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Article 1.

Washington Post

Arab democracy and the return of the Mediterranean world

Robert D. Kaplan

February 27, 2011 -- With the toppling of autocratic regimes in Egypt and Tunisia - and other Arab dictators, such as Libya's, on the ropes - some have euphorically announced the arrival of democracy in the Middle East. But something more subtle may develop. The regimes that emerge may call themselves democracies and the world may go along with the lie, but the test of a system is how the power relationships work behind the scenes. In states with relatively strong institutional traditions, such as Tunisia and Egypt, a form of democracy may in fact develop. But places that are less states than geographical expressions, such as Libya and Yemen, are more likely to produce hybrid regimes. Within such systems - with which history is very familiar - militaries, internal security services, tribes and inexperienced political parties compete for influence. The process produces incoherence and instability even as it combines attributes of authoritarianism and democracy. This is not anarchy so much as a groping toward true modernity. Another obstacle to full-bore democracies emerging quickly across the Middle East is simply that young people, while savvy in the ways of social media and willing to defy bullets, can bring down a system, but they cannot necessarily govern. Hierarchical organizations are required to govern. And as those develop we will see various mixed systems - various grays instead of democracy vs. dictatorship in black-and-white terms. When Christianity spread around the Mediterranean basin in late antiquity, it did not unify the ancient world or make it morally purer;

rather, Christianity split up into various rites, sects and heresies all battling against each other. Power politics continued very much as before. Something similar may ensue with the spread of democracy. Each Arab country's evolving system will unleash a familiar scenario: The United States had a relatively low-maintenance relationship with Mexico when it was a one-party dictatorship. But as Mexico evolved into a multiparty democracy, relations got far harder and more complex. No longer was there one man or one phone number to dial when crises arose; Washington had to lobby a host of Mexican personalities simultaneously. An era of similar complexity is about to emerge with the Arab world - and it won't be just a matter of getting things done but also of knowing who really is in charge.

The uprisings in the Middle East will have a more profound effect on Europe than on the United States. Just as Europe moved eastward to encompass the former satellite states of the Soviet Union after 1989, Europe will now expand to the south. For decades North Africa was effectively cut off from the northern rim of the Mediterranean because of autocratic regimes that stifled economic and social development while also facilitating extremist politics. North Africa gave Europe economic migrants but little else. But as its states evolve into hybrid regimes, the degree of political and economic interactions with nearby Europe will multiply. Some of those Arab migrants may return home as opportunities are created by reformist policies. The Mediterranean will become a connector, rather than the divider it has been during most of the post-colonial era. Of course, Tunisia and Egypt are not about to join the European Union. But they will become shadow zones of deepening E.U. involvement. The European Union itself will become an even more ambitious and unwieldy project. The true beneficiary of these uprisings in a historical and geographical sense is Turkey. Ottoman Turkey ruled North Africa and the Levant for hundreds of years in the modern era. While this

rule was despotic, it was not so oppressive as to leave a lasting scar on today's Arabs. Turkey is an exemplar of Islamic democracy that can serve as a role model for these newly liberated states, especially as its democracy evolved from a hybrid regime - with generals and politicians sharing power until recently. With 75 million people and a 10 percent economic growth rate, Turkey is also a demographic and economic juggernaut that can project soft power throughout the Mediterranean. The Middle East's march away from authoritarianism will ironically inhibit the projection of American power. Because of the complexity of hybrid regimes, American influence in each capital will be limited; Turkey is more likely to be the avatar toward which newly liberated Arabs look. America's influence is likely to be maintained less by the emergence of democracy than by continued military assistance to many Arab states and by the divisions that will continue to plague the region, especially the threat of a nuclearized, Shiite Iran. Mitigating the loss of American power will be the geopolitical weakening of the Arab world itself. As Arab societies turn inward to rectify long-ignored social and economic grievances and their leaders in hybrid systems battle each other to consolidate power domestically, they will have less energy for foreign policy concerns. The political scientist Samuel Huntington wrote that the United States essentially inherited its political system from England and, thus, America's periodic political upheavals had to do with taming authority rather than creating it from scratch. The Arab world now has the opposite challenge: It must create from the dust of tyrannies legitimate political orders. It is less democracy than the crisis of central authority that will dominate the next phase of Middle Eastern history.

