

The Politics of Policy: The Obama Doctrine and the Arab Spring

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Abstract: The purpose of the paper is to examine the Obama Doctrine and establish a clearer definition of what it is by contextualizing it through the lens of other presidential doctrines, the schools of realism and idealism. In addition, it seeks to establish specific tenets of the Obama Doctrine, as well as identify the contradictions present within the Obama Doctrine. I will then examine Obama's arc of disenchantment with the Arab Spring, explaining how his arc of disenchantment affected the way he made policy regarding the Middle East.

The Obama Doctrine is a contentious topic in the scholarly world. In the stacks of Fondren Library, books about Obama span an entire shelf; many of them are dedicated to the Obama Doctrine and figuring out what it is. In one of these books, *Barack Obama's Post-American Foreign Policy*, Robert Singh dedicates an entire chapter simply to trying to put a label on Obama and his foreign policy; the chapter is titled "'I've Got A Confusion on Obama': Cosmopolitan, Liberal Internationalist, Realist, Reaganite, Leftist?"¹ Scholars often compare the Obama Doctrine to other doctrines such as the Bush Doctrine and the Eisenhower Doctrine, and posit that these doctrines were much more clear-cut than the Obama Doctrine is; there is more literature dedicated to figuring out the Obama Doctrine than there are most other presidential doctrines. In my paper, I will examine the Obama Doctrine, especially as it applies to the Middle East, and explore some of its intricacies, and then examine the way that the Arab Spring changed the Obama Doctrine. I will utilize the arc of disenchantment to examine the way that the Arab Spring changed the Obama Doctrine.

¹ Robert Singh, *Barack Obama's Post-American Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2012), 25.

The Obama Doctrine

When considering the question of the Obama Doctrine, we first have to begin by asking the question: is doctrine a real concept? Or are doctrines frameworks that historians, foreign policy makers, and politicians construct to project the façade that they know what they are doing, and that they have a specific protocol that they apply to every crisis that will lead to desired results? This is a valid question, especially in the case of the Obama Doctrine. Obama has always balked at the very idea of doctrine; early on in his campaign, when asked to define the Obama Doctrine, he said that it was “not going to be as doctrinaire as the Bush doctrine,” and added that he thought “ideology has overridden facts and reality,”² which Obama regarded as a trap he did not want to fall into. This is an idea that continued throughout the administration; Obama has emphasized the fact that “the world is complicated”³ and a concrete doctrine cannot be adhered to in all cases. One aide, when asked what would set government policy, quoted British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan: “Events, dear boy, events.”⁴ This quote sums up Obama’s view of doctrine: adhering to one is dangerous; he and many others insist that strict adherence to a doctrine caused the Iraq War.

However, presidential doctrine is a long and storied tradition, and the expectation that Obama could challenge such a long tradition and refuse to have a doctrine proved to be more difficult than expected. Much of the literature I have read regarding doctrine is specifically related to how presidential doctrines have related to the Middle East, which is

² The New York Times, “Democratic Presidential Debate on NPR,” The New York Times, last modified December 4, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/04/us/politics/04transcript-debate.html>.

³ The New York Times, “Democratic Presidential,” The New York Times.

⁴ Ryan Lizza, “The Consequentialist,” The New Yorker, last modified May 2, 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist>.

mostly how I am examining the Obama Doctrine, as well. In *Three Kings*, Gardner evaluates the Truman Doctrine, and comes to the conclusion that the Truman doctrine was “the ideological foundation for the ‘imperial presidency.’”⁵ He argues that “the American quest was little different in purpose from that of previous powers seeking to dominate the area,”⁶ saying that the Truman Doctrine was essentially a continuation of Western imperialism in the Middle East that was previously enforced by the UK or France. Much of the foreign policy in the region during and after the Truman Doctrine was made in regards to the Cold War; according to Salim Yaqub, the Eisenhower Doctrine was dedicated to “exclud[ing] from the area Soviet influence.”⁷ There remained a continuity to doctrines regarding the Middle East during the Cold War, regardless of which party the president belonged to. The Carter Doctrine, established during his 1980 State of the Union address, stated that “an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”⁸ Essentially, during the Cold War, doctrines regarding the Middle East were dedicated to containing and combatting the spread of communism. Douglas Little argues in his new book *Us vs. Them* that once the spread of communism was no longer an issue, the spread of radical Islam supplanted that of communism and became the new threat around which doctrines were made. The Bush Doctrine was very clearly made in

⁵ Lloyd Gardner, *Three Kings: The Rise of an American Empire in the Middle East After World War II* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2009), 3.

⁶ Gardner, *Three Kings*, 49.

⁷ Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism* (n.p.: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 58.

