

President Obama's Approach to Democracy Promotion in the MENA Region



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Hadjer BIOUD^{1*}, Fatima HAMADOUCHE²

¹ Department of Letters and the English Language, Frères Mentouri University Constantine 1, (Algeria), email: hadjer.bioud@doc.umc.edu.dz

² Department of Letters and the English Language, Frères Mentouri University Constantine 1, (Algeria), email: fatima.hamadouche@umc.edu.dz

Abstract

This article examines former U.S. President Barack Obama's approach to promoting democracy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region amid critiques and strategic shifts. It highlights his initial "Three Ds" strategy, standing for diplomacy, development, and defense, which excluded democracy as a direct focus, marking a departure from his predecessor's Freedom Agenda. Central to this shift was President Obama's 2009 Cairo speech, proposing a "New Beginning" with Muslim-majority nations and adopting softer rhetoric on democracy. However, the Arab uprisings challenged this strategy, leading to nuanced responses across Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. The article also explores the post-Arab Spring period, where declining democracy funding raised questions about the administration's priorities and commitment to democratic ideals in the region.

Keywords

Democracy;
Democracy Promotion;
President Obama's
Administration;
MENA Region;
Arab Uprisings.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الديمقراطية ؛
تعزيز الديمقراطية ؛
إدارة الرئيس أوباما ؛
منطقة الشرق الأوسط
وشمال إفريقيا ؛
الانتفاضات العربية.

نهج الرئيس أوباما لتعزيز الديمقراطية في منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا ملخص

يتناول هذا المقال نهج الرئيس الأمريكي الأسبق باراك أوباما في تعزيز الديمقراطية في منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا، وهذا في ظل انتقادات وتحولات استراتيجية. المقال يسلط الضوء على استراتيجيته الأولية المعروفة بركائزها الثلاث، والتي تشمل الدبلوماسية والتنمية والدفاع، مستثنية الديمقراطية كتركيز مباشر، مما مثل تحولا عن "أجندة الحرية" التي اتبعتها سلفه. وكان خطاب الرئيس أوباما في القاهرة عام 2009، الذي دعا فيه إلى "بداية جديدة" مع الدول ذات الأغلبية المسلمة وتبنى خطاباً أكثر ليونة حول الديمقراطية، محورياً لهذا التحول. ومع ذلك، فقد شكلت الانتفاضات العربية تحدياً لهذه الاستراتيجية، مما دفع إلى استجابات متباينة في تونس ومصر وليبيا وسوريا والبحرين واليمن. يستعرض المقال أيضاً فترة ما بعد الربيع العربي، حيث أثار تراجع تمويل برامج دعم الديمقراطية تساؤلات حول أولويات الإدارة الأمريكية والتزامها بالمبادئ الديمقراطية في المنطقة.

* Corresponding author. E-mail: hadjer.bioud@doc.umc.edu.dz

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Introduction

Following President Barack Obama's inauguration, democracy promotion appeared to be less critical in U.S. foreign policy. President Obama and his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton did not discuss it in the early months of his presidency, and it was notably absent from President Obama's inaugural address. Experts suggest this was a deliberate move to distance his policy from his predecessor's, particularly regarding the military-focused Freedom Agenda. Later, President Obama softened his democracy promotion rhetoric, emphasizing in his speech to the United Nations that democracy cannot be imposed from outside. His focus shifted to the Middle East and North Africa, where he advocated for rights without imposing government systems, as exemplified in his speech in Cairo. However, the Arab Spring challenged these efforts, forcing the administration to balance support for democracy with maintaining strategic alliances, notably with Egypt.