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Article 2.

Los Angeles Times

Winds of change in the Middle East

Kenneth M. Pollack

February 27, 2011 -- On Feb. 11, 1979, Islamic revolutionaries took power in Tehran. On Sept. 11, 2001, Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda terrorists launched their attacks on New York and Washington, killing nearly 3,000 Americans. On Feb. 11, 2011, Hosni Mubarak resigned as president of Egypt.

That these things all occurred on the 11th of the month is coincidental, but the events themselves are not unrelated. One of the worst mistakes Americans have made over these three decades has been to overlook their common roots.

The Muslim Middle East sits on a vast reservoir of popular anger and frustration over the region's economic, social and political dysfunction. The same dissatisfaction that galvanized crowds in Cairo's Tahrir Square also drove young Iranians to bring down the shah. And it also has aided the recruitment efforts of Bin Laden and other Islamist terrorists since the early 1980s.

We should not forget that Bin Laden's original and ultimate goal was to spark a revolution to overthrow the Saudi government, just as his deputy's, Ayman Zawahiri, was to overthrow Mubarak. Like many frustrated revolutionaries before them, they turned to terrorism only when they were unable to bring about the grand popular revolutions they sought.

Perhaps the worst mistake of the Bush administration's response to 9/11 was to make terrorism itself America's principal target. Terrorism was never more than a symptom of this dysfunction and despair, as were the internal conflicts that have convulsed Algeria,

Libya, Yemen, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt itself in the past two decades. Even Iran's so-called green movement today is another manifestation of the phenomenon.

The Bush administration's "freedom agenda" — misnamed, mishandled and quickly shunted aside though it was — at least deserves credit for finally recognizing the real source of America's problems in the Middle East. The great shame of George W. Bush's presidency is that the war on terrorism was not a smaller adjunct to that broader effort, rather than the other way around.

We have no one but ourselves to blame for misunderstanding the common sources of our problems all across the Muslim Middle East. The people of the region have hardly kept quiet about their grievances: unemployment, underemployment, massive gaps between rich and poor, callous and corrupt autocracies that did nothing to alleviate distress and much to exacerbate it. The United States got repeated wake-up calls, beginning with the collapse of the shah, but we never bothered to question our convenient insistence that the problems were discrete and manageable by repression and denial.

But the most important question is not why have we failed to understand the problems of the Middle East for so long, but rather what are we going to do about them now?

The Egyptian revolution is an earthquake. It has shaken the Middle East like no other event since the Iranian revolution. It has swept away old paradigms, old ways of understanding the region. It has sparked copycat revolts from Libya to Yemen to Bahrain to Algeria and perhaps to future spots unknown.

But how the Egyptian revolution defines the new Middle East is still an open question. A great many people will try to use it to impose their visions. It is a moment when the United States can and must enter the fray. It is vital that we take the lead in helping shape how Middle Easterners see the Egyptian revolution.

It is also an opportunity for the United States to overcome our past mistakes, to recognize the real grievances of the people of the region and to reexamine their conflicts and our role in them. The Egyptian revolution and the regional unrest that followed have made it abundantly clear that the vast majority of Muslim Middle Easterners want to live in modernizing, democratizing, developing nations. They want prosperity, they want pluralism and they want the better lives that we in the West enjoy.

The struggle in the new Middle East must be defined as one between nations that are moving in the right direction and nations that are not; between those that are embracing economic liberalization, educational reform, democracy, the rule of law and civil liberties, and those that are not. Viewed through this prism, the new Egypt, the new Iraq and the new Palestinian Authority are clearly in one camp. Iran and Syria — the region's two most authoritarian regimes and America's two greatest remaining adversaries there — are in the other.

The other countries of the region will have to choose between a process of reform that embraces progress or repression. This latter course probably will be even harder for governments to maintain as their own people see what is happening in Egypt and elsewhere.