⁸ Jimmy Carter, “The State of the Union Address Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress,” speech, January 23, 1980, The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=33079>.

reaction to the spread of radical Islam, and the Obama Doctrine is in some ways a reaction to radical Islam; ignoring it as a threat in the region is impossible, and many of Obama's decisions in regards to the Arab Spring were made with the threat of radical Islam in mind. When examining the Obama Doctrine compared to other presidential doctrines, it becomes clear that Obama does not manage to rise above the definition of doctrine; he does have a set of values and beliefs that guide his approach to foreign policy, and although they might not be as specific as those set out in the Carter Doctrine or the Bush Doctrine, they are still enough to make up a doctrine.

Additionally, it can be argued that skirting the traditional definition of doctrine and insisting on a looser definition is a doctrine in itself, apart from the fact that the Obama Doctrine does contain a specific set of beliefs. Maintaining the importance of examining individual events on their own merit and making decisions based on the differences of every event sets out a very specific expectation. Lizza says that Obama has "approached foreign policy as if it were case law, deciding his response to every threat or crisis on its own merits."⁹ This meticulous approach, in my opinion, describes the Obama Doctrine. However, this is not the only tenet of the Obama Doctrine; Obama generally "does not believe a president should place American soldiers at great risk in order to prevent humanitarian disasters, unless those disasters pose a direct security threat to the United States."¹⁰ This tenet sets up precise parameters for intervention; unless there is a crisis that directly threatens the lives of American civilians, such as a terrorist attack on American soil explicitly endorsed by a foreign government, there will be no intervention.

⁹ Lizza, "The Consequentialist," *The New Yorker*.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, last modified April 2016, accessed September 28, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

Regarding the Arab Spring, this is where things begin to get convoluted. In Libya, there was very clearly no threat to the national security of the United States; it was a cut-and-dry humanitarian crisis. So intervention in Libya clearly violated one of the tenets of the Obama Doctrine. However, the intervention was not a unilateral intervention by the United States, and it does not violate the other tenet of the Obama Doctrine: examining every conflict on a case-by-case basis. It is also arguable that the national security tenet of the Obama Doctrine was solidified after the disaster that was the Libyan intervention, when Obama became more insistent that American intervention in the Middle East would not change anything (something I will discuss more fully in the section on the arc of disenchantment). This exposes one of the inherent conflicts within the Obama Doctrine: refusing to intervene unless national security is directly threatened and examining conflicts on a case-by-case basis are not compatible principles. There is another conflict present within the Obama Doctrine, especially regarding the Arab Spring: often, what Obama said about the Arab Spring was not compatible with the realist tenets of his doctrine. His idealist tendencies shone through in his speeches, but his realist tendencies shone through in his actions, which made determining Obama's foreign policy moves during the Arab Spring difficult for both his advisors and protestors taking part in the Arab Spring.

However, this is another place where Obama attempts to buck tradition; he believes the split between realism and idealism is a false one, or at least he refuses to accept that the labels apply to his foreign policy. In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, he said that “there had long been a tension between those who describe themselves as realists or idealists—a tension that suggests a stark choice between the

narrow pursuit of interests or an endless campaign to impose our values around the world,” and said bluntly that he “reject[s] these choices.”¹¹ The belief that the dichotomy between realism and idealism is false is echoed by some scholars, but is belied by the team of foreign policy advisors Obama chose, and by the fact that the Obama Doctrine is in large part a reaction to the failures of the Bush Doctrine, which is idealist in nature.

The foreign policy team that Obama assembled was essentially a blend of the foremost thinkers in the fields of idealism and realism. Samantha Power, for example, is a good example of someone at the top of the field of idealism. Her book, “A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide” proposes that the United States has a responsibility to intervene in humanitarian crises due to the position we hold in the world; she has been “caricatured as the Ivy League Joan of Arc.”¹² Robert Gates, a “self-described realist,”¹³ is an example of someone at the top of the field of realism. To be clear, I am not saying that the fact that Obama assembled a team of advisers from the two fields of idealism and realism is a bad thing; I am simply stating that it belies his insistence that the dichotomy between the two fields is a false one. And it is easy to see in situations regarding the Arab Spring where the fields of realism and idealism clash. In general, realists are not necessarily popular because they do not advocate exciting ideas; Robert Gilpin, a leader in the field, once said that “no one loves a political realist.”¹⁴

¹¹ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize,” speech, December 10, 2009, The White House, last modified December 10, 2009, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>.

¹² Evan Osnos, “In the Land of the Possible,” *The New Yorker*, last modified December 22, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/12/22/land-possible>.

¹³ Sean Kay, “Gates: A Realist in an Idealist World,” *War on the Rocks*, last modified January 22, 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/01/gates-a-realist-in-an-idealist-world/>.

