CHAPTER 9

THE GEOPOLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE CHALLENGE OF POSTCOLONIAL AGENCY

International relations, US policy, and the Arab world

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Introduction

On 19 May 2011, US President Barack Obama gave a landmark speech at the State Department that sought ‘to mark a new chapter in American diplomacy’. He recounted how ‘for six months, we have witnessed an extraordinary change taking place in the Middle East and North Africa. Square by square, town by town, country by country, the people have risen up to demand their basic human rights’. Obama referred to this as a ‘story of self-determination’, declaring that ‘there must be no doubt that the United States of America welcomes change that advances self-determination and opportunity … After decades of accepting the world as it is in the region, we have a chance to pursue the world as it should be’. Obama’s language and the dramatic events across the region he depicts suggest a changed world; they also signal a different American approach towards the Middle East from the one depicted in Derek Gregory’s The Colonial Present (2004).

In a text that burns with passion and anger, Gregory tells the spatial stories of ordinary people in Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq victimized by state violence unleashed in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks. Gregory draws heavily on Edward Said’s notion of ‘imaginative geographies’ that fold distance into difference to generate what Gregory calls ‘architectures of enmity’. State policies, he argues, were defined by practices that
'mark other people as irredeemably “Other” and that license the unleashing of exemplary violence against them' (2004: 16; see also Said 1979).

This chapter offers an epilogue to *The Colonial Present* by analysing the early phases of the US reaction to the 2010–11 Arab uprisings and the geopolitical changes they triggered. After an initial phase of confusion and indecision, in speeches and policy pronouncements President Obama and Secretary of State Hilary Clinton seemed to transcend the exclusionary, dehumanizing security logic of the ‘war on terror.’ Obama claimed to seek a ‘new beginning’ for US policy in the region, suggesting a narrative of mutual recognition between the US and the newly democratizing societies in the Arab world. As we will see, however, this ‘new’ narrative resonates with those found in *The Colonial Present* by adopting albeit more subtle strategies of exclusion and hierarchical ordering. Obama’s vision for how this ‘new’ Arab world can be incorporated into the evolving liberal international order functions, I argue, as a form of colonial modernity. As Gregory explains in the book’s final pages, ‘colonialism’s promise of modernity has always been deferred—always skewed by the boundary between “us” and “them”’ (2004: 255). This chapter traces the development, and then highlights the persistence, of the partitions erected between the US and the Arab world that suppress and deny the agency of postcolonial actors in international politics. In the end, Obama attempts to frame the ‘Arab Spring,’ as did Bush the ‘war on terror,’ in such a way as to define a ‘new’ global narrative in which the power to narrate is vested in a particular constellation of power and knowledge within the United States of America’ (Gregory 2004: 16).

Rather than detailing the numerous continuities between the Bush and Obama administration policies towards the Middle East, this chapter maps the ‘constellation of power and knowledge’ within American scholarship about international politics and US policy in the Middle East. These discourses tend to privilege certain forms of global order while ignoring the hierarchical power relations and means of violence deployed to sustain them. At the same time, they reject the legitimacy of the subjectivity, history, and memory of political actors external to this order (for a brief elaboration, see Grovogui 2010). As Arlene Tickner and Ole Waever observe, the Arab world ‘was the original object of “orientalist” knowledge practices’ (Said 1979), and again today it is (for large parts of western debate) the primary global exception: an exception to the global security order, to modernity, to secularism, to forms of knowledge and reason that constitute the “we” talking about these very exceptions (Pasha 2007)’ (Tickner and Waever 2009: 172; see also Hazbun 2011). American scholarship about international politics and US policy in the Middle East (even before 9/11) tends to deny the agency of Arab actors or to recognize it only when measured in reference to western-imposed orders. Arab regimes that support such orders are represented as enlightened autocrats or reformist modernizers. By contrast, Arab states and societies that oppose such orders are viewed as unacceptable threats, not only to regional (US-aligned) states but also to western powers and the global order more generally. As a result, Arab actors are never viewed as legitimate actors with their own interests playing an autonomous regional role or having a voice in shaping the regional or international order (outside of externally drafted scripts).
Such a broad critique of international relations and US foreign policy scholarship of the Middle East is a project that exceeds the scope of this chapter. Instead, I will begin by drawing on that broader critique in order to sketch some crucial threads of argument within the scholarship that help illustrate how the Obama administration's initial reaction to the democratic revolutions of the Arab uprisings have conformed to rather than transcended earlier constructions that ‘mark other people as irredeemably “Other”’. The first thread reveals how the discourse of international relations evolved from the internal micro-history of politics across the European continent to view the consolidated, ethnically and racially homogenous nation state as the normal key actor in international politics. The ‘deficiencies’ of postcolonial states are thus constructed as a source of insecurity and threat to global order. A second thread, which emerged particularly with the end of the Cold War, views the increasing power of such Third World states exclusively as a source of insecurity generating heightened anxiety. These perspectives highlight an underappreciated aspect of the genealogy of Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ argument (1993, 1996), which I argue was just as much driven by a realist fear of the rising power of Third World states as it was an ‘orientalist’, some might add Islamophobic, reading of the emerging post-Cold War order.

