

NY Times: Obama Jump-Started Arab Spring | Clarion Project

By Barry Rubin

It is now possible to trace precisely what Obama knew and when he knew it, and it proves that installing the Muslim Brotherhood into power was a conscious and deliberate strategy developed by Obama before the "Arab Spring" began.

"We have to confront violent extremism in all of its forms.... America is not — and never will be — at war with Islam. We will, however, relentlessly confront violent extremists who pose a grave threat to our security — because we reject the same thing that people of all faiths reject: the killing of innocent men, women, and children. And it is my first duty as president to protect the American people." --President Barack Obama, Cairo, June 2009.

"The United States is now experiencing the beginning of its end, and is heading towards its demise....Resistance is the only solution. [Today the United States] is withdrawing from Iraq, defeated and wounded, and it is also on the verge of withdrawing from Afghanistan. [All] its warplanes, missiles and modern military technology were defeated by the will of the peoples, as long as [these peoples] insisted on resistance." --[Muslim Brotherhood](#) leader Muhammad al-Badi, Cairo, September 2010.

What did the president know and when did he know it? That's a question made classical by the Watergate scandal. Now it is possible to trace precisely what Obama knew and when he knew it. And it proves that the installment of the Muslim Brotherhood into power was a conscious and deliberate strategy of the Obama Administration developed before the "Arab Spring" began.

In February 2011 the New York Times ran an [extremely complimentary article on President Obama by Mark Landler](#), who some observers say is the biggest apologist for Obama on the newspaper. That's quite an achievement. Landler praised Obama for having tremendous foresight, in effect, predicting the "Arab Spring." According to Landler,

"President Obama ordered his advisers last August [2010] to produce a secret report on unrest in the Arab world, which concluded that without sweeping political changes, countries from Bahrain to Yemen were ripe for popular revolt, administration officials said Wednesday."

Which advisors? The then counter-terrorism advisor and now designated CIA chief, John Brennan? National Security Council senior staffer Samantha Power? If it was done by Obama's own staff, rather than State and Defense, it's likely that these people or at least one of them was the key author.

So should U.S. policy help allies avoid such sweeping change by standing firm or by helping them make adjustments? No, explained the report, it should get on the side of history and wield a broom to do the sweeping. The article continued:

“Mr. Obama’s order, known as a Presidential Study Directive, identified likely flashpoints, most notably Egypt, and solicited proposals for *how the administration could push for political change in countries with autocratic rulers who are also valuable allies of the United States*, [emphasis added] these officials said.

“The 18-page classified report, they said, grapples with a problem that has bedeviled the White House’s approach toward Egypt and other countries in recent days: how to balance American strategic interests and the desire to avert broader instability against the democratic demands of the protesters.”

As I noted, the article was quite explicitly complimentary (and that’s an understatement) about how Obama knew what was likely to happen and was well prepared for it.

But that’s precisely the problem. It wasn't trying to deal with change but was pushing for it; it wasn't asserting U.S. interests but balancing them off against other factors. In the process, U.S. interests were forgotten.

If Landler was right, then Obama did have a sense of what was going to happen and prepared for it. It cannot be said that he was caught unawares. This view would suggest, then, that he thought American strategic interests could be protected and broader instability avoided by overthrowing U.S. allies as fast as possible and by showing the oppositions that he was on their side.

Presumably the paper pointed out the strength of Islamist forces and the Muslim Brotherhood factor and then discounted any dangers from this quarter. One could have imagined how other U.S. governments would have dealt with this situation.

Here is my *imagined* passage from a high-level government document:

In light of the likelihood of sweeping political changes, with countries from Bahrain to Yemen ripe for popular revolt, U.S. policy should either help friendly governments retain control or encourage them to make reforms that would increase the scope of freedom in a way that would satisfy popular desires without endangering U.S. interests and long-term stability. In the event that the fall of any given regime seemed likely, U.S. policy should work both publicly and behind the scenes to try to ensure the triumph of moderate, pro-democratic forces that would be able to prevent the formation of radical Islamist dictatorships inimical to U.S. interests, regional peace, and the well-being of the local population. [Remember: that was my imagined document.]