¹⁴ Robert Jervis, “Realism in the Study of World Politics,” *International Organization*,

Realism is, by its very nature, cautious, and idealists sometimes say of realists that “those who describe the world in terms of the utility of the use, or even the threat, of force are teaching incorrect and dangerous lessons and that realism is in part a self-fulfilling prophecy.”¹⁵ Realists, however, criticize idealists for “underestim[ing] the role of power in international politics and overestim[ing] the role, actual and potential, of law, morality, and public opinion.”¹⁶ This sort of fundamental difference on an approach to world politics and disagreement on the limits of power is clear between advisors like Power and Gates; for example, in the case of Libya, Power was a strong proponent of intervention, while Gates was “the most strenuous opponent of establishing a no-fly zone, or any other form of military intervention.”¹⁷ In this case, Obama swung towards the side of idealism, believing, like Power, that it was the responsibility of the United States to intervene. However, generally Obama falls more on the side of realism, especially in terms of intervention. He looks up to the great realist thinkers of the late 80s and early 90s, Brent Scowcroft especially. Jeffrey Goldberg mentions that in his 2006 book *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama praised Scowcroft so extensively that Susan Rice “felt it necessary to remind him to include at least one line of praise for the foreign policy of President Bill Clinton.”¹⁸ Brent Scowcroft, besides being an integral part of negotiating

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<http://content.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.rice.edu/ContentServer.asp?EbscoContent=dGJyMNHX8kSep644wtvhOLCmr06eqLBSsKm4SraWxWXS&ContentCustomer=dGJyMPGvrki3prJKuePfgeyx43zx1d%2BI5wAA&T=P&P=AN&S=R&D=mth&K=1414109>.

¹⁵ Jervis, “Realism in the Study,” 974.

¹⁶ Peter Wilson, “Idealism in International Relations,” in *Encyclopedia of Power* (Thousand Oaks, USA: SAGE, 2011), 333, [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/41929/1/Idealism%20in%20international%20relations%20\(LSERO\).pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/41929/1/Idealism%20in%20international%20relations%20(LSERO).pdf)

¹⁷ Lizza, “The Consequentialist,” *The New Yorker*.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*.

the American response to the end of the Cold War, was a vocal critic of American involvement in Iraq. He wrote an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal in late 2002, “Don’t Attack Saddam,” in which he warned that an attack on Iraq would have dire consequences for America, both domestically and internationally; he cautioned that it would have a permanent effect on the way that America was viewed in Iraq and the region in general.¹⁹ Obama made his opposition to the Iraq War one of his main talking points during the campaign, hammering on the fact that his opponent, Hillary Clinton, had voted for the war, while he had spoken out against it. In a speech given in November of 2006, Obama said that the war “has left us distracted from containing the world’s growing threats in North Korea, in Iran, and in Afghanistan” and attacked Bush’s foreign policy as “policy-by-slogan.”²⁰ Obama’s opposition to the way Bush conducted foreign policy and the Bush Doctrine in general became one of the most important building blocks of the Obama Doctrine.

The Bush Doctrine was not a departure from the norm of doctrines; it was a clear doctrine with tenets well known by the public, a doctrine that was generally followed to the letter. Much of the secondary literature written on the Obama Doctrine is literature that tries to figure out what exactly the Obama Doctrine is; the same cannot be said for the Bush Doctrine. The Bush Doctrine was made up of a few important precepts; one was the idea of the freedom agenda; another was the idea of preemptive wars or strikes; another was a general comfort with using American power unilaterally. The freedom

¹⁹ Brent Scowcroft, “Don’t Attack Saddam,” The Wall Street Journal, last modified August 15, 2002, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1029371773228069195>.

²⁰ Barack Obama, “A Way Forward in Iraq Remarks,” speech, November 20, 2006, Obama Speeches, <http://obamaspeeches.com/094-A-Way-Forward-in-Iraq-Obama-Speech.htm>.

agenda was a promise to “strengthen democracy and promote peace around the world.”²¹ These core tenets and the idea of the freedom agenda led to the demonization of the Muslim world and the religion of Islam, especially when Bush called Iraq and its “terrorist allies” an “axis of evil.”²² When examining the core tenets of the Bush Doctrine that I have just mentioned and the resulting Islamophobia that it sparked, it is clear that the Obama Doctrine is in large part a reaction to and rejection of the Bush Doctrine. The Obama Doctrine completely rejects the freedom agenda; in his famous Cairo speech, Obama said “no system of government can or should be imposed by one nation by any other,”²³ which is a direct attack on the Iraq War and the concept of the freedom agenda. In electing Obama, the American electorate was also rejecting the Bush Doctrine; they expected that the Obama Doctrine would be much different than the Bush Doctrine. One of Obama’s main campaign promises was to get troops out of Iraq, and that in itself showed the American people that Obama intended to have a foreign policy much different than Bush’s. By electing Obama, the American people were endorsing this new approach to foreign policy. The concept of preemptive wars was roundly rejected, as was the idea of unilateral American intervention (as made clear through the coalition intervention in Libya). And Obama spent a lot of his time in his early speeches to the Muslim world attempting to combat the idea that the United States was Islamophobic or at war with Islam, instead emphasizing the similarities between the Muslim world and the

²¹ The White House, “Fact Sheet: President Bush's Freedom Agenda Helped Protect The American People,” The White House, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/freedomagenda/>.

