



## The Arab Spring: Unfinished Business

### Public Affairs Program

#### Robert Malley, Joanne J. Myers

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### Introduction

**JOANNE MYERS:** Good afternoon and welcome. I'm Joanne Myers, director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council, I'd like to thank you all for joining us for this last program of the season.

We are delighted to have Rob Malley as our speaker. In reading Rob's bio, which you all should have a copy of, you will see that he is an expert on the Middle East and has been very lucky in that he has been able to fuse his academic interests with practical experience. It is this winning combination that affords us the opportunity of listening to an incisive analysis about many of the issues you may have been reading about.

The title of Rob's talk is "The Unfinished Business of the [Arab Spring](#)." As you can imagine, there is a lot to talk about, ever since a [Tunisian fruit seller](#) set himself aflame, providing the fuel which ignited the uprisings in neighboring countries.

While demonstrations brought the thrones of a few dictatorial regimes tumbling down, a quick tour of the region reveals the turmoil that lingers on.

[Tunisia](#), where, in December 2010, the first anti-regime protests began, now has an Islamic government that, for the most part, has been relatively successful, gliding as it has from despotism to democracy. But it, too, has seen rise by religious extremists.

[Libya](#), although no longer ruled by a [crazy tyrant](#), is expected to have an Islamic government as well. But until that occurs, it has been periodically rocked by the still untamed militias that ousted Qaddafi, and lawlessness pervades.

In [Yemen](#), having shed its [ruler](#) of 33 years, this country finds that it has become [al-Qaeda](#)'s favorite haunt.

But it is in [Syria](#) and in [Egypt](#) that our immediate attention is drawn. It has been 15 months now since Syria started cracking down on anti-government protesters, but it was only yesterday that [Bashar al-Assad declared](#) Syria to be in a state of real war and indicated that his regime must spare no effort to achieve victory and quash the opposition. As troubling as this is, it is Syria's neighbors who are increasingly worried about the threat of spillover, especially in Lebanon, as the uprising in Syria has exacerbated sectarian cleavages in that country.

With all this going on, the country still to watch is Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country and an historically influential nation. After 18 months of messy progress on its path towards democracy, [Mohamed Morsi](#) of the [Muslim Brotherhood](#) became the winner of the first competitive presidential election, handing this Islamist group a symbolic triumph and a new weapon in its struggle for power with the ruling military council. Although Mr. Morsi has pledged to create a unity government, the extent of his authority is unclear. While this victory is an ambiguous milestone in Egypt's promised transition to democracy, there is still much that could go wrong. And if Egypt goes wrong, then democracy's progress elsewhere in the Arab world will be far slower.

While the term "Arab Spring" had such a romantic ring to it, what appears to be left is a confusing reality and an uncertain future which lies somewhere between hope and foreboding. To give us a more nuanced understanding and insight on the prevailing conditions, please join me in welcoming our guest, the very knowledgeable and widely respected Rob Malley.

Thank you for joining us.

## Remarks

**ROBERT MALLEY:** Thank you, Joanne. Thank you for the nice introduction.

Actually, Joanne and I have been discussing what I will be talking about now for some months, because we postponed this several times. We had no problem deciding on the venue, the audience. The one thing that took us some time to decide was the title. We called it, as you saw, "The Arab Spring: Unfinished Business." I'm beginning to have second thoughts.

If you ask a Kurd who participated in the [uprisings](#) against their own leadership in the Kurdish areas in 2011, they would object to the fact that we're calling this "Arab." The same if you were to ask the Iranians who [rose up](#) in 2009 against what they considered to be a fraudulent [election](#). They, too, would quibble with the characterization of what has been occurring as strictly "Arab."

As a climatologist, he or she would be quite surprised to hear they were talking about the spring, when in fact it began in winter and, if my count is right, we're now at the seventh consecutive season of whatever we want to call this. Even metaphorically—I assume the reason people used the word "spring" was because it evokes a sense of renewal, a sense of rebirth—ask a Syrian today, ask a [Bahraini](#), even perhaps ask a Libyan, and it's hard to see why they would identify with that characterization.

As for the word "business," it's unclear to me as I think about it what precisely the business is that we say is still unfinished. Is it the business of a revolution? If you look to what is happening in Egypt, where what has happened after decades of a tête-à-tête between the regime, the military-dominated regime, and the Muslim Brotherhood, now, 18 months after whatever has happened, it is a tête-à-tête between the Muslim Brotherhood and the military old regime.

In Yemen, after months and months of uprising, what we have seen essentially, for the most part, is a game of musical chairs within the elite. One side of the elite has taken over and taken revenge over the other. So calling it a revolution might be taking it a step too far. Maybe it's a restoration, which, literally speaking, is a revolution, only taken to its logical conclusion. But that might not be far enough. It really doesn't give enough credence and it doesn't tell us enough about what was really happening—people fighting for their empowerment, taking to the streets for the first time, perhaps, in decades and decades, taking matters in their own hands. So to call it a restoration would really not do them justice.

But Arab or not Arab, spring or not spring, revolution or restoration—whatever it is, one thing I think we got right: It's unfinished. In fact, it's not just unfinished business, it's unfinished businesses. We can go through the list of all the loose ends that are still apparent in this region.

First is the unfinished business in the places where transitions supposedly have occurred—Yemen, Libya, Egypt, Tunisia. In all of them, we see the same fights, the same unfinished, unconcluded fights, between military and civilian, between Islamist and secular, among Islamists, among tribes, between regions. In each and every one of them, whether it is Tunisia or Yemen or Libya or Egypt, the unresolved conflicts remain as unresolved today as they were the day the revolutions or the uprisings broke out.