The remainder of the chapter suggests that the Obama administration might not be as motivated as Huntington or the George W. Bush administration to build ‘architectures of enmity’, but that its policies and visions for the Middle East still fail to embrace the agency of regional forces even as local actors are asserting themselves in new and often democratic ways. I show how, instead, major speeches and policies have attempted to position the US on the side of the Arab peoples while offering little room for accommodating their agency at a time when its effects are most apparent. Obama has recently sought to redefine the logic for the strong American presence in the region by arguing that the US is a necessary force for the realization of Arab goals. His statements suggest that the US still privileges US-dominated forms of global order, ignores their hierarchical power relations, and fails to fully recognize the agency of Middle East states and societies as actors in the international system. I conclude by briefly outlining some of the emerging forces attempting to redefine regional politics through the realization of new sources and forms of postcolonial agency.

**Postcolonial States and the Production of Insecurity in the Middle East**

Most narratives recounting the development of international relations (IR) as a field of study begin at the end of World War II (see, for example, Kahler 1997). This timeframe privileges as its master narrative the US-led effort to forge a ‘liberal’ international order to govern global economic and security relations as well as the rise and eventual decline of the Cold War (see Gopal in this part of the volume). At the same time, this framing
removes from view the racial hierarchies and imperial geopolitics that characterized the development of the field before 1945. Few readers of the respected journal Foreign Affairs (published by the Council on Foreign Relations) know that this, the world’s first journal of international relations, was founded in 1910 as the Journal of Race Development (Vitalis 2010: 928–9). During the post-war evolution of international relations as a field, these traces were erased in part by the dominance of neo-realist approaches that mapped international politics in units of the nation state and their power capabilities (Waltz 1979; Keohane 1986; Mearsheimer 2003). In its most simplified expression, neo-realism views global politics as a billiard table with balls of different masses (based on their power capabilities) struggling to survive in an environment of anarchy, that is, with no enforceable global law. Neo-realism attempts to determine how the structure of the ‘system-level’ environment (consisting of rival states seeking to increase their relative power and making alliances) shape patterns of state behaviour. For example, according to neo-realism, the nature of polarity—if there are one, two, or three-plus great powers in this system—is the most important factor shaping these patterns. Neo-realism viewed the bipolar Cold War order as a stable, mostly peaceful system because states tended to align with one or the other great power, leading to rival sides with relatively equal capabilities and thereby preventing a conflict between the two major powers.

Throughout the Cold War, American policymakers, security analysts, and IR scholars generally discussed US policy and interests in the Middle East using the tools and language of neo-realism. While neo-realism’s statist billiard ball imagery tends to discount the role of domestic politics and ideology, in scholarship about the Middle East Arab states and societies are nevertheless repeatedly marked as ‘Other’ while their agency is denied. Most recent efforts to modify the prevailing neo-realist framework to better represent the legacies of colonialism, the challenges of postcolonial state formation, and contemporary patterns of politics in the Middle East, have failed to escape a Eurocentric framework. One consequence is that such frameworks, by highlighting the domestic sources of instability in these states, generally obscure the role the US often plays as a generator of insecurity (see Smith and Turner in this part of the volume). Take for example ‘subaltern realism’ or other similar notions developed by neo-realists to better explain the behaviour of Third World states (Ayoob 1998). In accepting the European model of a nation state as the normal unit within the international system, such notions depict the vast diversity of Third World states in terms of their common lack of fully consolidated state structures and homogenous national identity. After identifying this as a defect, these units are measured against the European template to suggest that Third World states are more likely to be led by regimes that lack legitimacy and to experience political instability. As a result, they are less likely to follow the behaviour patterns that produce stable regional balances of power and instead encourage an unstable, threatening, and war-prone international environment.

Efforts to modify the neo-realist framework have often been consciously developed with intentions to better reflect (‘describe, explain, and predict’) the behaviour of non-western states (Ayoob 1998: 32). More critically, they seek to counter international
relations scholarship that fails to recognize how weaker states might shape the international or system-level environment (Ayoob 1998: 33). This effort to recognize the agency of postcolonial states is limited, however, by its focus on measuring it in terms of how it might impact on the security concerns of the great powers (Bilgin 2008: 11). A stark example of the deployment of this logic is the work of scholars like Steven David who published a 1992/3 essay in the leading journal of international relations and security studies *International Security* entitled ‘Why the Third World Still Matters’. David’s essay provides an ominous map of post-Cold War global politics. It seeks to counter a view common in much neo-realist scholarship that with the end of global superpower competition, which had exaggerated the strategic importance of the Third World, US policymakers should focus American policy and resources on regions of critical strategic importance such as the advanced industrialized states of Europe (see Van Evera 1990).