²² George W. Bush, “The State of the Union Address,” speech, January 29, 2002, NPR, <http://www.npr.org/news/specials/sou/2002/020129.bushtext.html>.

²³ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Beginning,” speech, June 4, 2009, The White House, last modified June 4, 2009, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>.

United States, a strategy that Douglas Little refers to as “contagement.”²⁴ The fact that the Obama Doctrine is in large part a rejection of the Bush Doctrine makes it, in my eyes, even more of a doctrine.

One final important thing to note about the Obama Doctrine is the position that the Middle East occupies within the doctrine. Obama’s pivot to Asia is something that Goldberg and many other journalists and scholars talk about a great deal. Obama believes that the future lies in Asia, and that in order to capitalize on the momentum present within Asia it is necessary to direct much more of America’s foreign policy energy towards building meaningful relationships with Asian countries. Obama believes that ultimately the Middle East will become an irrelevant region as the United States moves away from oil dependency, something I will discuss more in-depth in the section on the arc of disenchantment. Because of these two beliefs, the Middle East does not hold an incredibly important position in the Obama Doctrine, which is clear from Obama’s early moves within the region. One of his campaign promises was to remove troops from Iraq, which he followed through on (partial withdrawal completed by August 2010 and full withdrawal completed by October 2011). He also began to draw down troops in Afghanistan. With these moves, he was attempting to decrease American involvement in the region. The Arab Spring ended up sucking him back into the mire of the Middle East, but the initial intention of the Obama Doctrine was to reduce the role of the Middle East in American politics. In order to examine the way the Arab Spring changed the Obama Doctrine and exposed the contradictions within the Obama Doctrine, we can look at what

²⁴ Douglas Little, *Us versus Them: The United States, Radical Islam, and the Rise of the Green Threat* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2016), 173.

some call Obama's arc of disenchantment with the region. One final note: the term "Arab Spring" is in some ways ambiguous, and means different things in different regions. In this paper, I will address the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and briefly in Syria; working out the specifics of what exactly the Arab Spring means is not the purpose of this paper.

The Arc of Disenchantment

In order to address the way the Obama Doctrine changed, I will examine the arc of disenchantment in the region, a phrase taken from Goldberg's piece "The Obama Doctrine." Although the phrase is Goldberg's, he does not examine the arc of disenchantment in any critical way, and does not examine in-depth the arc of disenchantment in regards to specific countries. Additionally, my methodology is different from Goldberg's—I will be examining the arc of disenchantment mostly using Obama's speeches and other primary sources, while "The Obama Doctrine" is effectively a long-form interview with Obama. This methodology speaks to the difference between a historical approach (the one I will be taking) and a journalistic approach (the one Goldberg takes). Finally, "The Obama Doctrine" is a piece that is unabashedly in support of Obama and his foreign policy decisions; I hope to be more critical and unbiased in my examination of the Obama Doctrine and the arc of disenchantment.

Obama's engagement with the Middle East followed an arc of disenchantment with the region. His early speeches in and about the Middle East are full of optimism and hope, and as the Arab Spring began, he was hopeful that it would bring about meaningful democratic regime change in some countries. However, as the Arab Spring lost its early promise and countries became embroiled in civil war, Obama became gradually more

pessimistic about the region and became convinced that it was impossible for the Middle East to change in any sort of meaningful way. This pessimism affected the way that he made policy in the region; as his pessimism deepened, he became less and less willing to intervene in any way, shape, or form. I chose to examine three countries in order to bring Obama's arc of disenchantment with the region into sharper focus: Egypt, Libya, and finally Syria. Before I examine those countries, I will analyze some of Obama's early speeches in and about the region and show that his pessimism and disillusionment were phenomena brought about by the failure of the Arab Spring.