I. President Barack Obama's Democracy Promotion Strategy

When President Obama came to the White House, he inherited a flawed democracy promotion policy. The U.S. attempt to support freedom and human rights in the Middle East had become closely associated with aggressive regime change. President Bush's Freedom Agenda had engaged the U.S. in devastating wars, primarily in Afghanistan and Iraq. Consequently, the new administration had to confront the fallout from an approach that had tarnished America's global image. In this context, President Obama's main goal was to distinguish his policies from those of the previous administration, adopting what Michael Bohn, author of *Presidents in Crisis*, describes as an "Anything but Bush" approach (238). With this shift, Obama promised to reverse President Bush's policies by ending military intervention in Iraq and gradually reducing the U.S. troop presence:

After taking office, I announced a new strategy that would end our combat mission in Iraq and remove all of our troops by the end of 2011. As Commander-in-Chief, ensuring the success of this strategy has been one of my highest national security priorities. Last year, I announced the end to our combat mission in Iraq. And to date, we've removed more than 100,000 troops. Iraqis have taken full responsibility for their country's security. (qtd. in Kerrigan 566)

The announcement of the withdrawal and the plan for Iraq did not end America's involvement in the country. During President Obama's second term, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged and gained control of major Iraqi cities such as Mosul and Fallujah. Faced with this security threat, President Obama declared before the United Nations General Assembly that the United States was prepared to "work with a broad coalition to dismantle this network of death" (Address to the UN General Assembly, September 24, 2014). Additionally, his administration focused on training and arming Iraqi forces to counter ISIS. By June 2015, 3,550 noncombatant U.S. troops had been deployed to Iraq. By then, 7,000 Iraqi soldiers had completed their training, with an additional 4,000 expected to undergo training (Quivooij 22).

The approach taken in Afghanistan was notably different, President Obama implemented the Surge Policy in 2009, which initially increased the military presence in the country by deploying an additional 30,000 American troops (Woodward 95). The plan aimed to bolster the existing forces before initiating a rapid withdrawal. However, the withdrawal did not begin until 2020, with its final phase occurring in August 2021 under President Joe Biden's administration. The consequences of the U.S. military exit were devastating. Within just two weeks, the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan, leading the new government to impose severe restrictions on civil society, journalists, and especially women. As reported in 2022 by Human Rights Watch, the country faced a humanitarian crisis and an economic collapse. This situation has prompted observers to question the effectiveness of U.S. policy in promoting democratic change by forcing the American model of democracy on Afghanistan.

To separate democracy promotion from military interventions, President Obama and his team intentionally avoided discussing democracy publicly during the early months of his administration. His Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, exemplified this shift by highlighting the "three Ds" of engagement abroad: diplomacy, defense, and development (Harris 77). Notably, she omitted the fourth critical "D" of democracy, signaling that Washington did not prioritize democracy promotion in its foreign policy during the first half of 2009. However, months later, the American administration demonstrated that democracy promotion would indeed play a role in its foreign policy, although it was presented differently. In his speeches, President Obama adopted a tone that excluded hard power. He acknowledged that nations are likely to pursue policies that resonate with their traditional and cultural backgrounds, admitting that America should not impose democracy:

We will continue to promote democracy and human rights and open markets, because we believe these practices achieve peace and prosperity. But I also believe that we can rarely achieve these objectives through unilateral American action, particularly through military action. Iraq shows us that democracy cannot simply be imposed by force. Rather, these objectives are best achieved when we partner with

the international community and with the countries and peoples of the region. (Address to the UN General Assembly, September 24, 2013)

President Obama's speeches and statements regarding democracy and military interventions were often met with skepticism by researchers and journalists, questioning his administration's ability to translate them into action. Columnist Hisham Melhem argued that for President Obama, "eloquent words are more effective than sharp swords. Sometimes he treats words as if they have the value and impact of actions" (99).

This also prompted a discussion about President Obama's commitment to supporting democracy despite the complexities of dealing with other regimes. Many experts highlight his administration's response to the protests in Iran that followed the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as President. Before the Iranian Green Revolution in 2011, President Obama increased diplomatic efforts to engage with the Iranian regime. These efforts aimed to secure an agreement regarding Tehran's nuclear program, which ultimately led to the historic Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the nuclear deal (Bachar 886). While this agreement was widely controversial, President Obama viewed it as significant; in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he stated, "I know that engagement with repressive regimes lacks the satisfying purity of indignation. However, I also know that sanctions without outreach, condemnation without discussion, can perpetuate only a crippling status quo. No repressive regime can move down a new path unless it has the choice of an open door" ("A Just and Lasting Peace").