The good news is that a great many of America's allies have already started down the path of reform. Six years ago, King Abdullah II of Saudi Arabia began a gradual but comprehensive program of reform. Many others across the region have also inaugurated reform programs. We can all agree that their initiatives still have far to go and often have been pursued fitfully, even grudgingly. But they form a basis for progress and a starting point for a conversation about how to bring about peaceful change in their societies and so head off revolutions.

That is another thing we must not forget, despite the remarkable transformation of Egypt: Revolutions are dangerous, unpredictable events. Egypt's relatively peaceful transition notwithstanding, popular uprisings can easily devolve into chaos or civil war, or they can be hijacked by radical extremists, as the Iranian revolution was. Just because the Egyptian revolution is going well does not mean that we or the people of the region should seek more such events. Embracing unexpected, violent and unpredictable revolutions as a reasonable solution to the region's problems could lead to much worse problems than what we have so far: failed states, chaos, ethno-sectarian civil war and aggressive militarized states replacing corrupt, repressive but mostly passive autocracies. It would be far preferable for change to occur more peacefully, more gradually and more deliberately.

And that is where the United States comes back in. Redefining the central divide in the Middle East as one between progressive nations striving to build better societies and repressive states seeking to perpetuate the unhappiness of their people is going to require more than mere oratory from the White House. It is going to mean doing something that the Obama administration promised when it first took office but then turned away from shortly thereafter.

It is going to mean embracing and leading a comprehensive effort to enable economic, social and political reform across the Muslim Middle East. Enabling and encouraging such progress does not mean that the United States should impose its vision on the region; it means helping Muslim Middle Easterners devise their own progressive visions. For the poorer states of the region, this may require large-scale economic assistance. For the richer nations of the Middle East, it may mean very different kinds of help.

The Saudis, for instance, don't need our money, but they may need us to create a safe environment for them to enact reform by addressing

matters that create internal problems (like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) or external problems (like the Iranian nuclear program). It will also mean convincing China and Russia that getting on the right side of history is in their best interests. It will mean mobilizing the resources of the entire free world in a way that only the United States can.

For centuries, Europe was an immensely turbulent place, ravaged by war, revolution, genocide, repression and other social ills. Europe's transformation into something different was greatly helped by American aid and guidance during the 20th century. Today, Europe is the most peaceful and prosperous continent in the world.

Fifty years ago, Asia was racked by similar problems, and again the United States participated in a major effort to help the nations of the region transform themselves. Thirty years ago, Latin America was a nightmare of poverty, dictatorship, insurgency, terrorism and corruption. And again, the United States finally overcame its endless excuses and began helping the states of that region change.

The time has come for the United States to make the same effort to help the people of the Muslim Middle East, the region that has replaced Europe, then Asia and then Latin America as our greatest source of troubles. The Egyptian people have shown us all the path, but it will take American leadership to reach the desired destination.

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Article 3.

NYT

How the Arabs Turned Shame Into Liberty

Fouad Ajami

February 26, 2011 -- PERHAPS this Arab Revolution of 2011 had a scent for the geography of grief and cruelty. It erupted in Tunisia, made its way eastward to Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain, then doubled back to Libya. In Tunisia and Egypt political freedom seems to have prevailed, with relative ease, amid popular joy. Back in Libya, the counterrevolution made its stand, and a despot bereft of mercy declared war against his own people. In the calendar of Muammar el-Qaddafi's republic of fear and terror, Sept. 1 marks the coming to power, in 1969, of the officers and conspirators who upended a feeble but tolerant monarchy. Another date, Feb. 17, will proclaim the birth of a new Libyan republic, a date when a hitherto frightened society shed its quiescence and sought to topple the tyranny of four decades. There is no middle ground here, no splitting of the difference. It is a fight to the finish in a tormented country. It is a reckoning as well, the purest yet, with the pathologies of the culture of tyranny that has nearly destroyed the world of the Arabs. The crowd hadn't been blameless, it has to be conceded. Over the decades, Arabs took the dictators' bait, chanted their names and believed their promises. They averted their gazes from the great crimes. Out of malice or bigotry, that old "Arab street" — farewell to it, once and for all — had nothing to say about the terror inflicted on Shiites and Kurds in Iraq, for Saddam Hussein was beloved by the crowds, a pan-Arab hero, an enforcer of Sunni interests. Nor did many Arabs take notice in 1978 when Imam Musa al-Sadr, the leader of the Shiites of Lebanon, disappeared while on a visit to Libya. In the lore of the Arabs, hospitality due a guest is a cardinal virtue of the culture, but the crime