Obama's early speeches attempted to strike a conciliatory note with the Muslim world, and showed that he believed the area had potential and promise. As I mentioned earlier, he attempted to distance himself from the Bush Doctrine, as his election meant that the American public was ready for a new era of foreign relations. In his inaugural address, given January 21, 2009, he reached out to the Muslim world, saying that "we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect."²⁵ This was meaningful because for years, especially during George Bush's presidency, much of America's foreign policy regarding the Middle East had been grounded in a distrust and misunderstanding of the region. The fact that Obama was trying to reach out to a region that felt marginalized and misunderstood was therefore incredibly significant. As he settled into office, he continued to reach out to the Muslim world. His first trip overseas was to Turkey, and when he addressed the Turkish parliament, he told them that this was intentional; he intended to open up a new era of relations between Turkey and America,

²⁵ Barack Obama, "President Obama's Inaugural Address," speech, January 20, 2009, The White House, last modified January 21, 2009, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2009/01/21/president-barack-obamas-inaugural-address>.

and the Middle East as a whole. The most-quoted line of that speech came towards the end, when he assured the parliament that “the United States is not, and never will be, at war with Islam.”²⁶ This was, again, a step forward perception-wise. As mentioned in the previous section on the Obama Doctrine, Bush had sometimes given the appearance of being against the religion of Islam; his “axis of evil” speech certainly did not give the appearance of being willing to compromise with Muslim countries. Obama’s attempts to signal a new beginning of American relations with the Muslim world culminated in his famous Cairo speech. He himself said that he had “come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect...”²⁷, making clear early on in the speech what his theme would be. The speech is similar to the speech given to the Turkish parliament in many respects; he stresses themes of mutual respect and interest, emphasizing that the principles of the Muslim world are not contrary to those of the American world, and in fact have much in common. In this speech, he also laid the groundwork for his early acceptance of the protests in Tahrir Square. He said that the United States was committed to “governments that reflect the will of the people,” adding that the voices of the people would be heard “even if we disagree with them” and implying that the United States would even accept governments that they did not agree with “provided they govern with respect for all their people.”²⁸ This speech was immensely well-received in the Middle

²⁶ Barack Obama, “Remarks By President Obama To The Turkish Parliament,” speech, April 6, 2009, The White House, last modified April 6, 2009, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-turkish-parliament>.

²⁷ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Beginning,” speech, The White House.

²⁸ Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Beginning,” speech, The White House.

Eastern world, and led to a improvement in the way the US was viewed in the Middle East, a reflection of the new “global confidence in Barack Obama”²⁹ that some referred to as the Egypt effect. For the first time in years, there seemed to be hope that relations between the Middle East and the United States could be reset and start to move in a positive direction. This hope was spurred in part by the implication Obama made in the Cairo speech of being prepared to support governments that the United States did not necessarily agree with. This implication is confirmed as true by the existence of PDS-11, or “Political Reform in the Middle East and North Africa,” a document cited by Ryan Lizza in his piece *The Consequentialist* (it is not publicly available, but Lizza has seen a copy and quotes from it in his article). In this document, Obama asked for a country-by-country report on strategies to implement political reform in the region, and “told his advisers to challenge the traditional idea that stability in the Middle East always served U.S. interests.”³⁰ Obama seemed to be slanting towards a new age of relations with the Middle East, willing to accept new democracies (even ones that ran counter to US interests) in the interest of a more stable Middle East. By encouraging a Middle East that was stable in its own right, and free of autocrats or dictators installed by the United States, Obama may have hoped to extricate himself from the mire of the Middle East and fulfill his desired pivot to Asia.

Although Obama’s early speeches were filled with hope and optimism, some scholars voiced frustration with his rhetoric and foreign policy even before the Arab

²⁹ Pew Research Center, “Confidence in Obama Lifts U.S. Image Around the World,” Pew Research Center, last modified July 23, 2009, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2009/07/23/confidence-in-obama-lifts-us-image-around-the-world/>.

³⁰ Lizza, “The Consequentialist,” *The New Yorker*.

Spring began. Zbigniew Brzezinski, an ardent supporter of Obama on the campaign trail, wrote an article in early 2010 titled “From Hope to Audacity: Appraising Obama’s Foreign Policy,” in which he essentially said that Obama is all talk and no action. He said that “so far, it [Obama’s foreign policy] has generated more expectations than strategic breakthroughs”³¹ and says that Obama “has not yet made the transition from inspiring orator to compelling statesman.”³² This frustration would remain present throughout the Arab Spring, and is in fact what complicated the Obama Doctrine so thoroughly; Obama would seem to make promises that he then would not keep. Ryan Lizza said that “Obama’s ultimate position, it seemed, was to talk like an idealist while acting like a realist.”³³

The Arab Spring forced Obama to change his approach to the Middle East in many ways. Initially, it was possible for Obama to stick to his initial tone in the region—one of conciliation, hope, and support from afar. In his 2011 State of the Union address, given a little over a month after Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire and sparked the Tunisian revolution, he said that “the will of the people proved more powerful than the writ of a dictator” and asserted that the US “stands with the people of Tunisia, and supports the democratic aspirations of all people.”³⁴ He struck a tone of hope and optimism, excited at the prospect of democratic change that seemed to be gripping the region. As the Arab Spring began to gain speed and protests and demonstrations gripped

³¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, “From Hope to Audacity,” *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 1 (January/February 2010): 28, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.rice.edu/stable/20699780>.