The open-door approach toward the Iranian regime sparked outrage among Iranian activists, who believed that President Obama's response to their protests was inadequate. Even after his administration condemned the Iranian regime's treatment of the protesters, many felt this response was ineffective. Some demonstrators even carried banners directed at President Obama, urging him to take a stand, with messages stating that he was either with them or against them (Spencer 55). Although the Iran case was controversial, the White House emphasized its commitment to democracy and freedom abroad. It outlined a dual approach to promoting democracy: one focused on human rights and the other on development (Wittes and Masloski 1). This stance aligned more closely with the European method of promoting human rights, which argued that, despite the challenges of dealing with authoritarian regimes, engagement was essential for fostering democratic change.

Soft power, diplomacy, and international cooperation were President Obama's primary tools for promoting democracy. He initiated several efforts to strengthen civil society and freedom of speech, including the Stand with Civil Society agenda launched in September 2013. This agenda emphasizes collaboration with both governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (USAID 2). For President Obama, this support was not merely charitable; it was strategically designed to serve U.S. interests. At the Clinton Global Initiative, he stated, "America's support for civil society is a matter of national security" (Remarks by the President, September 23, 2014). Consequently, President Obama maintained that Washington is committed to defending the human rights of all individuals and continues to urge governments to respect and uphold these rights and freedoms.

To strengthen the principles of democracy and human rights, the team of President Obama believed that development should be an essential component of the democratization process. On many occasions, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton highlighted the relationship between development, democracy, and human rights. During a visit to Africa, she criticized the corruption prevalent in Nigeria and Kenya, highlighting the need for functioning democracies to facilitate the continent's development. In his book *Democracy Promotion as U.S. Foreign Policy*, author Nicolas Bouchet suggests this perspective might explain the Secretary of State's "Three Ds" approach, indicating that "the State Department hadn't abandoned democratization but rather viewed it through the lens of development" (204).

Likewise, Vice President Joe Biden emphasized the important relationship between development and democracy. He highlighted how social and economic conditions influence democracy and, in turn, security. Biden further explained that poverty can create an environment that fosters the rise of extremism:

To meet the challenges of this new century, defense and diplomacy are necessary. But quite frankly, ladies and gentlemen, they are not sufficient. We also need to wield development and democracy, two of the most powerful weapons in our collective arsenals. Poor societies and dysfunctional states, as you know as well as I do, can become breeding grounds for extremism, conflict and disease. Non-democratic nations frustrate the rightful aspirations of their citizens and fuel resentment. (Remarks at 45th Munich Conference, 7 February 2009)

As a result, President Obama, Vice President Biden, and Secretary of State Clinton developed several initiatives and programs aimed at supporting the African continent. One of these was Power Africa, launched in 2013, with the goal of doubling access to electricity in Sub-Saharan Africa. Another initiative was Feed the Future (FTF), created under the U.S. International Development Program, which sought to address the food price crisis that occurred between 2007 and

2008. During the G8 Summit, President Obama pledged over \$3.5 billion to support global agricultural and food security initiatives in impoverished countries, further enhancing the FTF program (Congressional Research Service 2).

The democratic approach towards various African and Latin American countries aimed to promote development. However, the situation in the Middle East was different. President Obama's administration confronted a challenging landscape shaped by the consequences of the Freedom Agenda initiated during President Bush's era, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan. This complexity was further intensified by the popular uprisings that occurred in many of these countries in 2011.

II. President Obama's Early Approach Towards the MENA Region

On June 4, 2009, President Obama delivered a speech in Cairo, Egypt, which many observers described as remarkable and unprecedented (Lukacs 4). This speech aligned with his vision for establishing a New Beginning in relations with countries in the Middle East and North Africa. President Obama introduced this goal during his first Inaugural Address, where he stated that the United States "seeks a new way forward, based on mutual interest and respect" (Inaugural Address, 21 January 2009). Months later, he reiterated this idea before the Turkish Parliament, declaring that the U.S. "is not, and will never be, at war with Islam" (qtd. in Gerges 302). He emphasized his administration's aim to foster more extensive interactions based on mutual interests and respect. President Obama also committed to actively listening, addressing misconceptions, identifying areas of agreement, and maintaining respect despite any disagreements.