has gone unpunished. Colonel Qaddafi had money to throw around, and the scribes sang his praise. Colonel Qaddafi had presented himself as the inheritor of the legendary Egyptian strongman Gamal Abdel Nasser. He had written, it was claimed, the three-volume Green Book, which by his lights held a solution for all the problems of governance, and servile Arab intellectuals indulged him, pretending that the collection of nonsensical dictums could be given serious reading.

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To understand the present, we consider the past. The tumult in Arab politics began in the 1950s and the 1960s, when rulers rose and fell with regularity. They were struck down by assassins or defied by political forces that had their own sources of strength and belief. Monarchs were overthrown with relative ease as new men, from more humble social classes, rose to power through the military and through radical political parties. By the 1980s, give or take a few years, in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Algeria and Yemen, a new political creature had taken hold: repressive "national security states" with awesome means of control and terror. The new men were pitiless, they re-ordered the political world, they killed with abandon; a world of cruelty had settled upon the Arabs. Average men and women made their accommodation with things, retreating into the privacy of their homes. In the public space, there was now the cult of the rulers, the unbounded power of Saddam Hussein and Muammar el-Qaddafi and Hafez al-Assad in Syria and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia. The traditional restraints on power had been swept away, and no new social contract between ruler and ruled had emerged. Fear was now the glue of politics, and in the more prosperous states (the ones with oil income) the ruler's purse did its share in the consolidation of state terror. A huge Arab prison had been constructed, and a once-proud people had been reduced to

submission. The prisoners hated their wardens and feared the guards, and on the surface of things, the autocracies were there to stay.
Yet, as they aged, the coup-makers and political plotters of yesteryear sprouted rapacious dynasties; they became "country owners," as a distinguished liberal Egyptian scholar and diplomat once put it to me. These were Oriental courts without protocol and charm, the wives and the children of the rulers devouring all that could be had by way of riches and vanity. Shame — a great, disciplining force in Arab life of old — quit Arab lands. In Tunisia, a hairdresser-turned-despot's wife, Leila Ben Ali, now pronounced on all public matters; in Egypt the despot's son, Gamal Mubarak, brazenly staked a claim to power over 80 million people; in Syria, Hafez al-Assad had pulled off a stunning feat, turning a once-rebellious republic into a monarchy in all but name and bequeathing it to one of his sons.

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These rulers hadn't descended from the sky. They had emerged out of the Arab world's sins of omission and commission. Today's rebellions are animated, above all, by a desire to be cleansed of the stain and the guilt of having given in to the despots for so long. Elias Canetti gave this phenomenon its timeless treatment in his 1960 book "Crowds and Power." A crowd comes together, he reminded us, to expiate its guilt, to be done, in the presence of others, with old sins and failures. There is no marker, no dividing line, that establishes with a precision when and why the Arab people grew weary of the dictators. To the extent that such tremendous ruptures can be pinned down, this rebellion was an inevitable response to the stagnation of the Arab economies. The so-called youth bulge made for a combustible background; a new generation with knowledge of the world beyond came into its own. Then, too, the legends of Arab nationalism that had sustained two generations had expired. Younger men and women had wearied of the old obsession with Palestine. The

revolution was waiting to happen, and one deed of despair in Tunisia, a street vendor who out of frustration set himself on fire, pushed the old order over the brink. And so, in those big, public spaces in Tunis, Cairo and Manama, Bahrain, in the Libyan cities of Benghazi and Tobruk, millions of Arabs came together to bid farewell to an age of quiescence. They were done with the politics of fear and silence. Every day and every gathering, broadcast to the world, offered its own memorable image. In Cairo, a girl of 6 or 7 rode her skateboard waving the flag of her country. In Tobruk, a young boy, atop the shoulders of a man most likely his father, held a placard and a message for Colonel Qaddafi: "Irhall, irhall, ya saffah." ("Be gone, be gone, O butcher.") In this tumult, I was struck by the chasm between the incoherence of the rulers and the poise of the many who wanted the outside world to bear witness. A Libyan of early middle age, a professional and a diabetic, was proud to speak on camera, to show his face, in a discussion with CNN's Anderson Cooper. He was a new man, he said, free of fear for the first time, and he beheld the future with confidence. The precision in his diction was a stark contrast to Colonel Qadaffi's rambling TV address on Tuesday that blamed the "Arab media" for his ills and called on Libyans to "prepare to defend petrol."

