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**The Current Political Crisis in the Middle East:  
Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy**

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# Introduction

**K.S. Nathan**

Head, Centre for American Studies (KAMERA), IKON, UKM;  
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President, Malaysian Association for American Studies (MAAS)

The broad field of “American Studies” as commonly understood, encompasses essentially the study of the United States, its history, politics, culture, literature, institutions, society, economy, foreign policy as well as its role in the global political economy. As the subject of this seminar falls very much within the ambit of American Studies, allow me to say a few words about the Centre for American Studies, also known by the Malay acronym KAMERA (meaning Pusat Kajian Amerika). KAMERA was established in the Institute of Occidental Studies (IKON) with my appointment as its Founding Head on 1st April 2007, and was officially launched on 11<sup>th</sup> May 2009. KAMERA’s rationale includes understanding fully and as objectively as possible, the forces and trends generated by Globalization and increasing interdependence, which requires an effort by all countries including Malaysia to address and respond positively to multi-cultural phenomena. In the process, KAMERA in IKON hopes to contribute towards the advancement of UKM’s key niche areas of research including **national identity and nation-building, cultural diversity and globalization**. Thus, the American Studies Centre was established to promote Malaysia’s national interests, including serving as a hub for the region and outside by offering a solid program that will attract local and foreign students.

KAMERA’S academic and professional activities include (a) Research & Publications, (b) Conferences & Seminars, (c) Teaching, and (d) Public Advocacy. The Public Advocacy Program (NICE) has the following objectives:- **Network** closely with Malaysian and American organizations with similar interests; **Invite** Malaysian and American academics, business and media professionals, diplomats etc. under KAMERA’s PUBLIC LECTURE SERIES; **Conduct** courses for diplomats (joint program with Institute of Diplomacy & Foreign Relations (IDFR)); and **Engage** Malaysian Government Officials and Ministries that have a direct interest in matters related to the United States, and also engage the American Business Community in Malaysia.

Now let me turn to the purpose of our meeting this evening. Of late, we have been observing some phenomenal developments in the Middle East -- events, rather quite

unexpected, unfolding before our very eyes with potentially huge consequences for the internal character of political systems and regional security. The so-called “Arab Spring” began with a 26 year-old Tunisian fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi immolating himself in desperation on 17 December 2010 after being harassed by the authorities for not having a legal permit to sell his wares on the street. His singular act of self-sacrifice, ostensibly to expose the excesses of the Tunisian regime, led swiftly to its downfall in the wake of mass pro-democracy demonstrations. The “Tunisian Wave” quickly engulfed other neighbouring Arab countries. Egypt felt the brunt of this new “push” for democracy, and the 42-year old dictatorship of President Hosni Mubarak was ended by the president’s resignation on 11<sup>th</sup> February 2011. However, while Mubarak has gone, the big question remains: How would the pro-Mubarak military, the dominant political institution of Egypt, adapt to the rising demands for democracy, good governance, end to widespread and debilitating corruption, and improvement in the livelihood of ordinary Egyptians? To be sure, such questions are more easily raised than answered. Evidently, several factors could be at play as to why there has been a sudden implosion of emotion and demands for political reform including regime change, not the least of which is the whole issue of governance and the apparent growing disconnect between the governors and the governed.

On the foreign policy front, what implications do such pro-democracy trends and political transformations have for American foreign policy? Is America’s interest better served by adopting the principle of non-interference, or should the United States play a role in facilitating the transition to democracy? This is a challenge full of hope as well as uncertainty. Would the “Arab Spring” spread to other parts of the Arab World beyond Tunisia and Egypt? What would be the trajectory and how would incumbent regimes respond? Is there a cultural foundation in the Arab World for the kind of Jeffersonian democracy that Americans have been nurtured since the Declaration of Independence on 4<sup>th</sup> July 1776? Even if modifications are necessary to account for region-specific and country-specific cultural, social, political and economic conditions, is there a common perception (by both Americans and Arabs) on democratic systems of governance for the Middle East? Indeed, these are the dilemmas confronting U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East (and probably elsewhere in the non-Western world) on the nature of American engagement in the region to promote the common good.