President Obama's approach represented a significant shift from the strategy of his predecessor in the Middle East, contributing to the tensions and conflicts between Washington and various Muslim capitals. This shift fostered a "cycle of suspicion and discord" (Lilli 4). A 2007 survey indicated that over 75% of respondents in four Muslim countries, Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia, held negative views of the U.S. government. Additionally, 79% of these respondents believed that a primary goal of U.S. foreign policy was to weaken and divide Islam, while 64% were convinced that the U.S. aimed to spread Christianity in the Middle East (Lilli 4).

In this context, President Obama aimed to repair damaged relations with the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA). When he spoke in front of hundreds at Al-Azhar University, he was also approached by nearly 1.8 billion Muslims around the world. His speech lasted about an hour and covered several topics, starting with a historical overview of the connection between Islam and the West, particularly with the United States (Lukacs 20). At the beginning of his address, it was clear that President Obama sought to connect with Muslims on an emotional level. He greeted the audience in the Islamic tradition and frequently quoted verses from the Quran, choosing those that aligned with his message against extremism. This reference to the Quran received applause from the crowd at Al-Azhar University, who listened attentively as he delved into increasingly complex subjects.

The Cairo Speech focused on seven important issues, including countering extremism, Iran's nuclear program, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the promotion of democracy and human rights. When President Obama addressed the topic of democracy, he acknowledged the controversial nature of U.S. efforts to promote democracy, particularly in relation to the Iraq War. He argued that "no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other" ("Remarks at Cairo University"). Despite this, President Obama emphasized his commitment to supporting freedom of speech, civil rights, and the rule of law in the region. He encouraged countries to protect the rights of their citizens and criticized any form of repression, asserting that:

These are not just American ideas; they are human rights. Moreover, that is why we will support them everywhere. Now, there is no straight line to realize this promise. But this much is clear: Governments that protect these rights are ultimately more stable, successful, and secure. Suppressing ideas never succeeds in making them go away. America respects the right of all peaceful and law-abiding voices to be heard worldwide, even if we disagree with them. And we will welcome all elected, peaceful governments -- provided they govern with respect for all their people. (Remarks at Cairo University, 4 June 2009)

In his speech, President Obama unintentionally sparked a challenge to his commitment to democracy and human rights in the MENA region. Significant political and security changes swept through the area nearly a year later. In late 2010, popular uprisings erupted across six Arab nations, marking the beginning of a notable movement known as The Arab Spring.

III. President Obama's Response to the Arab Uprisings

The Arab Spring was a series of anti-government protests that swept across six Arab countries: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain. The protests were initially sparked by poor social conditions, exemplified by the self-

immolation of Tunisian fruit seller Mohammed Bouazizi. These demonstrations quickly escalated into political demands to bring down the regime:

These Arab uprisings were against regimes and not principles. Ben Ali had to go, and the rule of Assad, Qadhafi, and the corrupt Mubarak family had to end. Justice had to be implemented, and dignity respected. The event that led Mohammed Bouazizi to immolate himself was not a stolen election or the closing of a newspaper. Rather he was a street vendor who was slapped and humiliated by a female police officer, and the offense was to his dignity rather than his freedom. (Abrams100)

The outcomes varied across these countries. In Tunisia, President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali fled the country less than a month after the protests began. In contrast, Syria has been engulfed in a civil war since 2011. The conflict reached its peak in December 2024, when President Bashar al-Assad's regime collapsed after a major offensive by opposition forces led by Tahrir al-Sham, with support from Turkey. As one of the Brookings Institution's experts noted, "Turkey played a major role in encouraging Abu Mohammed al-Jolani and his Hayat Tahrir al-Sham to launch their initial offensive" (Rabinovich). Regardless of the ongoing debate about Turkey's support for al-Jolani and the way he succeeded in overthrowing the al-Assad regime, he emerged as the president of Syria by the end of January 2025, taking on his real name, Ahmed al-Sharaa.

Scholars analyzing the aftermath of the Arab uprisings have sought to connect these events with the long-standing efforts of Americans and Europeans to promote democracy in the Arab region. However, they recognize the complexity of such analyses. Some argue that, on a superficial level, the so-called Arab Spring seems to validate President Bush's Freedom Agenda, suggesting that President Obama should continue following the path laid out by his predecessor (Hassan 45). In contrast, others view the 2011 demonstrations as a failure of the Freedom Agenda. This perspective argues that Bush's agenda aimed to gradually develop and stabilize the region in a way that would protect U.S. interests, a goal undermined by the rapid and tumultuous nature of the Arab uprisings (Hassan 45).