In the tyrant's shadow, unknown to him and to the killers and cronies around him, a moral clarity had come to ordinary men and women. They were not worried that a secular tyranny would be replaced by a theocracy; the specter of an "Islamic emirate" invoked by the dictator did not paralyze or terrify them.

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There is no overstating the importance of the fact that these Arab revolutions are the works of the Arabs themselves. No foreign gunboats were coming to the rescue, the cause of their emancipation would stand or fall on its own. Intuitively, these protesters understood

that the rulers had been sly, that they had convinced the Western democracies that it was either the tyrants' writ or the prospect of mayhem and chaos.

So now, emancipated from the prison, they will make their own world and commit their own errors. The closest historical analogy is the revolutions of 1848, the Springtime of the People in Europe. That revolution erupted in France, then hit the Italian states and German principalities, and eventually reached the remote outposts of the Austrian empire. Some 50 local and national uprisings, all in the name of liberty.

Massimo d'Azeglio, a Piedmontese aristocrat who was energized by the spirit of those times, wrote what for me are the most arresting words about liberty's promise and its perils: "The gift of liberty is like that of a horse, handsome, strong and high-spirited. In some it arouses a wish to ride; in many others, on the contrary, it increases the urge to walk." For decades, Arabs walked and cowered in fear. Now they seem eager to take freedom's ride. Wisely, they are paying no heed to those who wish to speak to them of liberty's risks.

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Article 4.

Washington Post

Could the next Mideast uprising happen in Saudi Arabia?

Rachel Bronson

February 25, 2011 -- Tunisia. Egypt. Yemen. Bahrain. And now the uprising and brutality in Libya. Could Saudi Arabia be next?

The notion of a revolution in the Saudi kingdom seems unthinkable. Yet, a Facebook page is calling for a "day of rage" protest on March 11. Prominent Saudis are urging political and social reforms. And the aging monarch, King Abdullah, has announced new economic assistance to the population, possibly to preempt any unrest.

Is the immovable Saudi regime, a linchpin of U.S. security interests in the region, actually movable?

Revolutions are contagious in the Middle East - and not just in the past few weeks. In the 1950s, when Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser swept into power, nationalist protests ignited across the region, challenging the leadership in Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and eventually Libya and beyond.

A shocked Saudi royal family watched helplessly as one of its members, directly in line to become king, claimed solidarity with the revolution and took up residence in Egypt for a few years. That prince, Talal bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud, a son of the kingdom's founder and a half-brother of the king, is now reintegrated into the Saudi elite - and on hand to remind the monarchy that it is not immune to regional revolts. "Unless problems facing Saudi Arabia are solved, what happened and is still happening in some Arab countries, including Bahrain, could spread to Saudi Arabia, even worse," Prince Talal recently told the BBC.

The unrest in Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain and Yemen (to the kingdom's west, east and south) plays on the Saudis' greatest fear: encirclement. The Saudis aligned with the United States instead of colonial Britain in the early 20th century in part to defend against creeping British hegemony. During the Cold War the monarchy hunkered down against its Soviet-backed neighbors out of fear of being surrounded by communist regimes. And since the end of the Cold War, the overarching goal of Saudi foreign policy has been countering the spread of Iranian influence in all directions - Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories and Yemen.

When King Abdullah returned to Saudi Arabia last week after three months of convalescence in the United States and Morocco, one of the first meetings he took was with his ally King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa of Bahrain to discuss the turmoil in his tiny nation. Sunni-ruled Bahrain, less than 20 miles from Saudi Arabia's oil- and Shiite-rich Eastern Province, has been a longtime recipient of Saudi aid. It has also been a focus of Iranian interests. The meeting was a clear signal of support for reigning monarchs, and an indication that the Saudi leadership is concerned about the events unfolding in Bahrain and throughout the region.