As I said, in the case of Yemen, it's quite palpable. The uprising was—perhaps "hijacked" is too strong a word, but it certainly was taken away from those who initiated it, to become a power play between those different factions of a tribe or of the elite in power. So the youth movement, which began the movement, or those in the north, the [Houthis](#), or those in the south, the [Hirak](#), feel that in some way they have been robbed of what at one point they considered to be at least partially theirs. And none of those conflicts have been resolved. You still have the problems in the north. You still have a secessionist movement in the south. Added to that, taking advantage of the chaos, you have al-Qaeda that is exploiting the situation.

In Libya, as we speak, there is a federalist movement that is now trying to create a boundary between east and west. It may not last for long, but it gives you a sense of how this stateless society, stateless during the Qaddafi years, has remained stateless after the revolution, with conflicts among tribes that were armed—armed in order to overthrow Qaddafi but not armed in order to fight to protect their own interests, to protect their region, to protect their tribe—that are finding that the notion of citizenship and a state doesn't come that easily at all. Whether it's between east and west or between different tribes, we're seeing the conflicts that continue every day.

Of course, the case I want to speak about most, the country from which I just came back last week, is Egypt—Egypt, where the world, and the United States in particular, had celebrated for days and days, and perhaps weeks, the notion of a Facebook revolution, a Twitter revolution, liberal revolution, non-Islamist revolution. As I say, we have ended up, some 18 months later, without a constitution, without a parliament, and again with a tête-à-tête between the two most conservative parties of modern-day Egypt, the Islamists on the one hand and the military on the other, playing different roles, with a different balance of power, but nonetheless, the same tug of war between those two.

The military, the SCAF, tried to co-opt the uprising by declaring itself the defender of the very revolution that it feared. The Muslim Brotherhood joined it belatedly, hoping to take advantage of a popular uprising that could undo the regime with which it had been at war for some time.

There's a joke that is now familiar to many Egyptians, in which the revolutionaries would fight and take hold of the center of Tahrir in order to overthrow the regime, whereas the Muslim Brotherhood would join Tahrir episodically, periodically, when it felt that it needed it in order to score political points against the military and then retreat once that point had been scored or once it felt that it had gone too far. But it didn't have the same interest as the young people who were in the square at the beginning. So as the young revolutionaries said, "In Tahrir until victory," the Muslim Brotherhood, according to this joke, would say, "In Tahrir until sometime this afternoon-ish."

The liberal, secular revolution is the one that the West identified with. If you go back and read the articles that were written 18 months ago in our own press, this was what this was supposed to be about, people celebrating the fact that there were no Islamist slogans, there were no anti-Israeli slogans, U.S. flags were not being burned. That's what people remember.

Go there today and get a sense of what's going on. Bear in mind that the revolutionaries—if that's what we want to call them—get about 2 percent of the popular vote in the parliamentary elections. Even if they were to double or triple that score in the next elections, it gives you a sense of the magnitude of their representation and what they really mean for average Egyptians, many of whom today are as tired of people taking to the square as they are of instability. That's why they choose one of two conservative forces, the conservative force of the past or the conservative, more familiar force of a very familiar face, the Muslim Brotherhood, but which is known to be deeply, deeply rooted in society and deeply conservative.

Actually, if you want to look at what happened in the last election—just for the sake of a slight exaggeration—of the three top candidates, one of them was aspiring to go back about 18 months earlier, to the [Mubarak](#) era. That was [Ahmed Shafiq](#), who came in second. Another was calling for a return to a few decades earlier, to the era of [Nassar](#), to the era of [pan-Arabism](#). That was [Hamdeen Sabahi](#), who came in third. One, I guess, was calling for a return to several centuries back, to the golden age of Islam.

So in this forward-looking revolutionary era, everyone was looking very firmly in the rear-view mirror, with a competition between those who wanted to go back a few months, a few years or decades, and a few centuries.

Of course, the other irony is that the presidential outcome, what we have just witnessed last weekend, would not have occurred—we wouldn't have known, in my view, who the victor was if people had not used that most revolutionary, modern of forms of activism by taking to the streets, replicating what happened during the heyday of the revolution in 2011. But they were doing so in order to referee between, as I said, those two conservative forces, the Muslim Brotherhood in the person of Mohamed Morsi or the SCAF in the person of Ahmed Shafiq.

That's the unfinished business of Egypt. I'll just add one thing, one of those other ironies in the case of Egypt. When I was there, what struck me is how many secular activists bemoan the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood and actually were hoping for the victory of the candidate of the SCAF, and how many of them were relieved when the Constitutional Court announced the dissolution of the Parliament, because they thought that was the best way to cut the Muslim Brotherhood down to size, which tells us something about how one could be more secular than one is democratic.

There's also the unfinished business of those places where the uprisings, of course, are still under way. There's the case of [Bahrain](#), where what started as a popular uprising increasingly has taken on the appearance of a sectarian war between a minority Sunni-dominated regime and a majority Shiite population, forms of apartheid, of economic discrimination, of economic retribution for people who joined the uprising, a regime that is raising the very communitarian specter that it's exploiting and that is accusing its foes of links to foreign regimes in order to better conceal its own.

The regime in Bahrain is accusing its opposition of being sectarian, when, as I say, they have done everything to exacerbate the sectarian character of the conflict, and they are accusing the Shiite opposition of being aligned with Iran, when, in fact, if either of the two parties is more aligned with a foreign entity, it is, of course, the regime, which is closely aligned to Saudi Arabia, which intervened on its behalf. That conflict is nowhere near its resolution. If anything, the polarization is deepening. The sense of alienation of Shiites vis-à-vis the regime is deepening. Therefore, the existential character of the conflict is becoming more and more acute, and the notion of reform less and less plausible as it's a fight for the death between the two opponents.