Some observers have noted the decline of American influence in the MENA region by the time of the Arab uprisings. Among them is Fawaz A. Gerges, a Professor of International Relations, who stated that America "faces an insurmountable challenge in maintaining its preponderant influence in the region due to the sweeping historical and sociological changes that followed the large-scale popular Arab uprisings in 2011, along with the evaporation of traditional alliances that had underpinned America's position since 1973" (300). This perspective highlights the challenges the emerging political systems posed in the post-Arab Spring era. In countries such as Tunisia and Egypt, democratic elections resulted in Islamist parties like Ennahda and the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power. These developments raised concerns about how Washington could uphold its influence and protect its regional interests under these new leaders.

The American administration has historically managed its relationships with regional leaders in the Middle East, many of whom are perceived as dictators from a Western perspective. However, different American presidents have chosen to maintain friendly ties with these leaders during various periods rather than support opposing forces. This dynamic has been the subject of extensive research and writing, including a book by Elliott Abrams, a politician and senior fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. In his book *Realism and Democracy*, Abrams notes that President Obama was unwilling to sacrifice U.S. significant interests for the sake of human rights and the rule of law. He points out that "Obama embraced Mubarak as a wise old statesman of the Arab Middle East, a trustworthy ally... Whatever reservations Obama had about Mubarak's oppressive and corrupt rule—if any—he did not make them public" (qtd. in Elliott 173).

With the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the American administration was engaged in a debate regarding how to balance its interests with its support for democratic change. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated, "Our choices also reflect other interests in the region with a real impact on Americans' lives—including our fight against al-Qaeda, defense of our allies, and a secure supply of energy" (qtd. in Ulrichsen 346). She further noted that fostering democracy in the Middle East and North Africa could ultimately help establish a more stable foundation for addressing various challenges. However, she acknowledged that there will be times when U.S. interests do not completely align with these goals (qtd. in Ulrichsen 346).

Some scholars argue that Washington prioritized closer cooperation with Arab leaders over promoting democracy. They point to the continued financial and military support the U.S. provides to countries in the region, particularly those aligned with American interests in critical areas such as counterterrorism, the Iranian nuclear program, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Selim 258). In attempting to balance the protection of American interests with support for democratic transitions in the Middle East, President Obama faced significant challenges during the Arab Spring. His administration's response to the popular uprisings was influenced by various factors, including potential power shifts, the military's reaction in six countries, and the nature of U.S. relations with each country. Initially, it appeared that the Arab Spring caught President Obama's administration by surprise. This prompted criticism in the U.S. and Europe regarding the

intelligence community's and think tanks' failure to foresee the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and other Arab nations (Abrams 92).

To understand President Obama's approach to the Arab uprisings, it's important to differentiate between his administration's statements and actions, as well as his immediate reactions when the uprisings began, and his subsequent decisions as events escalated in the Arab streets. Many experts in Middle Eastern studies agree that President Obama's response to the uprisings has been "ambivalent and hesitant" (Pinto 109). They often highlight the contradictions in his administration's dealings with Tunisia and Egypt compared to Syria, Libya, and, more specifically, Bahrain. Some experts note that President Obama initially urged calm, assuming that America's allied regimes would restore stability. However, he indicated that if the situation shifted in favor of the protesters, his administration would support them as part of a broader push for democracy (qtd. in Abrams 173-4).

In response to the situations in Egypt and Tunisia, President Obama consistently urged a de-escalation of violence whenever unrest occurred. He called on the governments to respond peacefully and to embrace political change. Following the violent Battle of the Camel in Egypt, the American administration demanded immediate changes, including President Mubarak's resignation. The administration emphasized the importance of a meaningful transition, stating that it "must be peaceful, and it must begin now" (qtd. in Rieffer-Flanagan 443).