By contrast, writing in the wake of the 1990–1 Gulf War, David calls for continuing and extending the American projection of power into the Middle East.

At a time when neo-realism was facing challenges, and as many scholars were beginning to suggest that the end of the Cold War and prospects for increasing global economic interdependence were making the world safer for the US, David attempts to reanimate neo-realism’s Hobbesian vision of the dangers of international anarchy through his depiction of the threats posed by Third World states. He notes the ‘growing likelihood that Third World States will act in ways inimical to American interests, due to the persistence of instability often leading to war’ (129). David argues that ‘leaders of these states may be unable or unwilling to follow “rational” policies that would safeguard American interests’ (129). Foreshadowing the claims of the George W. Bush administration, he suggests that deterrence may be an unworkable strategy against such states. In sum, the essay offers a logic for the expanded American projection of power based on ‘the increasing capability of many Third World states to threaten American interests, particularly in the areas of nuclear proliferation and supply of oil’ (129).

In outlining the causes of instability, this portrait recognizes select aspects of the legacy of colonialism. The European colonial powers, David notes, promoted political divides along ethnic lines and imposed arbitrary borders on peoples who shared little common history and culture. Drawing on Samuel Huntington’s earlier work *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968), David argues that, unlike West European states, Third World states witnessed the emergence of mass political participation before a ‘well-educated citizenry’ arose to build institutions to channel participation and govern populations. David effectively transposes Huntington’s warning about the destabilizing aspects of increased political participation at the domestic level to make similar claims at the international level. Huntington’s critique of modernization theory, in which he highlights the likelihood of populist social mobilization leading to ‘political decay’ in Third World states, resembles David’s anxiety about the dangers posed by Third World states, which are either due to the likelihood of political instability or because they are not effectively incorporated into the American global security architecture. Again generalizing vastly, David claims that Third World leaders do not face the institutional restraint of popular consent and are thus more likely than western states to engage in war when
it serves their personal interest and maintenance of power even if war might be inimical to popular and national interests. He also claims that Third World states have more war-prone cultures since ‘enemies are vilified and dehumanized in the press and textbooks … [while the] glories of military struggle are celebrated’ (136), and asserts that ‘the religious beliefs of many Third World states may also make them less resistant to going to war’ (136). On top of this analysis, David goes on to outline ‘the bleak future of the Third World’ suffering economic decline, rapid population growth, environmental disasters, and massive inequality gaps that impede the rise of democracy (140–2). This approach does not recognize how interventionist policies by the US and the structure of the northern-dominated liberal international economic order pose threats to Third World states and societies (see Niva 1999). Rather, it suggests that Third World states cannot be trusted as constituent members of international society and that the US must, especially after the end of the Cold War, continue to project power across the globe to ensure its own safety and security.

Rereading the ‘Clash of Civilizations’ and the Early Post-Cold War Order

In The Colonial Present, Gregory identifies the ‘at once extraordinary and dangerous claims’ (57) Huntington makes about ‘Islam’ in The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (1996). As in other insightful and penetrating critiques, Gregory highlights Huntington’s insidious deployment of the concepts of identity, culture, and religion to construct an intense, exclusionary map of global politics that ‘mark other people as irredeemably “Other”’ (Gregory 2004: 16, as above; see also Mignolo in Part I of this volume). Huntington’s focus on culture and the idea of civilizations as units in international politics has led many scholars of international relations to read his work in terms of how these units diverge from neo-realist international relations theory. They highlight Huntington’s suggestion that nation states will no longer be the principal actors in global politics and that ‘culture’ rather than rival ideologies or economic interests will become the basis of conflict. Huntington’s original 1993 essay was published months after David’s International Security article, which was written within the idiom of neo-realist international relations theory. However, the two essays (by a scholar and his former student) share a common thread that has often been missed amongst the reaction and debate about Huntington’s crude use of the concept of culture. They are both driven by anxiety about the rising power and agency of Third World states. And at the same time, both assume that the only acceptable global order is one shaped and dominated by the US.

David begins his essay by stating his concern that ‘many Third World states are becoming increasingly powerful’ (127). His anxiety about future patterns of global politics in which Third World states have increased agency is only amplified by the uncertain nature of the global order at the end of the Cold War. While many ‘defensive realists’
saw increased stability and decline of conflict, in part because the US no longer needed to project power so extensively into regions of limited strategic value (Van Evera 1990), others suggested a teleological path towards the consolidation of a US-led liberal international order as more states adopted various forms of capitalist democracy (most emphatically, Fukuyama 1989; for a sophisticated version, see Deudney and Ikenberry 1999). Rereading Huntington with this debate in mind it is striking how his argument is driven by a recognition of the desire of non-western states to become actors in global politics, which is at every moment countered by an anxiety—we might copy his quote from Bernard Lewis and call it a ‘perhaps irrational . . . reaction’ (quoted in Huntington 1993: 32)—that makes him unwilling to accept or accommodate it. He justifies his unwillingness to imagine what such accommodation would look like by resorting to his concept of civilizations that are defined by fundamental, incommensurable differences (25–9) that will shape future patterns of global conflict. As aspects of the neo-realist approach to international relations were facing numerous challenges due to shifts in global politics—the end of the Cold War, the erosion of nation state sovereignty, globalization—Huntington developed the concept of ‘civilizations’ to reanimate select elements of the neo-realist approach that tended to sustain American militarism and unilaterism and the American quest for global primacy. He rejuvenated the notion that the structure of the international system continually poses existential security threats to states, thus compelling them to do anything necessary to survive in this hostile environment.