But, of course, if Egypt is the most significant case for the unfinished business of the transitions that have occurred, Syria is the most significant case for the transitions that are still under way. There we see the same dynamics as in Bahrain, only worse, only more violent, only more dangerous—again, a regime which is exploiting the very communitarian/sectarian tensions that it claims to be combating, a regime that is doing everything, in fact, to bring to life every dynamic it says it fears—more Islamization of the opposition, more sectarianism in the

country, more militarization of the opposition, and more foreign involvement in the conflict. Everything the regime said it set out to prevent a year ago it has, by its own actions—in many cases, wittingly—done everything it could to promote.

Today what we have is a regime that is speaking like a state, as if there actually was a Syrian state that represents the Syrian people, but is acting increasingly like a militia—family-employed armed groups that are fighting for the sake of a family-based regime using the most brutal forms of violence. But also, because it has managed to promote this narrative of a sectarian conflict and because the opposition is becoming—inevitably, I would say—more militarized and more sectarian and more Islamist, it is stoking the fears of Alawites and other minority groups, and that has formed a further line of defense for the regime.

At this stage, my own sad prediction is that unless something unexpected happens, Syria is going to descend more and more into a deepening sectarian war, where it almost won't matter anymore if Bashar is in power or not, and it won't matter so much anymore what [Kofi Annan](#) is [doing](#) and whether you have this conference next week to try to resolve it diplomatically. At some point, if this becomes a truly sectarian war, with militias on both sides, with atrocities on both sides—the Syrian people have been fortunate, and, really, immense credit goes at this point to the civil society, which has refrained from the most atrocious forms of retribution. The majority of sectarian killings have been Alawite on Sunni. There have some Sunni on Alawite, but it has been remarkably small and remarkably restrained.

That, I would predict, will change. That's the pattern of civil wars. People can't stay forever and passively watch as their brethren are being killed. Once that retribution begins and once it becomes a free-for-all, it really won't matter if Russia puts pressure on Bashar al-Assad. It really won't if the international community increases its sanctions. It really won't matter whatever they do, because this will be a conflict that will have a life of its own and that will only end when one or both of the parties have been exhausted, and we are very, very far from that.

Then, of course, there's the unfinished business of those uprisings that have not yet begun, what I like to call the dogs that haven't barked, but have all the ingredients that we have seen elsewhere—the anger at corruption, the alienation from a state that has done much more to promote the interests of a narrowing class of elite, an elite that, in fact, has alienated itself even from its traditional bases of support. That was the case in Syria. That was the case in Tunisia. That was the case in Egypt. It is the case today in [Jordan](#).

It is the case in many places in the region, where a smaller part of the elite is actually taking over, increasing its share of resources at the expense of a broader section of the elite. When that happens, when you see a part of the elite monopolizing resources, then it becomes much harder to defend oneself once the uprising begins.

When you add to that the sectarian or tribal or other internal conflicts, as exist today in Jordan, as we know well, as exist in other places around the region, when you add to that foreign intervention, Jordan is an ideal target, on the one hand, for a country like Syria, which feels that Jordan is going to become a platform for attacking it; on the other hand, for a country like Saudi Arabia, which wants to use Jordan as an arena from which to destabilize the regime or further undermine the regime in Syria. Caught as a sandwich between Iraq on the one hand and Palestine and Israel on the other, it's a country that may well blow up at some point in flames.

The same with Palestine, of course, where we have had now a relatively long period of calm, but which every logical argument would lead us to believe that at some point there will be an explosion of violence, whether from Gaza or Jerusalem or the West Bank, and where what's happening in the Arab world will not stop at the boundaries of Palestine and Israel.

At some point, I suspect—and I don't know what form it will take, and I dearly hope that if it happens, it will take a peaceful form, but who knows?—at some point something will happen. You can't expect the Palestinian people not to react when they don't believe that there is a future to the peace process.

So there are those cases. I could add [Saudi Arabia](#), perhaps.

Then there is the unfinished business of those businesses that weren't finished even before the current business has begun. By that I mean those conflicts that preexisted the Arab Spring or the Arab uprising. The Arab uprising, or whatever we want to call it, didn't replace all the old conflicts. The fact that now we have conflicts within societies between different social groups, between different sects, civilians rising up against the military, that didn't erase the conflicts that had preexisted, and preexisted for decades, whether it is the conflict surrounding Iran's [nuclear program](#), whether it is the conflict about Iraq's future.

Today people forget that if one wants to really talk about an unfinished war, that's the [one](#). It may not have been the right war. It may have been the wrong war. It's still our war and it's still an unfinished one. And, of course, the unfinished business of Palestine, which I mentioned earlier.

All of these remain. None of them have been resolved. All of them interconnect with everything else that has been happening. In fact, all of them are reaching critical tipping points. Iran I don't need to say too much about. We all

know how close today we are to a fundamental choice about how to deal with Iran's nuclear program, as this round of negotiations appears to be exhausting itself, as pressure from Israel, which fears Iran entering into a zone of immunity which would protect its future nuclear arsenal if it ever were to come. That pressure point, where you have to decide whether you can live with a nuclear Iran or whether you have to go to war to stop it is coming relatively soon. I'm talking about a matter, perhaps, of years, but that is relatively soon in the span of things.

The Israel and Palestinian [conflict](#) is also reaching a tipping point, with the exhaustion on both sides. Neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians today believe—I have not met one who believes truly that this peace process, whatever one wants to call it, is going to get anywhere. The Palestinians gave up long ago. The Israelis have given up at least for the last 10 years, since the [Second Intifada](#). You add to this exhaustion—to what I would call people even tired of being tired of the peace process. They don't even want to talk about it.

The most startling thing for me when I travel there is not that people are angry at what they hear about or angry at the impasse; they don't seem to care anymore. That's a prelude to people doing something very different, to people giving up and then perhaps choosing a different form of expression.

This is happening at a time when the Palestinian national movement is really reaching a dead end, not only because it has failed in its attempt to attain statehood and independence, but also because the national leadership under President [Abbas](#) is reaching its own natural end. Once that's gone, we're dealing with something completely different, a completely different animal. We don't know what that national movement would look like. We don't know who will dominate it, whether it's the Islamists or the secularists, whether it's those in the West Bank or those in Gaza or those in Jerusalem or those in the diaspora.