In dealing with Libya and its leader, Muammar Gaddafi, President Obama encouraged the regime to step down but was not fully convinced about the merits of direct American military intervention. As the situation in Libya became increasingly severe, Western nations acted under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, which established a no-fly zone to protect civilians from attacks. In March 2011, the United States joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in its operations in Libya, playing a supporting role guided by a strategy known as "leading from behind," in which European forces took the lead (Gerges 308).

Syria presented a significant challenge for President Obama and his State Department. Initially, before the outbreak of popular protests, the U.S. administration sought to engage President Bashar al-Assad in peace negotiations with Israel (Dueck 84). The administration was cautious in its approach, and in March 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton referred to Bashar al-Assad as a "possible reformer" (Abrams 174). It was not until August 2011, when the situation escalated into a bloody civil war with foreign powers like Iran and later Russia supporting al-Assad, that President Obama officially called for Assad to step down. This position was further reinforced by the imposition of economic sanctions against the regime (Dueck 85).

In both Yemen and Bahrain, President Obama's response involved collaborating with Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE. He was concerned about Iran's influence in the region, mainly through groups like the Houthis in Yemen. Even though Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh was a close ally of the U.S. and had worked well with Americans in countering terrorism, President Obama believed that Saleh should step aside and accept the Gulf Countries Council (GCC) transition proposal (Carothers 33). The U.S. has significant strategic interests in Bahrain, particularly because it hosts the U.S. Fifth Fleet. While the American administration emphasized the need for dialogue and opposed repression, it was skeptical about Iran's support for the Shia demonstrators. There were even direct accusations against Tehran for attempting to exploit the demands of the Arab Shi'i population for its own geostrategic advantage (qtd. in Gerges 308). Given this threat and the U.S. desire to maintain Bahrain as an ally while also preserving its relationships with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, the U.S. initially supported dialogue within Bahrain. Subsequently, it backed the intervention of Gulf Cooperation Council troops at Bahrain's request to help control the situation (Carothers 34).

The U.S. government's response to the Arab uprisings was significantly influenced by the strategic importance of the countries involved and the nature of U.S. relations and interests in those regions. While the White House did not view Tunisia as a high priority, Egypt was a key partner in the Middle East, and the uprising there raised considerable concern. Professor of Political Science Gamal M. Selim pointed out that the U.S. had no strategic interests in Tunisia, considering it to fall within the French sphere of influence (261).

In contrast, there were worries that the election of an anti-American president in Egypt, potentially from the Muslim Brotherhood, could jeopardize the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty. Some observers argued that a newly elected government with a religious ideology, like that of the Muslim Brotherhood, could threaten American and Israeli interests in the region. American national security adviser and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger criticized President Obama for abandoning support for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during the uprising, stating, "When you are associated with an individual for 30 years, you do not just throw him over the side as if relationships have no meaning. Not that we owed him ten years in office, but that we owed him a graceful exit" (qtd. in Singh 126).

IV- President Obama's Funding for Democracy in the MENA Region

President Obama initially expressed skepticism about the promotion of democracy, and he sought to reverse President Bush's Freedom Agenda in the Middle East. This created the impression that his administration would reduce democracy assistance and funding for democratic programs and initiatives, such as the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) (Patterson 35). However, contrary to these expectations, President Obama's administration requested a 70% increase in funding for MEPI and MCC in FY 2011; they specifically sought \$86 million for MEPI. Those steps took place "despite previous uncertainty about its future, MEPI now has strong leadership, funding, and a solid place in the State Department's Bureau of Near East Affairs (NEA); it has quickly become one of President Obama's most important centerpieces demonstrating his commitment to Middle East democracy and human rights" (Patterson 35).

The encouraging figures mentioned were not evenly distributed among the countries in the region. In Egypt, where President Obama first addressed the Muslim world and emphasized the importance of democracy and human rights, his administration decided to fund only NGOs with government approval. Additionally, it cut funding for civil society and democracy initiatives, reducing the budget from \$50 million to \$20 million (qtd. in Rieffer-Flanagan 441).