Lost in much of the debate provoked by Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis is the fact that he was addressing a critical question of concern to scholars of postcolonialism. Like David, at the centre of Huntington’s concern and anxiety is the realization that increasingly, non-western states will seek to assert their own agency and will not readily concede to being socialized into a US-defined and dominated order. Huntington exposes the contradictions in claims that the US-led liberal international order is truly inclusive and non-hierarchical. ‘The West in effect’, Huntington writes, ‘is using international institutions, military power and economic resources to run the world in ways that maintain Western predominance, protect Western interests and promote Western political and economic values’ (1993: 40). He recognizes that ‘decisions made at the U.N. Security Council or in the International Monetary Fund that reflect the interests of the West are presented to the world as reflecting the desires of the world community’ (39). A critical example is that ‘in the post-Cold War world the primary objective of arms control is to prevent the development by non-Western societies of military capabilities that could threaten Western interests’ (46). But ‘the West’, he notes, ‘promotes non-proliferation as a universal norm’ (46; emphasis added).

Huntington ends the first section of his essay by suggesting that with the decline of the Cold War, international politics will no longer be centred in the west; ‘the centerpiece’ of the next phase of global politics will be defined rather by ‘interactions between the West and non-Western civilizations and among non-Western civilizations’ (1993: 23). Ignoring for a moment the problematic nature of his civilizational ontology, Huntington was addressing a question largely marginalized by the central debate amongst international relations scholars during the early 1990s, which was focused on the implications
of the end of the Cold War on the rise of US regional hegemony and the Arab–Israel peace process. Huntington’s more wide-ranging suggestion was that ‘the peoples and governments of non-Western civilizations no longer remain the objects of history as targets of Western colonialism, but join the West as movers and shapers of history’ (23). He concludes from this that ‘international relations, historically a game played out within Western civilization, will increasingly be de-Westernized and become a game in which non-Western civilizations are actors and not simply objects’ (48; for a different reading of the ‘de-westernization’ process, see Mignolo in Part I of this volume). While Huntington takes note of the need for mutual understanding and coexistence, since cooperation and the development of collective norms and governance is not possible across civilizations, he warns that the west must ‘maintain the economic and military power to protect its interests in relation to these civilizations’ (49).

Across the Middle East, US policy followed the strategic logic suggested by Huntington and David and expanded the American projection of its military and diplomatic power in order to sustain its position within the potentially hostile Islamic world. This period is sometimes referred to as the ‘American era’ in the Middle East, echoing the period of British hegemony in the first half of the twentieth century. With no global challenger or other major power that regional states could seek aid and support from, the US quickly came to dominate regional politics. During the 1990–1 Gulf War, the US mobilized a broad coalition of Arab states to defeat Iraq. In the war’s aftermath, the US was able to foster an Arab–Israeli peace process that resulted in the Oslo Process between Israel and the Palestinians (begun in 1993) and the signing of the Israel–Jordan peace treaty in 1994. At the same time, with an unchallenged military force in the Gulf, the US was able to sustain a policy of ‘dual containment’ against Iraq and Iran anchored by bases in Turkey, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Qatar, and a naval fleet circulating in Gulf waters.

By 2001, however, this US-backed regional order was coming undone. The Arab–Israeli peace process had collapsed and Palestinians and Israelis were engaged in a low-intensity war. The post-Gulf War containment regime over Iraq was falling apart as regional support for maintaining harsh sanctions diminished (Lynch 2000). Meanwhile, Iran was expanding its regional influence and secretly developing a nuclear program. Even the limited experiments with political liberalization and democratization of the late 1980s and early 1990s offered by US allies, including Jordan, Egypt, and Tunisia, had been reversed. Several states faced increasing societal opposition—often led by Islamist forces—to their regime’s dependence on external support from the US that made them beholden to American regional security interests. Moreover, the American military presence in the Gulf and its sanctions regime over Iraq was provoking domestic opposition and anti-Americanism within key pro-US states such as Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the smaller Gulf states.