³² Brzezinski, “From Hope to Audacity,” 29.

³³ Lizza, “The Consequentialist,” *The New Yorker*.

³⁴ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in State of Union Address,” speech, January 25, 2011, The White House, last modified January 25, 2011, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/25/remarks-president-state-union-address>.

countries across the region, things began to get more complicated. In his speeches, Obama projected an appearance of idealism and support for the revolutions and protestors, but the Arab Spring inevitably began to take a less clear-cut turn, and the Obama Doctrine started to become more complex as Obama's foreign policy realism began to take hold.

The arc of disenchantment would take hold in Egypt eventually, but at the beginning of the protests Obama was hopeful that the protests in Tahrir Square would lead to meaningful regime change. Egypt is an important American ally, and so Obama's foreign policy advisers counseled that Obama should remain cautious—one misstep could be incredibly costly to the relationship that presidents had cultivated with Egypt over years. However, Obama's tendency towards idealism took hold. In her autobiography *Hard Choices*, Hillary Clinton says that a "younger generation of White House aides 'swept up in the drama and idealism of the moment'"³⁵ convinced Obama to take decisive action that would embolden the protestors and change the current of the Egyptian revolution. Robert Gates confirms Hillary's statement in an interview given in 2013, saying that "literally the entire national security team recommended unanimously handling Mubarak differently than we did," but that ultimately Obama ended up taking the advice of "three junior back-benchers."³⁶ He adds in his memoir that "Biden, Clinton, and [National Security Advisor] Donilon had urged caution in light of the potential

³⁵ "Hillary Clinton: Obama administration divided over 2011 Arab uprisings," *The Guardian*, last modified June 7, 2014, accessed September 28, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/07/hillary-clinton-obama-administration-split-arab-spring-mubarak>.

³⁶ Rachel Dicker, "Obama Ignored Military's Advice in Egypt, Former Defense Secretary Says," *US News & World Report*, last modified March 18, 2016, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-03-18/robert-gates-obama-ignored-military-advice-on-arab-spring>.

impact on the region and the consequences of abandoning Mubarak, an ally of thirty years” but that despite these warnings Obama “was clearly leaning toward an aggressive posture and public statements.”³⁷ The events in Egypt show the first consequential split within the Obama administration regarding events during the Arab Spring; in this case, almost all the major upper-level advisors counseled caution, a warning that Obama ultimately did not heed.

Mubarak promised that he would not run for re-election and said that he would hand off power peacefully to his successor, but that was not enough for the protestors; they feared that power would automatically go to Mubarak’s son. Obama evidently also thought that Mubarak’s promise was not enough; he called Mubarak and attempted to get him to agree to a more prompt transition of power. Mubarak insisted that his country was not ready for such a quick transition, citing fears that the Muslim Brotherhood would take advantage of his stepping down and grab power. Obama did not accept this as a valid explanation, and on February 1, 2011 made a speech that called for a transition that “must be meaningful... must be peaceful and... must begin now,”³⁸ despite Gates’ plea to use “the more vague phrase ‘sooner rather than later.’”³⁹ This call for an immediate transition would further complicate things, as the Egyptian people read into the speech a promise that if transition did not begin immediately, there would be some sort of meaningful consequence imposed by the US on Mubarak, or some kind of US intervention. This never occurred, of course; America never intervened on Egyptian soil. But this speech laid the groundwork for false hope for many of the Egyptian people, which was a direct

³⁷ Robert M. Gates, *Duty* (n.p.: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 504.

³⁸ CNN, “Obama says Egypt's transition ‘must begin now,’” CNN, last modified February 2, 2011, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/POLITICS/02/01/us.egypt.obama/>.

³⁹ Gates, *Duty*, 506.

result of Obama's idealistic expectation of meaningful democratic transition and the establishment of free and fair elections in a country that had not had any free and fair elections in decades. Hillary Clinton seemed to warn the Egyptian people against Obama's idealism and counseled them against hoping for a transition that was both immediate and meaningful. She said in one interview that America was aware that since we have "been working at our own democracy for over 230 years, that this takes time"⁴⁰ and in another interview stressed that "we're just at the beginning of the transition,"⁴¹ solidifying the disconnect between Obama's advisors' belief in a cautious transition and Obama's belief that the Egyptian transition was not the time for caution. In Obama's idealistic speeches on Egypt we can see the inherent contradiction present within the Obama Doctrine; Obama tended to make promises he could not or was not willing to keep, regardless of whether or not the making of these promises was intentional. We also see the groundwork being laid for an important event in the arc of disenchantment—the ultimate failure of free and fair elections in Egypt, and the return of a dictator to the country in 2013.