What will their aspiration be at that point? Will it truly be for another state standing side by side with Israel or will it be something completely different?

Where will Israeli society go if it is increasingly convinced, as it seems to be, that it truly has no partner on the other side?

[Iraq](#) is also reaching a tipping point. The enterprise of building a democratic, nonsectarian state, I think, at this point, has failed. In fact, sectarianism is on the rise. Authoritarianism is on the rise as well. Prime Minister [Maliki](#), in some ways, is turning into a Shiite Islamist autocrat. When you add to that what's happening in Syria and the fears that the Shiites have that if Syria were to fall into Sunni hands, they would be the next target, and when you add to that the fact that many countries in the Gulf, the Sunni Arab Gulf countries, like Saudi Arabia, like the United Arab Emirates, have never digested, never accepted the reality of a Shiite-dominated Iraq—it's something they simply cannot stomach—if you put that together, you see that Iraq itself is going to be in the eye of the storm.

All of what I just mentioned interacts very closely with all of the domestic dynamics that I described. For example, if Iran were to feel that it was losing its ally in Syria because of the domestic situation in Syria, it might decide perhaps to inflame things on the Lebanese-Israeli border or between the Palestinians and the Israelis. It may try to do something to expand the conflict in order to change the narrative from one in which it has lost an ally to one in which the fight is between the forces allied with Israel and the forces opposed to it.

When you look at the behavior of Saudi Arabia or Qatar, which are investing deeply in what's happening in Syria, it has very little to do with democracy or bringing about a secular democratic, pluralistic regime in Syria. Just look at their own regimes. That's not what this is about. For them, this is a battle for the regional balance of power. They, too, will intervene in Syria with Iran in mind much more so than with the Syrian people in mind.

Everything will play out. If there's more tension on the nuclear front, Iran may seek to flex its muscles elsewhere, perhaps in Bahrain, perhaps in Yemen. Again, as I said, if the Syrian regime begins to collapse, who knows what President Assad will do? We have already seen what they have done to the [Turkish aircraft](#). They may do something else, again, to change the narrative—and because this is a regime that will never sink alone, it will bring everyone else with it if it can.

Of course, there's the unfinished business of the United States—so many questions that have been left unanswered, so much that we have decided that we will not answer and that we have had the luxury not to answer. On the question of intervention in Syria, we have been able to do both things, both to say that we support the [Annan plan](#) and that we're prepared to work diplomatically and to see whether it's going to succeed, but also working to strengthen the opposition and working with countries that are arming the opposition, and not deciding today whether we can make that choice between two options that, I confess, are extremely dangerous, both of them.

But at some point the choice has to be made between doing very little or nothing, in which case this conflict will continue, will become more sectarian, will become more polarized, in which Islamists will play a bigger role on the side of the opposition, in which you are likely to see more sectarian massacres on one side than the

other—but it is a choice. It's a choice that one can make and decide this is not a conflict, as a number of foreign policy analysts have said, in which we should get involved.

Suppose we get involved and it doesn't change anything and there's a further massacre? Does that mean that we have to get more deeply involved and overthrow the regime? Or suppose we get involved and our allies perpetrate a sectarian massacre of their own? What do we then do to protect those who are harmed?

I understand that there is choice about doing nothing. There's also harm in intervening broadly. I just outlined some of the harms. You can intervene broadly, but then you have to decide what will happen if Iran gets involved, what will happen if [Hezbollah](#) gets involved, what happens if it becomes a regional proxy war? At what point do we stop? Do we know what the exit looks like? Do we know how we will get out of another war? When President [Obama](#) has committed himself to ending two, does he really want to start a third?

But we don't have the luxury of not choosing for much longer. If we don't do anything—and I'll be honest, I believe that the risks of intervention are very high, so I sympathize with the instinct of not wanting to intervene—but if we don't do anything now, within a month, two months, perhaps six months, as I said earlier, intervention won't even be possible because it will be an all-out civil war. And whose side will we intervene on if the Sunnis are also guilty of massacres against Alawites?

So it is a choice we have to make, and we may not have the luxury of waiting.

We may not have the luxury of waiting on Iran either. We have been pursuing a dual-track policy of engagement and sanctions, of reaching out and of putting pressure. My own view is that those are two strategies that are at war with one another. You can't really do both. You can't tell the Iranians, at the same time, we want a better relationship—oh, but, by the way, we're trying to do everything to undermine you. In the Iranians' mind—and we have to understand it—it means that we are seeking regime change, and it won't be satisfied if they make a concession on the nuclear front.

It's a difficult choice as well, because if you don't pressure, then perhaps you are sending the message to the Iranians that they can get away with what they are doing. But if we pressure the way we had—if we conduct diplomacy the way the P5+1 appeared to have conducted it in Istanbul and Baghdad and Moscow—then there will not be an agreement. And if there's not an agreement, there will be choices to be made as well. Are we prepared to watch Iran continue its nuclear program or are we going to take the extraordinarily dangerous action, in my view, of intervening?

There are other choices we're going to have to make as well between liberalism and democracy. So far we have supported the uprisings in the Middle East on the very Western notion that where there's revolution, it will tend to be secular, it will tend to be liberal, it will tend to be pro-Western. It may not be the case.

As my colleague [Hussein Agha](#) and I [wrote](#) last September—and when I reread it, it's almost scary to see how things haven't changed—revolutions often don't end up benefiting those who started them. We know the saying, "Revolutions devour their children." As we wrote in the piece, the spoils go to the more resolute, the more determined, those who fought the longest. And they are not the young people who protest in Tahrir Square.