Further emphasizing that concern, Saudi leaders were reportedly furious that the Obama administration ultimately supported regime change in Egypt, because of the precedent it could set. Before Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak left office, the Saudis offered to compensate his faltering regime for any withdrawal of U.S. economic assistance - aiming to undermine Washington's influence in Egypt and reduce its leverage.

As Saudi leaders look across the region, they have reason to believe that they won't find themselves confronting revolutionaries at their own doorstep. The upheaval in Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and elsewhere is driven by popular revulsion with sclerotic, corrupt leadership.

These countries do not have clear succession plans in place. They do have organized opposition movements, both inside and outside their borders, that are exploiting new means and technologies to challenge the governments. Their leaders are vulnerable to independent militaries. Their economies are weak, and educational opportunities are few.

These conditions seem to be present in Saudi Arabia, too, but the country is different in some important ways. First, its economic situation is far better. Egypt's per capita gross domestic product is slightly more than $6,000, and Tunisia's is closer to $9,000. For Saudi Arabia, it is roughly $24,000 and climbing (up from $9,000 a little more than a decade ago). The Saudi regime also has resources to spend on its people. Oil prices are high and rising. On Wednesday, the king announced massive social benefits packages totaling more than $35 billion and including unemployment relief, housing subsidies, funds to support study abroad and a raft of new job opportunities created by the state. Clearly the king is nervous, but he has goodies to spread around.

Poverty is real in Saudi Arabia, but higher oil prices and slowly liberalizing economic policies help mask it. When I met then-Crown Prince Abdullah in 1999, he told a group of us that unemployment was "the number one national security problem that Saudi Arabia faced." He was right then and remains right now. According to an analysis by Banque Saudi Fransi, joblessness among Saudis under age 30 hovered around 30 percent in 2009. Still, many of the king's key policy decisions - joining the World Trade Organization, creating new cities with more liberal values, promoting education and particularly study abroad - have sought to solve these problems. The country may be on a very slow path toward modernization, but it is not sliding backward like many others in the Middle East.

Another difference between Saudi Arabia and its neighbors is that the opposition has been largely co-opted or destroyed. For the past 10 years, the Saudi government has systematically gone after al-Qaeda cells on its territory and has rooted out suspected supporters in the military and the national guard, especially after a series of attacks in 2003. Key opposition clerics have been slowly brought under the wing of the regime. This has involved some cozying up to unsavory people, but the threat from the radical fringe is lower now than it has been in the recent past. And the Saudis have been quite clever about convincing the country's liberal elites that the regime is their best hope for a successful future.

The loyalty of the security services is always an important predictor of a regime's stability, and here the Saudis again have reason for some confidence. Senior members of the royal family and their sons are in control of all the security forces - the military, the national guard and the religious police. They will survive or fall together. There can be no equivalent to the Egyptian military taking over as a credible, independent institution. In Saudi Arabia, the government has a monopoly on violence. Indeed, the Saudis are taking no chances and have arrested people trying to establish a new political party calling for greater democracy and protections for human rights.

Finally, a succession plan is in place. Saudi Arabia has had five monarchs in the past six decades, since the death of its founder. There is not a succession vacuum as there was in Egypt and Tunisia. Many Saudis may not like Prince Nayaf, the interior minister, but they know he is likely to follow King Abdullah and Crown Prince Sultan on the throne. And there is a process, if somewhat opaque, for choosing the king after him.

The United States has a great deal at stake in Saudi Arabia, though Americans often look at the Saudis with distaste. As one senior Saudi government official once asked me: "What does the United States

share with a country where women can't drive, the Koran is the constitution and beheadings are commonplace?" It's a tough question, but the answer, quite simply, is geopolitics - and that we know and like Saudi's U.S.-educated liberal elites.