The first paper by **Sean Foley** argues that the U.S. strategic position is better in spring 2011 than it was at the end of 2010. The peaceful protestors in Egypt and elsewhere

eviscerated the core argument of Al-Qaeda i.e. that extremist Islam and terrorism were the only way for Arabs to free themselves of autocratic governments and regain their dignity. Iran's position has also been weakened by the Arab democratic political movements. Although Bahrain and Tunisia demonstrate the dangers of a regional dynamic in which U.S. power can have limited direct influence, Washington should not lose sight of America's cultural influence in the region. In the long run, that cultural or soft power may prove to be longer lasting and more capable of producing better results for America than traditional diplomatic tools. It is now up to American diplomats to harness their nation's cultural power in the Middle East to secure a better future for both America and the rest of the world.

In the second paper, **James Wong Wing On** observes that the upheavals in the Middle East since January 2011 interestingly have revealed *inter alia* the reality that the Palestine-Israel issue is only one of the many problems in the region. The other major problems that have contributed to the outbreak of the upheavals include: (a) The wide gap between rich elites and poor masses within the countries in the region, and this is highlighted by the fact that the unemployment rate in oil-rich Saudi Arabia was about 10% at the end of 2010; (b) The unfulfilled aspirations of a large number of youths who now form the vanguards of the street protests for change of the status quo; (c) The deep sectarian divide between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims; (d) The marginalization or even institutional oppression of women who have now decided to participate actively on the streets for political change, especially in Bahrain; and (e) The inter-state distrust and rivalry as noticeable in Saudi Arabia-Iran relations. Taking a holistic view, it would appear to be inappropriate to blame the United States for all the woes in the Middle Eastern and North African societies. Seen in the larger context, he concludes that the causes that have triggered the upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa are domestic and not external and that the U.S. engagement in the region can continue to provide a certain degree of security guarantee against the forces of militant and/or extremist Islam that could halt or even reverse the march of modernity in the regional societies.

The third paper by **Brian D. McFeeters** outlines the existing conditions before the current crisis erupted. He cites U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's speech at "Forum for the Future" seminar held in Doha in January 2011: "... one of the problems about the Middle East and North Africa is that this region of the world did not grow and prosper during the last 50 years, when all of the rest of the world did...[I]n many of the countries there was further and deeper poverty, and there was no real effort to chart a course of development that would

move people upward on the scale of accomplishment, educational attainment, and the like....So you're looking at a part of the world that the Arab Development Reports started saying in 2002 was really being left out...So it's been a long time coming. The frustration has now come through very loudly and clearly". McFeeters explained that the U.S. government tried, but without much success, to balance the maintenance of stable relationships with governments in the Middle East with the need for reform. He concludes that in terms of the individual countries in the region, it is important to note that the U.S. Government calls for peaceful dialogue everywhere and abhors violence against citizens. In Libya, the United States joined a broad international coalition, including the Arab League, in supporting UN Security Council Resolution 1973 to protect Libyan civilians.

The fourth paper by **Wahabuddin Ra'ees** claims that the Middle East is experiencing a democratic wave that is both unprecedented and untraditional. It is home grown and suggestive of the Arab empowerment and revival of confidence. The people across the Arab World have broken borders of fear to demand civil liberties, greater freedom and emancipation from the ruling authoritarian regimes in the region. Corrupt, oppressive and extra-judicial practices of the regimes in the Middle East inspired millions of people to peacefully march on the streets in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Jordan and Syria. The constructive approach the U.S. could adopt entails ensuring that the emerging democratic states in the Middle East are inclusive and engage all segments of society—the secularists, the nationalists and the Islamists—and integrate them into the democratic process. It would serve America's long-term interests to ensure that these states are committed to the development of an open and viable civil society. Evidently, the American model of democracy seems to be appealing to the reformists and revolutionaries in the emerging democracies in the Middle East region. Nevertheless, Wahabuddin cautions that it would of course be premature to forecast the exact course of political development in that region—whether it would pursue a democratic course, revert to authoritarianism, or produce hybrid political systems that characterize other parts of the Developing World.

