



# MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

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## THE UNITED STATES AND THE MIDDLE EAST IN 2013

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*MEI Visiting Research Professor Peter Sluglett was recently asked by Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to speak briefly on U.S. policy toward the Middle East in 2013 as well as Turkey's role as an emerging power.*

U.S. policy in the Middle East will most probably be governed by very much the same guidelines as it has been for some time, but its *intentions* may be overtaken by the swift pace of events on the ground. Despite the fact that the United States is likely going to be self-sufficient in fossil fuels in the next decade or so, the country's main concerns are and will remain to protect its own and its allies' oil interests, to promote its own version of "stability," and generally to protect Israel from the consequences of its obstinacy and folly. It may be that in his second term Mr. Obama will feel less constrained than he has in the past, and it is clear that he has relatively little sympathy with Mr.

Netanyahu. However, even the positive memories of the conversations Mr. Obama may once have had with Rashid Khalidi—the Columbia University, then University of Chicago, professor who writes critically on the question of Palestine—are probably not sufficient for him to be prepared to put real pressure on the Israeli government. As Jimmy Carter said recently in the context of Israel’s plan to build 3,000 new settlements, never before has an Israeli government so flagrantly disregarded clearly stated U.S. policies. Sadly, no major constituency in the United States has any real concern for the plight of the Palestinians, which essentially is why we are where we are on the Palestinian-Israeli front.

Egypt, as we know, is going through great turmoil. Former President Mubarak appointed many members of the current Egyptian judiciary—as he did many members of the “deep state”—so that to Mr. Morsi and many of his supporters they seem to represent dangerous forces of reaction and should have their power curbed. That may be a real fear on Morsi’s part, but rushing through a referendum on the constitution, which contains many clauses of which the secular opposition—not just the judges—fundamentally disapproves, is asking for trouble.

The Muslim Brothers have shown a degree of disdain for other opposition groups and little interest in consensus building on a road map for political transition and coming to agreement on the new political order. Let us not forget that Morsi won only 51.7 percent of the vote in the presidential election, with a turnout of 43.4 percent—hardly a resounding victory. I am old enough to remember the referendum on Britain joining the European community, announced in October 1974, which took place some eight months later. Even half that time would give a decent period for deliberation. With the referendum currently underway, Egyptians have the choice between being ruled by an unrepresentative constitution that keeps the army's extensive privileges largely intact or by a dictator.

For many Egyptians, Morsi's decree of November 22 arrogating all power to the presidency was the last straw. Leading opposition figures, many of who were dissidents under Mubarak, called on Morsi to revoke the decree and open the constitution drafting process to broader input. He has revoked the decree, but the referendum is still in place.

Of course, what the United States wants out of all this is a quiescent Egypt that will continue not to rock the boat in the Middle East; whether or not the

United States will get its wish is anyone's guess, but I have a feeling it will not. The United States supports the Muslim Brotherhood to the extent that the United States believes the Brotherhood can deliver what the United States wants, including economic liberalization and a key economic role for the military. As usual, expediency, short-termism, and considerable ignorance about the situation on the ground seem to be the guiding principles of U.S. policy.

As far as Iran is concerned, this might be the year that the United States comes to its senses and realizes that, while it may not like the Iranian regime, the regime is probably here to stay in a form not utterly dissimilar to the one it has today. Iran currently occupies the bogeyman position in American foreign policy that China occupied in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At some point, the United States will have to come round to living with a nuclear Iran in some guise or other, just as it came to live with a complex and sometimes threatening China and an even more chaotic nuclear Pakistan. In addition, the United States and Israel will also have to learn to live with the notion that what other states and peoples inside and outside the region, including Iran, object to about Israel is not simply who the Israelis are, but what they have done and continue to do.

Syria presents a major problem. The collapse of the regime, however it is brought about, will have long lasting reverberations, both inside the country and among Syria's neighbors, especially Lebanon, where the north of the country is already engulfed in the prelude to civil war. In general, "humanitarian intervention"—except, in the recent past, in Bosnia, where it might have succeeded in stopping the conflict in the way that it did in Kosovo—is almost never a good idea. Fortunately, a U.S. or Turkish invasion of Syria seems off the table. Quite how one can explain the role of such doughty defenders of democracy as Qatar in the crisis in Syria is difficult to determine: the Qatari poet Mohammed Ajami was sentenced to life in prison in November for writing a poem that the ruler did not like, one of whose lines was: "We are all Tunisia in the face of the repressive elite." Both in Qatar and Bahrain, the United States finds itself in strange company.

Turkey, which used to be on good terms with all its neighbors, now seems to be at odds with most of them (except, as far as I know, Greece, whose economic malaise must have many Turks sniggering). Turkey has quarrelled with Israel—about time, many would say. Its relations with Syria are extremely tense, which is Syria's fault rather than Turkey's. Iran is upset at Turkey's hosting the NATO shield in September 2011, and at Turkey's

apparently determined opposition to the regime of Bashar al-Asad. However, Turkey is increasingly emerging as a major regional power, and also serves as a model— particularly, of course, if one is not a secular leftist living there—of what the West would eventually want “moderate Islamic states” to look like.

Whether the ongoing upheavals in this region will produce that result is anyone’s guess. What does seem certain is that we are at the beginning, rather than anywhere near the end, of a major period of transformation in the Middle East, which is why it is almost impossible even trying to guess what might happen in 2013. The only major certainty is the almost endless capacity of the people of this region to surprise us all.

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