The Saudis have been helpful to us. They are reasonably peaceful stalwarts. They don't attack their neighbors, although they do try to influence them, often by funding allies in local competitions for power. They are generally committed to reasonable oil prices. For example, although their oil is not a direct substitute for Libyan sweet crude, the Saudis have offered to increase their supply to offset any reduction in Libyan production due to the violence there. We work closely with them on counterterrorism operations. And the Saudis are a counterbalance to Iran. We disagree on the Israel-Palestinian issue, but we don't let it get in the way of other key interests.

Washington does not want the Saudi monarchy to fall. The Obama administration would like it to change over time and should encourage a better system of governance with more representation and liberal policies and laws. But revolutions aren't necessarily going to help those we hope will win.

It is dangerous business to predict events in the Middle East, especially in times of regional crisis. It's hard to block out flashbacks of President Jimmy Carter's 1977 New Year's Eve statement that Iran under the shah was an island of stability in a troubled region - only months before that stability was shattered. Still, the key components of rapid, massive, revolutionary change are not present in Saudi Arabia. At least, not yet.

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Article 5.

The Guardian

China crackdown: A tweak of the tiger's tail

Isabel Hilton

26 February 2011 -- All it took was a single tweet to send the Chinese government into panic last Sunday. The tweet, originating in the US, publicised a call posted on the US-based website Boxun for Chinese citizens to assemble in cities across the country to start a jasmine revolution, inspired by events in the Middle East.

The tweet did not produce nationwide protest but it certainly had an impact, despite the fact that Twitter is blocked in China. Saturday saw the first wave of arrests of human rights activists, lawyers and other citizens known to disagree with the regime. The detentions continued on Sunday morning until the list of names passed 100. On Sunday afternoon, outside the McDonald's on Wangfujing, one of Beijing's biggest shopping streets, police both uniformed and plainclothed, outnumbered the curious, the passersby, the shoppers and even, no doubt, some potential protesters.

Online, explosive words like "tomorrow", "today" and "jasmine" fell under prohibition. The Boxun website was targeted with a severe distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack, and users of social media in China found themselves unable to post photographs, forward posts or search. There was no revolution last Sunday, but as an exercise in tweaking the tiger's tale it was hard to beat.

Now, the anonymous organisers of last Sunday's "citizens' stroll" have called for it to be repeated every Sunday at 2pm. The question is not so much how many people will show up to protest at the usual list of grievances – corruption, lack of accountability, abuse of the law,

arbitrary use of power – but the fraying of sensitive official nerves each week as the authorities wonder if this might be the day it does take off.

It would be unwise to exaggerate the parallels between discontent in the Middle East and in China. Certainly discontent in China exists, but for many people the last two decades have brought rising living standards and a sense of personal freedom. Given that, it is not easy to explain the evident fears of the regime. According to a study last year by Beijing's Qinghua University, the government now spends more on internal security than it does on external defence. If those figures are accurate, it offers an interesting snapshot of where the regime thinks its most dangerous enemies are.

Images of successful nonviolent protest, then, are deeply unwelcome, because they recall similar images of Tiananmen Square in 1989 and serve as a reminder for the discontented that change is possible, and that there is unfinished political business to attend to.

The suggestion that the examples of Tunisia or Egypt have anything to say to China brings on the government's jitters, but while the regime can clamp down on the news periodically, it can no longer keep the outside world at bay. China admits to 30,000 Chinese citizens in Libya, for instance, and Chinese citizens have been vocal in their demands that the government evacuate them.

With the government on high alert, it is unlikely that Tunisian or Egyptian protests will be replicated in China this week. For one thing, the emblematic square that has been a feature of this and other waves of protest – the public theatres in which the political dramas are enacted – has been closed off since 1989. Tiananmen Square still exists but it is the most closely patrolled public space in China. There are, nevertheless, some underlying factors that feed into the government's anxieties.

The stresses that were the backdrop to the protests in the Middle East were economic: rising food prices, inflation and joblessness, along with corrupt regimes perceived as indifferent to the peoples' needs. China too is suffering from inflation and rising food prices: the true inflation figure is much debated but there is a widespread belief that it is higher than the official 5%. What is admitted is that within that headline figure, food prices rose more than 10%.

Rising food prices are a global phenomenon that is likely to get worse as climate change takes hold: the impacts of droughts and floods in Australia, drought in China itself, fires last year in Russia, and floods in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Brazil, along with rising demand, have pushed up grain prices to what the World Bank calls dangerous levels.