That's why those in Egypt who will prevail will be either the military or the Islamists, at least for the time being. This is not a prediction for the long term. I'm talking about choices that have to be now. What will the United States do if, in fact, in Tunisia or in Libya or in Egypt decisions are made by those in power that strike us as profoundly illiberal, even though they are democratic because they reflect the views of the majority of the people?

Then, of course, that eternally unfinished business of the conflict between interests and values, and the question of double standards. Double standards happen all the time. I'm sure everyone in this room has applied double standards. I do it all the time to everyone I deal with. But double standards are costly when you place yourself on a moral plane, which is what the United States has done, which is what President Obama—one can laud him for it, but he has placed himself on a moral plane. He wants to be on the right side of history. He wants to be on the side of those who are protesting. Once you place yourself on a moral plane, you can't have a double standard or you lose credibility in those places where your interests come first.

But you actually also lose credibility in the places where you pretend your values come first, because those who benefit from that position then see it for what it is—just an opportunistic choice in one place where siding with the revolution has made most sense. In Bahrain it makes less sense, so we're not siding with the Shiites who are protesting. In Bahrain we may be able to get away with it, perhaps. But that choice will become difficult if those dogs that I claim haven't barked do start barking.

What will we do if there's a popular uprising that threatens the monarchy in Jordan, a [monarchy](#) with which we have been very closely allied, and, if it were to be toppled, could threaten our interests in the region, could threaten Israeli interests? What will our position be then?

What will our position be if there's an uprising in Saudi Arabia, threatening our oil interests and threatening what remains—what very little remains—of the architecture of U.S. Middle East policy since the [Second World War](#)?

Of course, what will U.S. policy be if an uprising were to break out in Palestine, a peaceful uprising, that challenged, not their own leadership—which may well happen, both in the West Bank and Gaza, leaderships that are quite unpopular—but what if they challenge the occupation through peaceful means, peaceful demonstrations, demonstrations that have everything in common with what happened in Egypt or what happened in Tunisia or what happened elsewhere? What will Israel's reaction be, and what will Washington's reaction be to Jerusalem's reaction?

Those are the questions, I say, of the unfinished business of U.S. foreign policy that we won't be able to get away with for much, much longer.

If there's a lesson to be drawn from this—and I'm sorry, there's not a very clear one, because everything is so confused—I think the main lesson is that everything is so confused, and we should avoid drawing the quick conclusions that people drew at the very beginning, as I referred to, those who wanted to project their own paradigm on events that were taking place far away, that were taking place in a region of the world that—for very good reason, I might add—has developed a sense of alienation and antagonism and hostility towards the West.

When one hears of conspiracy theories in the Middle East and one wonders why they subscribe to them, there's a very good reason. They have been victim of conspiracy after conspiracy, in the 18th century, in the 19th century, and in the 20th century, and perhaps before that. So there is no reason to be surprised that they believe that way, even when no conspiracy is at play. But that means that we can't project our assumptions and view the revolution and believe that it is a revolution that is corresponding to our values, which we then claim to be universal values.

There is confusion in ways that I think are going to challenge everything we like to think. Take a few examples. Saudi Arabia, our ally Saudi Arabia, a very religious regime, an autocratic religious regime—in fact, one of the most autocratic religious regimes in the area—but our ally, which sided, paradoxically, with the secular candidate in the second round of the presidential elections in Egypt, the military against the Islamists, the Muslim Brotherhood, but sides with the more extreme Islamists, the Salafis, against the Muslim Brothers. How does one make sense of that?

How does one make sense of an organization like [Hamas](#), which has been our foe, which we have put on our list of terrorist actors, but which is allied today with our allies in Saudi Arabia and in Qatar and Turkey? Forget about Saudi Arabia, but Qatar, Turkey—allied with them in a vision of Syria as a regime that is going to have to go—they may not have said that explicitly, but privately they are quite clear about it—and, of course, remains strongly—and that's a euphemism—hostile to Israel. What are we to make of them?

What are we to make of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which is reaching out to us, which will perhaps, by taking power and agreeing to subscribe to all past agreements—therefore, implicitly to recognize Israel—but continue to support Hamas and continue to say things which we are going to find, and Israel even more so, extremely difficult to accept?

We have always had a tendency to try to simplify and to try to project and to look at axes as the militant and as the moderate, as the pro-Western and as the anti-Western, and it has always been more complicated than that. But that complexity has never been clearer than today; that confusion has never been clearer than today. I think it really means that the unfinished business of making sense of what our interests are, what we actually value above all else in the region, what we are really pursuing - those questions are going to have to be answered.

I'm not sure if this was exclusively Arab or not. I'm quite sure that it wasn't really a spring. I'm not even sure what business we're talking about, if it is revolution or restoration. One thing I am sure of is that it's unfinished, very unfinished, and we should all fasten our seatbelts.

Thank you.

## Questions and Answers

**QUESTION:** Tova Usdan.

Do you have any glimmer of hope?

**ROBERT MALLEY:** I'm trying to paint a relatively short- to medium-term picture. Again, let's not sit here—not us, but people who are trying to project—and assume that they know what this trajectory looks like. I think at this point it's a trajectory that is very unfamiliar to what people expected at the beginning. I can say, when Hussein and I wrote the article almost a year ago, many people accused us of being overly pessimistic.

Our point was not to be optimistic or pessimistic, but to paint a picture of what the forces were, what the forces were that actually had resonance within their own societies. You can't expect, after decades and decades of not

being in existence, that the forces that we like, that we feel familiar with, that speak our language, that seem to use our technology, are suddenly going to have resonance within their own societies.

I was struck during the Egyptian elections—the polls seemed to indicate one thing. It always surprised me, because one thing that those polls didn't seem to take into account was the deep-rootedness of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the polls, the presidential candidate, I think, sometimes hovered around 3 to 5 percent only a few weeks before the elections. I think we have to understand that, for better or for worse—maybe we have to also be less alarmist about some of these developments—it's not going to be what we expect. It's not going to be the familiar.