The event that cemented Obama's arc of disenchantment most thoroughly was the failure of the NATO intervention in Libya. In February of 2011, soon after Obama called for Mubarak to step down from power, protests engulfed Libya. The situation was similar to the one in Egypt, except for one key difference: Muammar Qaddafi, the dictator who

⁴⁰ Hillary Rodham Clinton and Mohamed Kamel Amr, "Remarks With Egyptian Foreign Minister Mohamed Kamel Amr After Their Meeting," speech, September 28, 2011, U.S. Department of State, last modified September 28, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/09/174550.htm>.

⁴¹ Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Interview With Abderrahim Foukara of Al Jazeera," by Abderrahim Foukara, U.S. Department of State, last modified February 14, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/02/156573.htm>.

led Libya, was entirely unwilling to entertain notions of a transition of any kind. As protests continued, Qaddafi became increasingly enraged; he urged loyalists to take to the streets to fight the “greasy rats” who were inciting the protests, and assured his followers that he would “die as a martyr at the end” and remain “the leader of the revolution until the end of time.”⁴² These rantings could not be written off as laughable lunacy in light of the fact that the protests represented a real threat to Qaddafi, and the international community began to make moves against him. One step was UN Resolution 1970, in which the Security Council decided to refer the case of Libya to the ICC and imposed a travel ban, arms embargo, and asset freeze.⁴³ In the week or two following Resolution 1970, the Security Council began to discuss attempting to establish a no-fly zone and taking additional steps to remove Qaddafi from power through another resolution. Qaddafi saw the moves that the international community was making against him, and on March 17, 2011 warned dissidents that “we are coming tonight” and that “we will find you in your closets.”⁴⁴ A humanitarian crisis seemed imminent. On the same day, UN Resolution 1973 was adopted, authorizing an intervention in the crisis.

Behind the scenes, Obama had been struggling to decide whether or not to intervene. His top advisers were split, as they had been in the case of Egypt; some advocated intervention, fearing that if they did not intervene they would have a genocide

⁴² Ian Black, “Gaddafi urges violent showdown and tells Libya ‘I’ll die a martyr,’” *The Guardian*, last modified February 2, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/feb/22/muammar-gaddafi-urges-violent-showdown>.

⁴³ United Nations, “Resolution 1970 (2011),” United Nations, last modified February 26, 2011, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/NR/rdonlyres/081A9013-B03D-4859-9D61-5D0B0F2F5EFA/0/1970Eng.pdf>.

⁴⁴ David D. Kirkpatrick and Kareem Fahim, “Qaddafi Warns of Assault on Benghazi as U.N. Vote Nears,” *The New York Times*, last modified March 17, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/18/world/africa/18libya.html?pagewanted=all>.

on their hands. Others warned that intervention could set a dangerous precedent, and pointed out that the situation in Libya posed no direct threat to American national security, ostensibly a tenet for intervention according to the Obama Doctrine. The most ardent proponents of intervention were “UN ambassador Susan Rice and NSS staffers Ben Rhodes and Samantha Power...[and] in the final phase of the internal debate, Hillary.”⁴⁵ It was clear that Rice and Clinton were supporters of intervention by the public statements they made. Clinton said in an interview that a decision would be made that would “enable us to protect innocent lives in Libya,”⁴⁶ and Rice said that the Security Council was committed to “swift and meaningful action to try to halt the killing on the ground.”⁴⁷ The proponents of staying out stayed made few public statements, but Gates says that he, “Biden, Donilon, Daley, Mullen, McDonough, [and] Brennan”⁴⁸ reminded Obama privately that that, as Brent Scowcroft said, “of all the countries in the region there, our real interests in Libya are minimal.”⁴⁹ In fact, Ryan Lizza put it best, saying that “the decision about intervention in Libya was an unusually clear choice between interests and values.”⁵⁰ Obama had to choose to either endorse an intervention that came dangerously close to resembling one that could have occurred during Bush’s freedom agenda, or stay out of the conflict and risk being accused of standing by and letting a genocide occur. He tried to split the difference, refusing to endorse a unilateral

⁴⁵ Gates, *Duty*, 511.

⁴⁶ Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Interview With Kim Ghattas of BBC,” by Kim Ghattas, U.S. Department of State, last modified March 16, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/03/158444.htm>.

⁴⁷ Susan E. Rice, “Remarks on the Situation in Libya,” speech, March 16, 2011, U.S. Department of State, last modified March 16, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/p/io/rm/2011/158474.htm>.

⁴⁸ Gates, *Duty*, 511.

⁴⁹ Lizza, “The Consequentialist,” *The New Yorker*.

⁵⁰ Lizza, “The Consequentialist,” *The New Yorker*.

intervention by America and instead putting together a coalition that would intervene on the behalf of multiple countries. An anonymous source within the administration gave a catchy name to this new policy: “leading from behind.”⁵¹ By endorsing action through a coalition, Obama was trying to avoid shouldering the burden of failure if it did occur.