Such an approach would have been easy and in line with historic U.S. policy. We have every reason to

believe that the State Department and the Defense Department favored such an approach.

But let's look at precisely how the White House described the U.S. policy it wanted:

"...how the administration could push for political change in countries with autocratic rulers who are also valuable allies of the United States,"

In other words, a popular revolt was going to happen (I've seen the cables from the U.S. embassy in Tunisia that accurately predicted an upheaval) but would it succeed or fail? The Obama Administration concluded that the revolt should succeed and set out to help make sure that it did so. As for who won, it favored not just moderate Islamic forces--which hardly existed as such--but moderate Islamist forces, which didn't exist at all.

Anyone who says that the United States did not have a lot of influence in these crises doesn't know what they are talking about. Of course, the U.S. government didn't control the outcome, its leverage was limited. But there's a big difference between telling the Egyptian army to stay in control, dump Mubarak, and make a mild transition—and we, the United States, will back you—or telling them that Washington wanted the generals to stand aside, let Mubarak be overthrown, and have a thoroughgoing regime change, a fundamental transformation, to coin a phrase.

So the Obama Administration did not stand beside friendly regimes or help to manage a limited transition with more democracy and reforms. No, it actively pushed to bring down at least four governments—Bahrain, Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen.

It did not push for the overthrow of two anti-American regimes—Iran and Syria—but on the contrary was still striving for good relations with those two dictatorships. Equally, it did not push for the fall of radical anti-American governments in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. No, it only pushed for the fall of “valuable allies.”

There was no increase in support for dissidents in Iran despite, as we will see in a moment, internal administration predictions of unrest there, too. As for Syria, strong administration support for the dictatorship there continued for months until it was clear that the regime was in serious trouble. It seems reasonable to say that the paper did not predict the Syrian civil war.

Want more evidence about the internal administration document? Here's [another article](#) from the *Times* which explains:

"The White House had been debating the likelihood of a domino effect since youth-driven revolts had toppled President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, even though the American intelligence community and Israel's intelligence services had estimated that the risk to President Mubarak was low — less than 20 percent, some officials said.

"According to senior officials who participated in Mr. Obama's policy debates, the president took a

different view. He made the point early on, a senior official said, that `this was a trend' that could spread to other authoritarian governments in the region, including in Iran. By the end of the 18-day uprising, by a White House count, there were 38 meetings with the president about Egypt. Mr. Obama said that this was a chance to create an alternative to "the Al Qaeda narrative" of Western interference."

Notice that while this suggests the debate began after the unrest started, full credit is given to Obama personally, not to U.S. intelligence agencies, for grasping the truth. This is like the appropriation by the White House of all the credit for getting Usama bin Ladin, sort of a cult of personality thing.

We know for a fact that the State Department predicted significant problems arising in Tunisia (from the Wikileaks documents) and perhaps that is true for other countries as well. But if Obama wants to take personal credit for the new U.S. policy that means he also has to take personal blame for the damage it does.

Now I assume what I'm about to say isn't going to be too popular, but I'll also bet that history will prove it correct: The revolution in Egypt was not inevitable and Obama's position was a self-fulfilling prophecy. And judging from what happened at the time, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton agrees with me.

The idea of an "alternative to `the al-Qaida narrative'" of Western interference is straight Brennan. What Obama was really saying was: Ha! So al-Qaida claims we interfere to put reactionary pro-Western dictators in power just because they're siding with us? We'll show them that we can put popular Islamist dictators in power even though they are against us!

I'm writing this somewhat facetiously, but I mean it very seriously.

And here's [more proof](#) from the *Washington Post* in March 2011 which seems to report on the implementation of the White House paper's recommendations:

"The administration is already taking steps to distinguish between various movements in the region that promote Islamic law in government. An internal assessment, ordered by the White House last month, identified large ideological differences between such movements as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and al-Qaeda that will guide the U.S. approach to the region."