The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 can be understood in part as a reaction to this destabilized position. Following the logic of Huntington, David, and neoconservative policy analysts, Bush was unwilling to allow an erosion of US influence or a contraction in the American ability to project power in the region. Gregory’s The Colonial Present
Graphically documents this era and its violence. Gregory’s discussion of the Iraq war ends by noting the rising insurgency against ‘America’s Iraq’. The Iraq war failed, however, to realize the Bush administration’s strategic vision for regional transformation and resulted in what many have come to suggest is the end of the ‘American era’ of dominance over the Middle East (Haass 2006; see also Walt 2011). The years since 2003 have witnessed the steadily declining ability of the US to shape regional politics. The 2003 Iraq war was conducted without broad regional support and led to the breakdown of political order verging on sectarian civil war in Iraq. Any post-war Iraq is likely to remain a weak, divided state, increasingly influenced by Iran and the anti-American forces of the Sadrist movement. Moreover, the Arab–Israeli peace process has remained effectively dead, while the ‘two-state solution’ is viewed by many as no longer being viable. The breakdown of the peace process led to the re-polarization of regional politics along an Arab–Israeli axis, with US support for Israel eroding Arab support for US policies and mobilizing popular dissent in Egypt and Jordan which had in turn, with US backing, signed peace agreements with Israel. The US-led order also rotted from within as pro-US state elites seemed increasingly disconnected from the interests and concerns of their societies while non-state actors, such as Hamas and Hizballah (with Iranian backing), evolved as popular, powerful movements challenging US influence and US allies in the region (see Hazbun 2008: 252–6). These trends were most starkly illustrated during the 2006 war between Hizballah and Israel. By the late period of the Bush administration, US allies in the region had become threatened by instability and Islamist forces while regional states, such as Iran, and outside powers, such as Russia, China and the European Union, looked to play an increasingly important role in the region.

The Arab Uprisings and Obama’s ‘Moment of Opportunity’

On 4 June 2009 Obama gave a long awaited speech at Egypt’s Cairo University in which he declared:

I’ve come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles—principles of justice and progress, tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.

Among its other features, this speech can be read as a direct challenge to the ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis. It even highlights the notion of shared, overlapping values between American and Muslim societies. Since Barack Obama began his run for president many observers expected he would seek to define a new role for the US in the Middle East while attempting to undo destructive elements of the Bush administration’s legacy in the
region. Obama wrote, for example, that American security and wellbeing depend ‘on the security and wellbeing of those who live beyond our borders … in the understanding that the world shares a common security and a common humanity’ (Obama 2007; for a contradictory assessment, see Hazbun 2008).

These expectations, however, remained largely unmet before the Arab uprisings. As Ryan Lizza documents in his revealing report in the New Yorker, early in his administration Obama was influenced by ‘realist’-oriented advisors who sought to redirect American policy in the Middle East away from military engagements and democracy promotion while cautiously holding on to the status quo (Lizza 2011). Obama’s initial reaction to the protests in Egypt in early 2011, as it had been to those in Iran two years before, was an attempt to avoid the impression that the US was taking sides. Obama was aware of the limits of Bush’s democracy promotion efforts and recognized that the US’s regional position was heavily tied to Mubarak’s willingness to support US (and Israeli) interests. Writing after the US engagement in Libya but before Obama’s 19 May 2011 speech, Lizza traces how events across the Arab world throughout the spring of 2011 led Obama towards increased re-engagement with the Middle East. Lizza highlights the pre-uprising internal debates between the ‘realists’, who emphasized stability and had been dominating policymaking, and the more liberal internationalists, who recognized the negative implications of American ties to repressive regimes and recommended a strong push for reform. While Lizza, based on his inside sources, highlights the role of insiders advocating policy change, a close reading of events reveals that shifts in US policy at each moment were responses to changing political realities over which the US had little control. Years of debate about the trade-offs between stability and democracy were effectively trumped by massive protests in Tunis, Cairo, and elsewhere. The US publicly backed Egyptian President Mubarak, a long-term ally, right up until protests and shifts in the attitude of the Egyptian military made his position untenable. Thus, while the US might have supported democratic reform before, it only seemed to embrace political revolution after the fact.

Meanwhile, during the early months of the Arab protests the participants appeared secular and non-ideological in nature. American media coverage focused on tech-savvy youth and noted the absence of Islamists and anti-American slogans. This depiction allowed many Americans finally to view the Arab world with empathy and identification rather than as hostile and Other. The British Foreign Secretary suggested that the uprisings could mark ‘the greatest advance for human rights and freedom since the end of the cold war’ (quoted in Kurlantzick 2011), and Francis Fukuyama remarked that ‘there’s something very gratifying about the Middle East demonstrating that Islam is not at odds with the democratic currents that have swept up other parts of the world’ (quoted in Bast 2011). Similarly, Secretary of State Clinton would later note that 2011 saw ‘the first Arab revolution for democracy’ (2011) and ask ‘after 2011, how can anyone honestly say that civil society is not indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa?’ (2012). The revolutions accomplished what Obama in his 2009 Cairo speech did not: they overturned the exclusionary construction of otherness and visions of a ‘clash of civilizations’ that had previously dominated
American and European images of the region. In his 19 May 2011 speech titled ‘A Moment of Opportunity’, Obama accordingly attempted to craft a new narrative of American relations with the Arab world. He refers to the ongoing events as a ‘story of self-determination’, which he said would ‘mark a new chapter in American diplomacy’ in which we ‘have a chance to pursue the world as it should be’. Former US Ambassador Daniel Kurtzer went so far as to suggest that ‘Obama [has] articulated a radical definition of change, a kind of political “liberation theology” that he says will guide US policy’ (2011).