We have this other tendency—it's the same tendency—of choosing to side generally with those who speak our language and who act the way we do, and by helping them—we think we do—we often do nothing more than undermine them. That was true in Lebanon, with [March 14](#). That was true in Palestine, with some of the anti-Hamas [Fatah](#) forces. It was true in Iraq. In none of these places—we assumed, because they are like us, because they accepted our help, because we were helping them, they are going to prevail.

There are no two more prevalent myths than the one I'm going to say now about the U.S. policy: that those we help will prevail, which time and again is proved wrong, and that those we help and who do prevail will behave the way they did before they prevailed in the same way after they prevail. Just think of Maliki and think of [Karzai](#) and think of probably anyone else. Think of Libya tomorrow. Let's place a wager on Libya. In virtually all those cases, if they do prevail, they go back to their roots, because ultimately they are political leaders who have to be in tune with their own societies.

**QUESTION:** Tyler Beebe.

Two questions about Egypt. One, I understand that Mr. Morsi really will not have as much power as perhaps one might have presumed, based on his victory. Number two, to what extent will he promote Sharia law, in your opinion, if at all?

**ROBERT MALLEY:** On your first question, I think there has been a tug of war between the military and the Muslim Brotherhood, like a game of chess. I don't think either one wants a real confrontation, that either one is going to go for the kill. They are both deeply conservative institutions. The Muslim Brotherhood has in its memory not just what happened to its own organization in the 1950s, when Nasser went after them, but also what happened in Algeria in the 1990s, when Islamists, who were about to come to power, were victims of horrendous violence, and by the end of a [civil war](#) where Islamists were equally guilty, about 100,000 people died. They don't want to replicate what happened in Gaza, where perhaps Hamas went too far and then was the object of a boycott.

They want to be able to govern. It means they are going to have to respect, to some extent, the SCAF's prerogatives. Who knows what happened when Morsi was declared the victor after so much hesitation? My own hypothesis—and I could be proven wrong very quickly—is that SCAF wasn't sure. I think they toyed very much with the notion that Shafiq would be declared the victor. I didn't count the ballots, so I don't know who won, but I think they toyed with it. They saw what the Muslim Brotherhood could bring to the streets. They saw the reaction in the Western capitals that were showing quite a bit of anxiety about the notion of Shafiq being declared the victor. So they stepped back.

But in the meantime, they had taken steps, as you say, to deprive the president of key powers—the power to name the defense minister, some budgetary power—made sure that they would have a hand in the writing of the constitution, dissolved Parliament and given to themselves all legislative powers, formed a national security council of sorts that was very heavily dominated by military folks. So they had taken those preemptive steps.

The question now is, will the Muslim Brotherhood accept them or not? My guess at this point is, given the nature of the Muslim Brotherhood, they don't want to lose a presidency that they have just acquired, the first elected Islamist president ever, perhaps, or certainly in modern Arab history. They don't want to give that up. My guess is they are going to accept, up to a certain point, allowing the SCAF to retain its privileges, its prerogatives. But it's going to want to acquire a bit more to make sure they are not simply a president in name only. I think that's how the war will continue.

A lot of Egyptians predict, and many of the revolutionaries fear, that there is going to be an understanding between the two. The SCAF will say, "We need to retain our privileges, economic privileges. We need to retain monopoly over decisions having to do with war and peace and all military matters, military nominations. We'll leave to you cultural, economic, social matters. And let's see if we can reach an understanding that way."

It might work. Obviously, the people who are going to be left out are the very people who began the revolution. That's why, as I said, there's a lot of suspicion among the revolutionaries who made that joke about Tahrir Square, because they see the Islamists as fair-weather revolutionaries, and as soon as the weather turns, they'll go back to the way they were.



On your other question, just quickly, it doesn't really mean much—many countries, including some we are very close to, have Sharia law. What matters is the application. My sense—again, I think it's a short-term sense—is that the Muslim Brotherhood doesn't want to provoke secular parts of the society, doesn't want to provoke the Coptic Christians. It doesn't want to scare away tourists and foreign investment. So I think they are going to be relatively calm and moderate about that.

As time goes by, if they are subjected to pressure by the Salafists, who have a pretty strong electoral base, or if they are failing in their economic attempts, then they may be tempted to play to their base on social and religious issues. Then you might see things happening that are going to be, as I say, more illiberal in nature and they are going to create more of a dilemma for us, but also for the Egyptians themselves.

If they could succeed by being more moderate, I think that's what they would do for the time being. But over time, my sense is, given the depth of the economic challenges—and these are economic challenges of such magnitude that you would need the kind of unity that our own country can't produce, let alone a country that is as polarized as Egypt—my sense is they will fail economically. Then will they be able to resist being more extreme in terms of their religious agenda, in terms of their foreign policy agenda? I think that's going to be the big question.

**QUESTION:** Abdullah Alsaïdi, from the International Peace Institute.

Rob, I only came to your assistance to dispel some of the pessimism, which is spreading here. I am not pessimistic like you. I know transitions are turbulent and very violent. When you transit from a social order to another, as you wrote in your September article, which I read, the old elites will never surrender peacefully power. They will resist. Therefore, transitions are very violent.

But the heart of the matter is democracy in all of these things. I wager on the young people who are hooked to the social media, who are better educated than in the past. Here I would like to just remind you of [Mazzini](#) in 1848, in Europe, when he said that a revolution never dies, irrespective of the reversals, because it sparked, never died. The democracy element remained.

In our part of the world, the transition will be extremely difficult. Why? Because the geography is not hospitable to democracy. There will be a lot of difficulties. You cited some of them. They are not receptive to democracy. There is a feeling now that revolution is unfolding, but there is already a counterrevolution in the process.