Wheat prices globally have doubled since last summer and they could continue to rise: demand is growing as more affluent populations in India and China demand more protein. In China, agricultural land is still being lost to the expanding cities, and a water crisis across the north is likely to reduce output further. As ever, it is the poor – who spend a greater proportion of their income on food – who suffer most. And the Chinese government will recall that the background to the 1989 protests was also rising inflation and food prices.

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Article 6.

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Iran: U.S. losing allies in Mid East

Michael Adler

February 26, 2011 -- Iran thinks it will benefit from the wave of unrest sweeping the Middle East, no matter how it turns out, a senior Iranian diplomat said. “The equations of power would be changed,” said the diplomat, who asked not to be named. “There will be fewer and fewer countries listening to the United States.”

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has talked in apocalyptic terms about the Arab uprisings. He said in Tehran last week, “changes will be forthcoming and will engulf the whole world from Asia to Africa and from Europe to North America.”

But the Iranian diplomat’s comments are a glimpse into a more measured strategic thinking — harder to dismiss as mere politicking. “If the regime in Egypt collapses,” the diplomat said, “then U.S. influence will collapse. We now face a region with a different situation. The picture of the region will be changed.”

He added: “The way things are moving ahead, we may be facing, in the near future, a region where countries are saying similar things on such issues as U.S. influence, nuclear issues, peace and security.”

The result would be that “there will be approaches and ideas more similar to that of Iran — a more Oriental and Islamic and Arabic approach.”

His comments mirrored what some U.S. analysts have been saying. Alireza Nader, an expert in international affairs at the RAND Corp, told The New York Times, Saudi Arabia is worried “that the region is ripe for Iranian exploitation.” A U.S. government adviser on the Middle East stated, “Iran is the big winner here.”

The Iranian diplomat's analysis, however, bestowed the benefit on Iran independent of any national maneuvering. He predicted it would be due to a change in attitude throughout the Middle East — a shift from what he regarded as the colonial mentality that has reigned for so long.

Egypt, for example, with its role as a close U.S. ally, has often been an Iranian adversary. But now history is asserting itself, said the diplomat. "You know Egyptians are an old culture," he said, "very much like Iran, in terms of history and belief. It is a strong nation, 80 million population. These countries have been under pressure for some decades, with military suppression and government, economic problems, lack of dignity of the nation, no real elections."

"What I'm talking about in the region is, I agree, a movement towards democracy. But it does not necessarily mean that the influence of the United States or other modern countries is going to increase," the diplomat continued. He said Washington has been exposed as hypocritical, with its waffling over the fate of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, for example: first backing him and then making clear that he had to go. He said that if the demonstrators deserved to be supported, then why were they not backed "for the last 30 years" by pro-Mubarak U.S. governments.

The Obama administration has a riposte of sorts in its increasingly open criticism of the Iranian regime. It has been exceptionally direct in criticizing what it calls Iran's hypocrisy — supporting anti-government demonstrations in Arab countries, while repressing them brutally in Iran.

Some Western and expatriate Iranian analysts argue that Iran is itself a domino about to fall in a Middle East revival, though the timing for this could be years away.

What is most noteworthy in the Iranian diplomat's argument is that it is an over-arching strategic vision which predicts a sea-change in the

region — however demonstrations and government transformations work out.

"It is too soon to judge the future of the Middle East," the diplomat said, "how the movement is going to go ahead. But I think that the future will tell us, which regime is correct." The reality, he said, is that there is a movement "towards democracy, towards freedom, toward respecting more Islamic ideas and distancing from the foreign occupation, foreign dictation and influence."

The Iranian assumption that democratic Arab regimes would be necessarily hostile to the United States or Israel, and not in fact hostile to an Iran seen as using nuclear sway and other power levers to dominate the region, can certainly be questioned. We do not know how the epochal events across North Africa and in the Gulf will turn out.

Iran's confidence that a movement built on human rights is certain to turn in its favor is, however, a clear sign that the United States is going to need creative and sustained diplomacy to protect its interests in a world catching us by surprise.

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