



BLINDSIDED – THE UNITED STATES AND NORTH AFRICAN UNREST

Roger Svensson

For the last fifty years, U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis Arab and Middle Eastern nations has been dominated by two big issues: the Israeli state and secure access to oil. Even if the United States is today much less dependant on oil from autocratic regimes in the region, the events of September 9, 2001 made the Arab and Islamic nations the key issue of U.S. foreign policy. In no particular order it meant Iran, Iraq and of course Israel/Palestine. Developments in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya during recent weeks have turned the table and forced the U.S. (and the European Union) into ad hoc crisis management.

“This We Did Not Expect”

The events in North Africa are of course not the first time the United States has been caught unaware and unprepared. But responses, appropriate or not, were easier to find after the break-up of the Soviet empire or the attack of 9/11. Facing the human and security consequences of the revolts, Washington has gradually tried to find its feet and that includes the current administration as well as the Republican Party.

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Whatever strategy the United States had developed towards these countries, it would seem that this kind of pro-democracy, root level activity toppling autocrats was never on the cards. Of course, no one really predicted the events starting in Tunisia, continuing in Egypt and Libya and to

a certain degree in other Arab nations. The historical links between North Africa and the former colonial powers of Europe – as well as geographic proximity – did nothing to inform France, Italy or the United Kingdom about events that started as a brush-fire.

For the United States the quest for stability and containment of radical Islam were goals that lead to outright support and cooperation with some (Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia are such examples) and tolerance for some (Libya). That strategy is no longer viable and as Will Inboden, foreign policy expert in the Bush administration, puts it: “...it is not just individual governments that are being changed, but also the entire strategic order that America’s regional posture has been based on for decades.”

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton’s stumbling performance at the outset and the Obama administration’s purely reactive responses clearly show that they were all blindsided by events and still do not have a concerted policy how to deal with them. They literally do not know what to do, except to call for restraint and for sanctions. This might work for autocrats with personal exit options (Ben Ali and Mubarak) but not for a mad man like Ghadaffi and his henchmen.

Between Talking and All In

When terrorists, linked to Libya, bombed a club in West Berlin in April 1986 President Ronald Reagan ordered air



strikes on Libyan military targets. The raid took place within two weeks after the bombing of the club. (An interesting aside: France, Italy and Spain denied the U.S. Air Force access to their air space and no Continental bases could be used, forcing deployment from far away bases in the United Kingdom). Today, similar responses to the civil unrest are off the table. Firstly, it would be directly counter productive, linking the protesters/rebels to Western powers and supporting conspiracy theories that are already afoot in the region. Secondly, it is highly unlikely that the United States – presently trying to get out of one and a half war – would be willing to get militarily entangled in a region so complex and confusing. It is true that NATO, prodded by President Bill Clinton, started the bombing campaign in the Balkans for humanitarian reasons and without the support of the United Nations Security Council. Anything along these lines in North Africa or more precisely Libya is only a distant possibility, despite the martial possibilities outlined by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen just the other day. Similar utterances have been heard from both side of the aisle in the U.S. Senate, but most, including old hardliners like former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld advice restraint and caution.

The half-measure suggested, a no-fly zone, is an example of “damned if you do, damned if you don’t.” To the general public it sounds easy and clinical. To the generals it is complicated and requiring substantial military assets – and it could very well lead to a situation where the United States and NATO would be forced to use ground forces to rescue downed pilots

Apart from the obvious concern for the civil population in North Africa, especially in Libya, the real nightmare for the United States – and the West – is North African rebellions being hijacked by radical Islam, in a kind of replay of the Iranian revolution, toppling the Shah. At the moment there are no signs to support this scenario and if that would happen it would by necessity be quite a ways down the road from today’s situation. And it is not an argument that can be used as a reason for concrete military action.

The situation in the Muslim nations in North Africa and the Middle East is extremely fluid and it would indeed

be rash to try to assess the short, medium and long term outcome. That the United States – and/or NATO – would intervene militarily is however highly unlikely. As already stated, it would most likely be counter productive to the long term interests of the West and it is unlikely to gain domestic public support, not to mention the immense difficulties the military would encounter. There is, however, an outside chance for a Balkan situation, but now in reverse. It was the United States that prodded NATO to intervene. North Africa is the near abroad of Southern Europe – if things get really ugly, would Europe for once be the initiator for using the military option, with or without the United States?

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