The ‘New’ Middle East and the Ideal of a Liberal International Order

Obama’s approach seemed to transcend the exclusionary construction of otherness found in Huntington and David. However, he studiously avoided addressing their ‘postcolonial’ concerns over the rising power and agency of Third World states while attempting to displace concerns about the end of the American era in the Middle East. To date, Obama and other members of his administration have notably failed to recognize the agency of the forces mobilized by the Arab uprising as actors in international politics. He may defend the dignity of individuals, but he makes little if any reference to the collective dignity of the peoples of postcolonial societies who have long sought to realize national self-determination in a global system dominated by western powers. Additionally, rather than suggesting that the US will accommodate emerging political forces and voices in the region, he persists in outlining a reinvention of the American rationale for its continued presence in the region even as events have further eroded its influence. He defends the US position in the region by restating American ‘core interests’ that include ‘countering terrorism and stopping the spread of nuclear weapons; securing the free flow of commerce and safe-guarding the security of the region; standing up for Israel’s security and pursuing Arab–Israeli peace’ (Obama 2011). Seeking to justify an American role as a hegemon (strategically defined as a provider of public goods: see Vitalis 2006), Obama declares that these are not exclusively American interests but rather universal ones, in the interest of all states. He also argues that these interests are by no means ‘hostile to [the Arab] people’s hopes’ and even claims that the American pursuit of these interests are ‘essential to [their hopes]’ (Obama 2011, emphasis added).

In his effort to address what he refers to as the ‘broader aspirations of ordinary people’ in the Arab world, Obama narrowly recognizes not rival geopolitical interests, but a liberal interpretation of basic human rights. He neglects to add that is only in societies that have undergone revolutions that these rights seem attainable. He repeatedly refers to US support for political and economic reform in the region, but seems to ignore the fact that many Arab protestors are not interested in economic aid and technical advice but rather in renegotiating the terms of the Washington Consensus and US backing for neoliberal
economic reforms which have been thoroughly exploited by local regimes and economic elites. In the end, he tries to outline a set of ‘values’ to complement the set of ‘interests’ that drive US policy in the region. These values, however, are those that define the basis for a liberal international order dominated by the US and western powers. The uprisings and the American recognition of an Arab democratic imaginary allows Obama to speak about the possible incorporation of the Arab world into a liberal international order defined by economic independence and mutual security arrangements and regulated by global norms and international institutions.

What Obama fails to consider is how one force currently driving social and political movements in the Arab world is the view that the terms of the US-backed liberal international order are unjust or that much insecurity in the Arab world is caused by external powers and pro-US regimes like Israel’s. Moreover, the Middle East sits in a very awkward position in relationship to the liberal international order. The Middle East contains regions of vital security and economic interest to the US and other western powers. The Arab states, however, have remained outside the community of states that practise its collective and cooperative governance. At the same time, the Middle East has also been a deeply penetrated space, repeatedly suffering from great-power intervention and from numerous external efforts to divide and order the region, such as the British and French Mandate system after World War I.

American IR scholars such as John Ikenberry who celebrate the idea of a US-backed liberal international order, argue that global US hegemony serves the interests of other states since ‘for most countries, the US-led order is a negotiated system wherein the United States has sought participation by other states on terms that are mutually agreeable’ (Ikenberry 2004: 146). Ikenberry has more recently argued that ‘the rise of the non-Western powers and the growth of economic and security interdependence are creating new constituencies and pressures for the liberal international order’ (2011: 2). In a direct challenge to Huntington, he suggests that states like China have an interest in the maintenance of such a rule-based order because it can best protect its own interests and global influence (see Vukovich in Part V of this volume).