It is hoped that this publication will contribute, even if in a small way, towards a better and informed understanding of political developments in the Middle East—a region whose rich religious and cultural tradition coupled with the abundant presence of oil direly needed by the industrialized world has become the focus of world attention in the wake of the 'Arab Spring' engendering in the process the prospect of social change and progress for the larger citizenry. The four essays, besides analyzing the unfolding scenario, attempt also to



address the issue of how best the United States should deal with this regional transformation, and the urgency for Washington in adopting strategies of engagement that promote mutual interests, societal security as well as regional stability.

# **I. The Paradox of American Power in the Middle East: America and the 2011 Arab Awakening**

**Sean Foley**

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In 1935 Lieutenant-Colonel Hodgen, the British political agent for Kuwait, wrote to the British foreign office about a new and popular form of communication in Kuwait and the other Arab monarchies along the coast of the Persian Gulf: Arabic radio broadcasts emanating from Egypt. He observed that the new form of communication is not only significant but also contains very great possibilities for both good and harm. His warnings proved to be prophetic. In the 1950s, Egyptian radio broadcasts in Arabic helped to inspire a new generation of young activists and military officers to challenge Arab autocratic regimes allied with the West from North Africa to the Persian Gulf.

Those upheavals provide a useful framework for understanding the events that have reshaped the Arab world in recent months and the challenges that they present to U.S. diplomacy in the Middle East in the early decades of the twenty-first century. Just as in the 1950s, political events in 2011 were unprecedented, led by a new generation of political activists, and caught Washington by surprise. But there was a key difference: the traditional tools of twentieth-century U.S. diplomacy often have had little or unexpected impact on events—even as millions of Arabs demanded a new order consistent with U.S. values. For Washington, the changes have created a paradox: as U.S. “hard” power recedes in the Middle East, the nation’s soft power has reached unprecedented heights. How well U.S. policy makers adapt to this paradox will shape the nation’s fortunes in the Middle East for many years to come.

Few factors were more important to events in 2011 in the Arab world (and to U.S. policy there) than the telecommunication revolution that began in the 1990s. It undermined the ability of Arab governments to manage the flow of information and gave young people new freedom to choose what to believe, to associate with communities who shared their beliefs, and to act. Within this new environment, bloggers and poets alike pushed the “order” in their societies, whether on the internet or in literature. They sought to create an

Arab society more like the one emerging in Turkey under the Justice and Development Party: a democratic and economically vibrant Muslim nation where neither Islam nor the West could be used to justify autocracy.

Starting in December 2010, millions of individuals from Morocco to Bahrain gained the confidence to demand political reform and create a society consistent with their dreams. Protestors challenged governments with massive demonstrations of millions of individuals. Nor did they burn U.S. flags or blame the West. They put the blame and responsibility for change at home: “al-sha'b yuridu isqat al-nizam” (“the people want to overthrow the order”). By using this slogan, Arab protestors sent a clear message: their leaders were symptoms of a larger problem -- it was the whole social order that had to change.

Few nations outside of the Middle East were more invested in the Arab *nizam* than the United States. Washington had difficulty determining how to use U.S. power. Should U.S. officials support demonstrators espousing American values and seeking Washington's support against Arab leaders who had opposed Al-Qaeda and Iran? The street protestors had already become aware that the opinion of U.S. officials could have unexpected and unintended consequences. For instance, the website Wikileaks' unauthorized release of U.S. diplomatic cables about Tunisia had helped to convince many Tunisians that Washington did not respect Tunisian President Ben Ali and his government and would not intervene to protect either in a political crisis. Ironically, that realization would play a powerful role in the Tunisian revolution.

American officials were also keenly aware that there were other actors driving events in the Arab world. One of the defining events of the Tunisian revolution, the video of the self-immolation of a fruit seller, might not have come to light had a reporting team from al-Jazeera not discovered it on Facebook. Al-Jazeera went on to pursue innovative and politically influential reporting in other Arab states experiencing protests. Their work earned them the hatred of Arab governments but praise from U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton -- a remarkable development for a network seen by many Americans as an ally of Osama Bin Laden.