But again, I wager on the youth, on the educated people, who are going to push for democracy. In my view, it's better to allow the Muslim Brotherhood to take over, not because I think they will be glorious and a shining path in governance, but that is how they are going to be reversed. They will never recede by military means. They will try their luck. And they have lost since the beginning of the uprising.

Finally, I want to say—again, this is to cheer up the crowd here—I think that what has happened in Egypt in the last few days is a defeat to an infamous Egyptian, [Zawahiri](#), the al-Qaeda elements. The al-Qaeda logic of changing regimes by force is defeated in the last election in Egypt. Remember, Zawahiri is from Egypt, and he probably knows the Morsi family. What happened in Egypt is a defeat of the logic of al-Qaeda and violence. In that sense, I'm much more optimistic than you are.

**ROBERT MALLEY:** I'm glad you are. I said my pessimism, if that's what it's called—this picture is a snapshot of where we are now. You are talking about the longer term. And I agree, I think longer-term—who knows? The revolution may take over from the counterrevolution. I absolutely agree that the best way to see that that happen is to let them govern. The biggest mistake people made in Algeria and in Gaza was to prevent them from governing, which maintains at least the belief that they could succeed. If they succeed, all the better. If they fail, then they will be replaced.

So I don't think we disagree. I think we have a different time horizon.

I also have a comment about youth. I hear this all the time. Youth is not an ideology. Youth is a category. Youth is a state of being that sooner or later, for better or for worse, we all outgrow. And that will be true as well in these societies. I think there are forces, social forces, in these societies that have a sense of citizenship. That's what's missing, a sense of citizenship, a sense of pluralism.

I don't know if this is a plus or a minus, but one thing that's very important that these uprisings did is that they brought to the surface a number of conflicts that had been hidden, that had been both manipulated and concealed by regimes, and that played with them. In each one of them, we're seeing them come to the fore. They were always there, but now we're seeing them express themselves, whether it's the reality of—and this is perhaps too strong a word—a quasi-apartheid system in Bahrain, whether it's the reality in Tunisia of an authoritarian secular system that tried to impose itself on a society that, at core, was religious and conservative. That conflict still exists, but it's now in the open.

The myriad conflicts in Egypt between Coptics and Muslims, between military and civilians, between secular and

Islamists—all those conflicts—if you went to Egypt in the last few years, they love to present themselves as a very consensual society. They weren't. They had all these conflicts that they tried to conceal and that the regime would manipulate when it had to exacerbate or manage in other instances.

As you say, these conflicts are going to have to play out. One of the benefits of these uprisings is that now the emperor is naked. We have to confront these conflicts. How they are going to be resolved, at least in the short to medium term? I don't know. I think we're going to see a lot of what people prayed they wouldn't see when these began 18 months ago.

**QUESTION:** Thanassis Cambanis from *The Boston Globe*.

I'm just curious what leverage you think America has in this entire matter at this point and whether we have any influence whatsoever on the outcome in any of the places you talked about. If so, what can we do?

**ROBERT MALLEY:** We have some influence. Obviously, the amount of money that we give to Egypt every year, I think, has played a role. I wouldn't exaggerate it and I wouldn't exaggerate the role of the bully pulpit. A lot of people felt—and I heard this from people in the [administration](#)—that when the president, on the 18th of August a year ago, [said](#) President Bashar must go, somehow that would have a dramatic impact. I don't know why the expression of a preference by the U.S president would have any impact on the views of those in power, the old regime, the people who are holding on to power in Syria or elsewhere.

I think we tend to exaggerate, overemphasize the role we have, and particularly because, as I said earlier, this comes against a backdrop, as you know well, of deep, deep, deep suspicion of the West, for good reason, as I said. So what comes out of the mouth of any Western leader is viewed, at best, as an attempt to make up for past sins, not as a great moral victory or a great moral statement. As I said, the double standards that exist, whether it's Bahrain, whether it's Israel-Palestine—whether we like it or not, that is a prism through which many Arabs view us, view the West, view the United States. It's hard for them to view moral statements by the United States as what we want them to take them as.

I think there is some leverage, but I would say don't overestimate it. Don't ignore the profound possibility of a boomerang effect, which Egyptians know how to use so well. The SCAF, when the United States tried to intervene, played the xenophobic card extremely well. Egyptians from all parts of the political spectrum rallied around the SCAF—for example, on the [NGO issue](#).

For those of you who might not be familiar with it, there was a preposterous case against NGOs operating in Egypt. There may have been some legitimacy, but, at bottom, the way they were treated was quite outlandish. Even though you could have viewed the fight as one between civil society and the military regime, a large number of Egyptians, including the Islamists, some of whom were revolutionaries, took the side of the regime against the NGOs because they viewed it through the prism of domestic versus foreign.

So I think we have to be mindful of how easy it is for what we do to boomerang. My own view is that we have little leverage. It doesn't mean that we shouldn't make clear what our principles are and stick to them and have statements, as I like to say, that can survive both space and time travel—we shouldn't say one thing that applies today and then say something different tomorrow or one thing that applies in Syria or Libya, but doesn't apply in Bahrain. We have to have a certain level of consistency if we want our moral message—and that's what we seem to want—to resonate. But I think we have to be quite modest in what we can expect from our leverage.

**QUESTION:** Thank you so much for that marvelous exposition. It was both succinct and profound, which is quite a trick, actually.

My name is Ann Phillips. I'm on the board of the International Peace Institute, where we're fortunate to have the optimist Ambassador Alsaïdi.

I want to go back to Egypt also. What happened in Tahrir Square was a momentous event. It was spellbinding, not only for the people of the region, but all around the world people were fixed and watching the TV sets to see what was happening. There was an excitement about it.

Yet I'm bewildered and baffled by the fact that only about 38 percent of the Egyptian population voted. How do you explain that? And the same amount, maybe maximum 40 percent, for the Parliament. It's such an exciting event in their world, one would think that there would certainly have been more people participating.