By contrast, others like Charles Kupchan observe that ‘if India and Brazil are any indication, even rising powers that are stable democracies will chart their own courses, expediting the arrival of a world that no longer plays by Western rules’ (Kupchan 2012). As Robert Vitalis points out, Ikenberry’s vision of the liberal international order is dismissive of the relevance of past colonial experiences and what Ikenberry refers to as the ‘crude imperial policies [of the US], most notably in Latin America and the Middle East’ (Ikenberry 2004: 146, quoted in Vitalis 2006: 30). And to the degree that other non-western countries have become integrated into the liberal international order, it is in terms and within institutions already established by the North Atlantic states. The NATO-led war in Libya highlights these tensions as the Arab League originally sought to back a narrow UN mandate for a no-fly zone, but the US pushed to promote a very extensive military intervention leading to regime change, which was supported by only some Arab states. More broadly, in the Middle East the US has often worked to suppress, or very selectively to deploy, international institutions and international law as
mechanisms for governing its own behaviour and that of other states in the region. For example, America’s key ally Israel is frequently shielded from sanction by the actions of the Security Council. The Arab Gulf states remain critical US allies but have yet to fully embrace international norms regarding human rights, labour standards, freedom of expression, and democracy (Ulrichsen 2011). And, oddly, populations within what have been some of the most democratic polities—including Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, and even Israel itself—tend to look to the UN as a body that has failed to protect their security and well-being.

**Democracy, US Interests, and ‘History’**

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently addressed these and other issues in a 7 November 2011 speech to the National Democratic Institute (NDI). In the speech, she stated that the US strongly supports democratic change in the Arab World as ‘democracies make for stronger and stable partners’. She explained how such states fit within a liberal order, noting that ‘they trade more, innovate more, and fight less’. Clinton delivered these remarks at a time when there was mounting concern about the rise of Islamist forces and about the commitment of new power holders—like the Egyptian military—to democratic change. She reveals, though, the highly conditional and contingent bases on which the US backs democratic change. In short, while the US will back democratic reform (in allied states) when it promotes stability and contains dissent, it backs revolutionary democratic change only when the status quo is unsustainable, or when it targets a regime not aligned with the US. Clinton’s underlying concern seems to be to avoid a worst-case scenario such as that in the wake of the Islamic revolution in Iran. Democracies, she notes, ‘channel people’s energies away from extremism and towards political and civic engagement’.

Clinton also considers the question of ‘how will America respond if and when a democracy brings to power people and parties we disagree with?’ In her reply, she exclusively addresses domestic political and social concerns. The US, she notes, will certainly want to push for political and social rights, such as women’s equality. Her only reference to regional and geopolitical dimensions to this question is her statement to the effect that ‘nobody wants to see political parties with military wings and militant foreign policies gain influence’. Through such thinly veiled references to movements like Hamas and Hizballah, which had recently gained increased political power through free elections, Clinton implies that such forces do not represent legitimate voices in shaping the political future of the Arab world since they oppose US efforts to define a regional order sympathetic to its own interests. At the same time, she recognizes that the US maintains conflicting short-term interests, such as relying on non-democratic regimes to support national interests in the Gulf and host the American ability to project military power. These concerns came to the fore when the US took only limited actions in response to the Saudi-backed crackdown on the democracy protests in Bahrain. More generally, in
the later phases of the Arab uprisings the US has not opposed the growing influence of non-democratic Gulf States such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia over the course of the uprisings in Libya, Yemen, and Syria.

In the end, the speeches by Obama and Clinton are best seen as ongoing attempts to pivot from the previous US strategy that viewed the uprisings against pro-US regimes as a severe threat to US security architecture in the region, to a strategy that seemingly embraces the changes as vehicles for transforming the region in a way that might establish a new, more liberal order under US guidance and protection. Not only is this ‘new-look’ American approach largely unconvincing and rife with contradictions, but neither Obama nor Clinton has made much effort so far to depict what the regional geopolitical implications of the Arab uprising might be, being content instead to suggest only that an expanded American role in the region (economic, diplomatic, military) is essential for Arabs to realize self-determination.

A key line in Clinton’s NDI speech, echoing a resonant phase also used by Obama, is that ‘fundamentally, there is a right side of history. And we want to be on it’ (Clinton 2011; for Obama’s usage, see also Halloran and Shapiro 2011). The early phase of the American reaction to the Arab uprisings I have been documenting here was driven by the embarrassing recognition that the uprisings had once again exposed the association of US alliances and interests with increasingly repressive regimes and unpopular policies. Clinton and Obama responded to this by arguing that US support for democratic change (in some countries) meant the US was now on the ‘right side of history’.

Many aspects of US policy during the uprisings, such as its support for stability in the Gulf, have led critics to suggest that the US has backed the forces of counter-revolution. Clinton’s statement, however, exposes a more critical issue. What is that future, and who is going to have the power and voice to shape it? The question of what the ‘right side of history’ is must inevitably remain an open one because the future path of global politics is contested. Such questions urgently require a sustained engagement with the geopolitical visions and interests of the peoples and states in the region. These must be understood prior to addressing which side the US is really on. If the US wants to be on the ‘right side’, it will need to embrace the agency and autonomy of Arab societies, to allow them to debate and determine for themselves what they wish to make of their future, and to support their role in shaping the regional and global order.