Nor were Ms. Clinton or other U.S. officials able to control how Arabs used American social-networking and internet software. These platforms could be used for organizing protests as well as to swap information on avoiding tear gas, to secure interviews on international television networks, or to attend rallies in major Western cities. When internet networks were taken down, there were other ways to record and distribute

information: SD chips, thumb drives, CDs, miniature recording devices, and cell phone cameras. International television networks competed to broadcast these videos—even if they could not be independently verified.

Following the fall of Mubarak, U.S. diplomats seemingly gained a firmer footing. Their rhetoric became more consistent and, with their European counterparts, convinced members of the Arab League to endorse U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973 authorizing a no-fly zone to be established in one of its member states, Libya. Two Arab nations, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar dispatched combat aircraft to aid the no-fly zone and, along with Kuwait and Turkey, have been involved in the diplomacy to resolve the crisis in Libya. For the United States, which is still recovering from the aftermath of the invasions of two Muslim states (Afghanistan and Iraq), these developments are major accomplishments whose importance should not be diminished.

But that agreement may have come at a steep price, Bahrain. There, a Sunni monarchy faced enormous protests, mainly of Shi'a Bahrainis, demanding social and economic opportunities commensurate with their status as the island's largest religious group. They took over Manama's Pearl Square, deftly utilized videos of security forces brutalizing defenceless civilians, and staged rallies of 100,000 people, an enormous number for an island with a population of barely a million people.

At the same time, the demonstrations terrified Bahrain's government and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) -- an organization comprising the six Sunni Arab monarchies in the Persian Gulf region: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates. In the eyes of Saudi and other GCC leaders, the demonstrations had become a threat to the collective security of the GCC states and had to be dealt with firmly before Shi'a powers could gain a foothold in the region. Within hours of the approval of an Arab League resolution backing a no-fly zone in Libya, Bahrain invited GCC military forces to cross the causeway and to intervene directly on the island. With the aid of GCC military forces, the Bahraini security forces crushed the demonstrations and levelled the centre of the protests: Pearl Square.

Although the military intervention may have prevented the Bahraini monarchy from having to make historic concessions, its timing and brutality tarnished the GCC's reputation and raised communal tensions to a fever pitch. While Washington opposed the use of force in Bahrain and had called for peaceful dialogue on the island, the timing of the GCC intervention left U.S. officials open to the charge that they had traded Bahrain for Arab and

GCC support of the U.N. Security Council resolution on Libya. Even if the crackdown had occurred at another time, the U.S. naval base in Bahrain and Washington's close ties to the Bahraini ruling family guarantee that the U.S. government would be seen as complicit in any crackdown on the island.

By making these points, I am not suggesting that the U.S. government is complicit in the crackdown. There is no proof that the GCC agreed to support the intervention in Libya in exchange for U.S. silence on the intervention in Bahrain or that Washington contemplated making such a deal. But in a situation where image and individuals' conscious choice to embrace U.S. values are key factors in U.S. power, Arab and broader Muslim public opinion on these types of issues cannot be dismissed.

In conclusion, the U.S. strategic position is better in spring 2011 than it was at the end of 2010. The peaceful protestors in Egypt and elsewhere eviscerated the core arguments of Al-Qaeda long before Osama Bin Laden died in a firefight in Pakistan: extremist Islam and terrorism were the only way for Arabs to free themselves of autocratic governments and regain their dignity. Iran's position has also been weakened by the Arab democratic political movements. Although Bahrain and Tunisia demonstrate the dangers of a regional dynamic in which U.S. power can have limited direct influence, we should not lose sight of America's cultural influence in the region. In the long run, that cultural or soft power may prove to be longer lasting and more capable of producing better results for America than traditional diplomatic tools. It is now up to American diplomats to harness their nation's cultural power in the Middle East to secure a better future for both America and the rest of the world.