**ROBERT MALLEY:** First, it's not what you were saying, but I do want to add it, in terms of the conflicts that Egypt has to come to terms with. For those of you who have traveled there, particularly women who have traveled there, it is a conflict they are going to have to come to terms with. It's the problem of gender relations in Egypt. International Crisis Group has an employee in Egypt who is a woman. She has traveled throughout the region. She said there's no country that she has traveled to—she hasn't been to Saudi Arabia—of all the countries she has traveled to, she has never seen it as bad as in Egypt. I think that's something that Egypt is going to have to come

to terms with.

But that's beside your question.

I think the numbers were a bit higher than the numbers you said, but they certainly were not the 70 percent that one might expect at a time of—I think, again, it's one of those factors that, coming from here, people had maybe a harder time realizing the extent to which people were just tired. Their economy was in ruins. There were protests every day. The tourists weren't coming, foreign investment. I think this whole political affair for many people was distant, alien, and destructive. So I think many people said, "Let's just get over with this. We just want the end of the uncertainty."

I don't have scientific proof. It's just the people who I would speak to on the street, who seemed to feel that—Tahrir Square, we're going to have one more demonstration and the elections and all the fights that come with the elections. I think there's a fatigue factor that accounts, to some extent, for the people who don't vote. But equally surprising is that 50 percent of those who voted, plus or minus, voted for Shafiq. Who would have thought 18 months ago that the candidate who was the last prime minister of Mubarak, who was prime minister during that infamous camel attack episode, would get roughly the same amount as his opponent?

As I said, it says those who didn't vote were tired and a lot of those who voted were tired, too, and just said, "We have a sense of nostalgia. Mubarak may not have been great. The old regime may not have been great. But at least we knew when we woke up we could go to our businesses, we could sell our goods, we would get bread at a certain price."

Today that uncertainty, that sense of a world that has been lost I think is weighing heavily, and it accounts both for the sense of alienation from politics and the attraction of a candidate like Ahmed Shafiq.

**QUESTION:** Ron Berenbeim.

Just building on the comments of two previous speakers, and a question; revolutions always take a long time. [Henry Kissinger](#) and [Zhou Enlai](#) were having a conversation about the [French Revolution](#) and Kissinger asked Zhou Enlai, "What do you think of the French Revolution?" This was in 1971.

Zhou Enlai said, "It's too early to tell."

And it is way too early to tell about any of this stuff.

Keeping that in mind, can you give us three or four basic principles about what the United States should do to protect its vital interests, bearing in mind the kinds of limitations that you mentioned in response to a previous question?

**ROBERT MALLEY:** I think I may repeat myself. There are some things that the United States is going to continue to defend, whether it's access to oil, whether it's its relationship with Israel, whether it's counterterrorism. I'll put those to the side.

In terms of what's happening, I think the principle I said earlier, which is to have a set of principles—and I think we know what they are, non-use of violence against civilian protestors, pluralism, the will of citizens—and apply them—it doesn't mean that you break relations with a country that doesn't respect them. It doesn't mean that you go to war with every country that doesn't respect them. But it means that those are the principles according to which you are going to judge situations.

You don't have to comment day by day, as I think the administration has tended to do. So it gives this impression that one day Mubarak is firmly in power, the next day maybe he should reform and give power to his vice president, to General [Suleiman](#), the third day he should go, and the fourth day he should go now, which meant go yesterday.

It gives a sense that you are putting your finger up and checking where the wind is blowing. I think we have to have pretty clear principles.

The harder case—and maybe that's what your question is going to—is the question of intervention. It existed in [Libya](#). Libya is not a happy story. It's not necessarily yet a sad story. It's not one where you can look back and say that the intervention was a bad or necessarily the greatest idea.

Syria is going to create a much bigger dilemma, and others may. There we have to have clear principles of, if we intervene, what it is we actually want. I think one of the reasons why the administration, even though it has toyed with various ideas, has not yet intervened in Syria—and I sympathize with it—it doesn't know how its intervention will yield an outcome that will be beneficial to its interests. It doesn't mean that it doesn't support the opposition in all kinds of ways. But when you have to make a decision to intervene militarily, I have yet to hear a plan—and maybe one exists—that says, here's how you intervene, here's what you get out of it, here's how you avoid the

most detrimental outcomes, and here's how you get the outcome that you actually want.

I think that has to be a principle that we have to bear in mind, which is this weighing of our national interests and what we actually could accomplish by intervening.

But the main one, as I said—I would repeat the two things I said earlier: A, consistency in certain positions; and B, divorcing from those twin myths that those we help come to power and that those we help and who come to power behave the same way after they come to power as they did before.

I think if we bear those lessons in mind, we'll be a bit more modest, more humble in the way we intervene, and not always think that what happens in the region has to involve the United States—some of the better things that have happened in the region have happened in spite of us, not because of us—and, of course, as I said, try to tie those loose ends, those loose ends about what we actually believe in:

- For the future of Israel-Palestine: Do we want to manage the conflict, as sometimes we seem to do, or do we want to resolve it?
- For the future of the Iranian nuclear program: Do we truly believe that we would go to war to stop them if they are going to get a nuclear program or can we live with some form of containment, even though President Obama has taken that off the table?
- In the case of our interests and our values: Are we prepared to be as consistent when we're loud about certain countries? Bear in mind today what we would do if tomorrow Saudi Arabia or Jordan or Palestine erupted, and not find ourselves defending positions today that are going to be completely contradicted by the positions that we take tomorrow.

**JOANNE MYERS:** Sometimes unfinished business is a good thing, because that means you have to come back and finish your talk.

**ROBERT MALLEY:** With pleasure.

**JOANNE MYERS:** I would like to thank you all for participating during this year and wish you all a very good summer.

[Robert Malley](#)

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