That says it all, doesn't it? The implication is that the U.S. government knew that the Brotherhood would take power and thought this was a good thing.

It continued:

"`If our policy can't distinguish between al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood, we won't be able to adapt to this change,'" the senior administration official said. "`We're also not going to allow

ourselves to be driven by fear."

Might that be then counterterrorism advisor and now CIA director John Brennan? I'd bet on it.

[ad] What did Obama and his advisors think would happen? Why, that out of gratitude for America stopping its (alleged) bullying and imperialistic ways and getting on the (alleged) side of history, the new regimes would be friendly?

The Muslim Brotherhood in particular would conclude that America was not its enemy. You know, one Brotherhood leader would supposedly say to another, all of these years we thought the United States was against us but now we see that they are really our friends. Remember Obama's Cairo speech? He really gets us!

More likely he'd be saying: We don't understand precisely what the Americans are up to but they are obviously weak, cowardly, and in decline! In fact, that's what they did say.

Remember that President Jimmy Carter's attempts to make friends with the new Islamist regime in Iran in 1979 fed a combination of Iranian suspicion and arrogance which led to the hostage crisis and Tehran daring to take on the United States single-handed. America, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini at the time, can't do a damned thing against us.

Incidentally, everyone except the American public—which means people in the Middle East—knows that Obama cut the funding for real democratic groups. His Cairo speech was important not for the points so often discussed (Israel, for example) but because it heralded the age of political [Islamism](#) being dominant in the region. Indeed, Obama practically told those people that they should identify not as Arabs but as Muslims.

In broader terms, what does Obama's behavior remind me of? President Jimmy Carter pushing Iran's Shah for human rights and other reforms in 1977 and then standing aloof as the revolution unrolled—and went increasingly in the direction of radical Islamists—in 1978.

As noted above, that didn't work out too well.

Incidentally, the State Department quite visibly did not support Obama's policy in 2011. It wanted to stand with its traditional clients in the threatened Arab governments, just as presumably there were many in the Defense Department who wanted to help the imperiled militaries with whom they had cooperated for years. And that, by the way, includes the Turkish army which was being visibly dismantled by the Islamist regime in Ankara.

While the State Department backed down on Egypt it drew the line on Bahrain. Yes, there is a very unfair system there in which a small Sunni minority dominates a large Shia majority and yes, too, some of the Shia opposition is moderate but the assessment was that a revolution would probably bring to power an Iranian satellite government.

But the idea that they're going to be overthrown any way so let's give them a push did not apply to Iran or Syria or Hamas-government Gaza or Hizballah-governed Lebanon and not at all to Islamist-governed Turkey.

It makes sense that this basic thinking also applied to Libya, where dictator Muammar al-Qadhafi was hardly a friend of the United States but had been on better behavior lately. As for Syria, the U.S. government indifference to who actually wins leadership of the new regime seems to carry over from the earlier crises.

Credit should be given to the U.S. government in two specific cases. Once the decision to overthrow Qadhafi was made, the result was a relatively favorable regime in Libya. That was a gain. The problem is that this same philosophy and the fragility of the regime helped produce the Benghazi incident.

The other relatively positive situation was Iraq's post-Saddam government, to which most of the credit goes to Obama's predecessor but some to his administration. Still, Iraq seems to be sliding--in terms of its regional strategic stance, not domestically--closer toward Iran.

At any rate, the evidence both public and behind the scenes seems to indicate that the Obama Administration decided on two principles in early 2011.

First, let's help overthrow our friends before someone else does so and somehow we will benefit from being on the right side.



Second, it doesn't really matter too much who takes power because somehow they will be better than their predecessors, somehow we will be more popular with them, and somehow U.S. interests will be preserved.

Landler definitely thought he was making Obama look good. Instead, I think, he was really showing us that the bad thinking and disastrous policy was planned and purposeful.