A key turning point for this strategy occurred during and after the Arab uprisings when U.S. global assistance to promote democracy significantly declined. Leading scholar Thomas Crothers, who specializes in U.S. democracy promotion, noted this decline. He pointed out, "The decline has been especially severe at the U.S. Agency for International Development, which traditionally funds the bulk of U.S. democracy assistance and established itself in the 1990s as the largest source of such aid worldwide" (qtd. in Abrams 174-5). By the end of President Obama's second term, the planned foreign aid budget for FY 2017 totaled \$34 billion, with only 8% allocated to democracy, human rights, and governance (Abrams 194).

On the other hand, key Arab governments have resisted U.S. democratic assistance by supporting local activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In Egypt, for instance, after the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces took power, some American NGOs, such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and Freedom House, were accused of violating local laws and lacking permission to spend foreign funds (Rugh 37). This decision by the Council led to increased criticism of America's commitment to supporting Egypt's civil society, as reflected in statements from Egyptian officials and local media. Egypt's Minister of International Cooperation, Faiza Abulnaga, accused NGOs' personnel of attempting to "undermine the Egyptian state, divert the Egyptian revolution, and serve American and Israeli interests" (qtd. in Rugh 38).

While these accusations contributed to the overall decline of democracy assistance and good governance in the region, President Obama's diminished support for democratic initiatives in the MENA region can also be assessed through his broader foreign policy. Initially, President Obama aimed to shift America's focus away from the Middle East and toward the Pacific and Asian regions. His Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, articulated this strategy: "The future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the center of the action" (qtd. in Brown 152).

During President Obama's administration, there was a notable emphasis on strengthening alliances with Asian countries while reducing involvement in Middle Eastern affairs. This shift was evident during the Arab uprisings, where his administration allowed other powers, such as European nations in Libya and Gulf countries in Yemen and Bahrain, to take the lead. This approach reflected a pragmatic strategy to manage China's expansion in the strategic Pacific region, which is crucial for commercial and economic interests. Many key sea trade routes and straits, including those essential for oil shipments that the United States seeks to protect, pass through these areas, contributing to global economic stability (Brown 157-9).

Another key factor that led President Obama to shift his focus away from the Middle East and the mission of supporting democracy in the region was the domestic economic crisis. When he took office, the U.S. economy was the top priority, as polls indicated that voters were primarily concerned with jobs, manufacturing, and insurance (Degani 23). As a result, President Obama was committed to addressing economic issues immediately. One of the most significant challenges he faced was managing the aftermath of the financial crisis that began in September 2008, which profoundly impacted the American and global markets. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that Obama told her, "You know, we've got this major economic crisis that could push us into a depression. I won't be able to fulfill the built-up expectations for our role around the world. So, you're going to have to get out there and manage those expectations" (Gerges 305).

Conclusion

During President Obama's presidency, U.S. efforts to promote democracy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) faced a significant challenge in upholding a long-standing commitment to supporting human rights and democratic change. This challenge stemmed from a disconnect between rhetoric and action. In his Cairo Speech, President Obama highlighted the importance of democratic values in the region; however, his administration later reduced democracy assistance to key Middle Eastern nations, including Egypt, following the Arab uprisings. These actions raised doubts about American engagement and highlighted President Obama's perceived inconsistency, especially in response to widespread protests in over six Arab countries where people demanded change and the ousting of their leaders. Initially, President Obama's administration supported long-time allies like Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, both of whom are seen as dictators from a Western perspective. Washington was cautious, fearing that the removal of these leaders might lead to the rise of anti-American figures, particularly those associated with Islamic political movements. This dilemma underscored the struggle between supporting authoritarian leaders aligned with U.S. interests and the potential emergence of Islamic leadership that could threaten those interests.

Strategic interests influenced the approach to democratic change in the region, particularly regarding security and economic factors. On the security front, President Obama prioritized maintaining the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel and valued the presence of the American Fifth Fleet in Bahrain. Economically, his administration acknowledged the importance of investments and energy production in Gulf countries. This justified its cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the UAE in stabilizing Bahrain during the Arab Spring. For many human rights activists, these positions indicated a retreat by the American administration from actively supporting democratic change in Arab countries. However, experts viewed it as a pragmatic decision, reflecting President Obama's attempt to balance democracy, security, stability, and American interests. Additionally, some analysts argued that it was reasonable for the administration to adopt tailored approaches for different countries in the MENA region based on their influence level in each nation.

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