**Mapping New Pathways of Postcolonial Agency**

In their programmatic 2006 essay ‘The Postcolonial Moment in Security Studies’, Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey not only reconfirm how ‘security studies [has generally been] by and for western powers’ (344), but also suggest a series of moves that might help pluralize the fields of security studies and international relations. As they argue, ‘the politics
of a non-European security studies ... necessarily stands ... with the weak against the strong, with the many against the few'; and they embrace the notion that 'the weak' must be viewed as being equal to 'the strong' in their 'right to bear arms' (2006: 351; see also the General Introduction to this volume). Even when the violence of 'the weak' is characterized as terrorism or insurgency, and even when, by the standard definitions of western security and policy discourses, their actions are viewed as unacceptable or illegitimate, postcolonial security studies should refrain from passing normative judgement (351; see also Smith and Turner in this part of the volume). Gregory would seem to embrace this turn. He notes in his preface to The Colonial Present that the book sets out 'to trace the connections between the modalities of political, military, and economic power—the grand strategies of geopolitics—and the spatial stories told by the lives of ordinary people' (2004: xv). The Arab uprisings, however, may turn out to be a moment when recording these stories may allow us to do more than report on the victims of state violence; it may also give us access to ordinary people’s imaginings of domestic, regional and global politics, offering us alternative 'geographical imaginations that can engage and enhance our sense of the world and enable us to situate ourselves within it with care, concern, and humility' (Gregory 2004: 262).

Any effort to outline a postcolonial approach to international relations and security studies would do well to follow Gregory’s statement that ‘people make geographies’ (2004: xv). Barkawi and Laffey wryly note that in the recent development of alternative critical approaches to international relations and security studies, ‘the agent of emancipation is [still] almost invariably the West, whether in the form of Western-dominated international institutions, a Western-led global civil society, or in the “ethical foreign policies” of leading Western powers’ (2006: 350). Many of these alternatives to neo-realism have gained titles associated with geographical locations outside the US. These include the IR approach referred to as the 'English School’ as well as the ‘Copenhagen’, ‘Wales’, and ‘Paris’ schools of security studies (Buzan and Hansen 2009: 187–225). Perhaps the next turn in security studies and international relations theory will lead to the proliferation of research developed by scholars situated in the postcolonial states, especially those exposed to the violence of colonial modernity. These new forms of knowledge production might someday be referred to as the ‘Cairo School’, the ‘Beirut School’, and the ‘Palestinian School’. In an essay reflecting on the implications of the Arab uprisings on Palestine, the insightful journalist Adam Shatz gives a sense of what some of these alternative parameters might look like:

The old Arab order was buried in Tahrir Square. Young revolutionaries rose up against a regime which for three decades had stood in the way of Palestinian aspirations. It seemed too good to be true and some pundits in Palestine wondered whether it wasn't an American conspiracy. But it wasn't, and Palestinians began to re-examine what had been one of their most disabling convictions: the belief that the US controls the Middle Eastern chessboard, and that the Arab world is powerless against America and Israel. ‘There has been a kind of epistemic break,’ a young Palestinian said to me. (2011: 8)
Within the ongoing Arab uprisings there has been a proliferation of alternative voices and a mobilization of popular social opinion that seeks to redefine ‘national security’ away from a US-dominated regional architecture and towards concerns with human security, dignity, and participatory government. In the next phase of regional geopolitics, the most influential states will likely be those able to accommodate and mobilize, rather than suppress, these popular social forces. However, as these trends toward the regional diffusion of power become more clear, it will become less clear to what degree the US will be willing to accommodate the rise of more autonomous regional actors. It is worth noting, finally, that these new forces operate within a regional system that has long been resiliently multipolar (see Hazbun 2010). No regional or external power has been able to establish itself as a hegemon, and even the US has failed in its efforts. Not only do rival regional powers tend to cancel each other out (often with the support of external patrons), but power is also wielded by a variety of non-state and transnational actors. A broader trend is the increasing assertiveness of regional ‘middle powers’ such as Iran and Turkey, Qatar and Egypt. Each of these states will doubtless use a range of tools to project its influence and articulate competing visions for the emergence of a multi-actor regional order; but none of these rival visions will likely match the American ideal of a liberal order or envision the maintenance of a US-dominated regional order in the Middle East.

A region with multiple autonomous actors always runs the risk of becoming unstable with continually shifting alliances. I fear that in such a consolidated multipolar system, the US will be even less willing to rely on ‘soft power’ or to accept the short-term trade-offs needed to invest in a long-term vision for democratic order as it faces an increasing number of competitors in the regional contest over hearts and minds; over alternative visions of the future. So far, the US has shown little willingness to consider developing a more inclusive regional security framework that might address the varied interests of both its allies and its rivals. Its interests in the region seem too ‘vital’. Recent events suggest, though, that the US will again have to choose whether it wants to exert influence through persuasion and diplomacy, which would mean a retreat from its current posture, or whether it wishes to forgo such influence in a renewed effort to impose control through projecting power.

References


