer size of its military presence there will inevitably put the U.S. in the middle of the conflict.

Confronting the Challenge

For all these reasons, the U.S. needs to confront the Saudi challenge head-on. Failure to do so will hurt our standing in the region and alienate public opinion there, which will only benefit Iran. The U.S. should assert its leadership role in the Middle East. It should make clear that, our close ties to Saudi Arabia notwithstanding, we will be as vigilant in pushing for reform in Bahrain as in Libya or Syria. Washington should be prepared to act if the monarchy in Bahrain doesn't end its crackdown and start a meaningful dialog with the opposition. We should also make clear to Jordan and Morocco that America supports their reform initiatives and won't look favorably on reversing course.

In short, Saudi Arabia is going to be an important aspect of our topic, but I don't believe it should be a topical country under any interpretation.