On March 28, 2011, 11 days after the intervention began, Obama gave a speech on the actions that were being taken in Libya. He stressed Libya’s proximity to Tunisia and Egypt and emphasized the brutality of Qaddafi, hammering on the fact that the conflict had disproportionately affected civilians. He said that “innocent people were targeted for killing,” “hospitals and ambulances were attacked,” and “journalists were arrested, sexually assaulted, and killed.”⁵² He said that “in this particular country...at this particular moment, we were faced with the prospect of violence on a horrific scale” and added that “some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries” but that “the United States of America is different.”⁵³ Reading this speech in 2016, when Syria is in the midst of a civil war, is striking. The current conflict in Syria is incredibly similar to the conflict that took place in Libya. In Aleppo, there are no more functioning hospitals, as they have been the focuses of targeted attacks by terrorist groups and, debatably, international actors such as Russia; civilians are also dying in huge numbers. Obama’s stance of international police power in this case, similar to the position posited in the Roosevelt Corollary, strikes a different chord when we remember the red line

⁵¹ Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*.

⁵² Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation of Libya,” speech, March 28, 2011, The White House, last modified March 28, 2011, accessed September 27, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/28/remarks-president-address-nation-libya>.

⁵³ Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation of Libya,” speech, The White House.

promise he made and then reneged on regarding Syria. And it is largely because of the spectacular way that this international effort failed that Obama refused to intervene in Syria.

No one foresaw the chaos that would erupt in Libya after the NATO intervention. For a few months, things seemed to be going well. Obama gave a speech in which hope and idealism seemed alive and well; he said that an “extraordinary change” had taken place in the Middle East and North Africa and that “square by square, town by town, country by country, the people have risen up to demand their basic human rights.”⁵⁴ He stressed that the region remained important to the United States and said that we are “bound to this region by the forces of economics and security, by history and by faith,”⁵⁵ while at the same time emphasizing that the United States was decreasing involvement by pulling troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan. This, after all, had been the plan all along; pull away from the Middle East and pivot to Asia. The Libyan intervention seemed a distraction along the way, a one-off that would lead to free and fair elections and stability for the country. Anyone was better than Qaddafi. In this speech, Obama seemed to tread the same thin line he had been treading for most of the Arab Spring—striking a note of hope and idealism, and teetering on the brink of promising intervention (at least, many of his speeches could be read in a way that would imply a promise to intervene), but stopping short of actually doing so. He said that supporting the Arab Spring was a “top priority that must be translated into concrete actions, and supported by all of the

⁵⁴ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa,” speech, May 19, 2011, The White House, last modified May 19, 2011, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

⁵⁵ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa,” speech, The White House.

diplomatic, economic and strategic tools at our disposal,”⁵⁶ which, if read through the eyes of a protestor in Syria, might mean that Obama would somehow use diplomacy or force to make Assad to step down if he refused. In late August, during a Press Corps briefing, Obama seemed to set up a clear expectation: if Assad used chemical weapons, something drastic would have to be done. He said that “a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized,” saying that it would “change his calculus” and there would be “enormous consequences”⁵⁷ if Assad used chemical weapons.

But when that day, August 21, 2013, finally arrived, things had changed. Elections in Libya had taken place, yes, but the GNC was going in a disturbing direction. It was allegedly involved with Islamic forces, and was engaged in an effort to suppress women’s rights. Factions opposing the GNC were starting to come together; the country was not content with the government it had elected. It was clear to anyone involved in foreign policy that Libya was on the brink of another civil war. The NATO intervention had proved a failure; an international coalition had proved unable to stop a country from slipping back towards the dark abyss of dictatorship. Obama had watched all this happen, and was left with a bitter taste in his mouth; he started to believe that American intervention in the region would accomplish little to nothing. His view of the Middle East proved to be bleak; he said that all the United State was doing in the region was “figuring out how to destroy or cordon off or control the malicious, nihilistic, violent parts of

⁵⁶ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa,” speech, The White House.

⁵⁷ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps,” speech, August 20, 2012, The White House, last modified August 20, 2012, accessed September 28, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps>.

humanity,”⁵⁸ a far cry from his remarks in 2011 where he stated that the “greatest untapped resource in the Middle East and North Africa is the talent of its people.”⁵⁹ So when Assad used sarin gas against his own people, Obama refused to step in. His fatalistic view of the region was sealed by the failure of a soft intervention in Libya. Regardless of the fact that Syria was facing a humanitarian crisis of the same, if not greater proportion, than the one in Libya, Obama believed that an American intervention would solve nothing. There were also more external factors to consider in Syria; Assad was a much closer friend to Russia than Qaddafi had been, and an American intervention would be sure to spark a conflict with Russia that America could not afford. So Obama stepped back from his promise, despite dire warnings from his advising team that this decision could affect American credibility for years to come. Yes, Obama admits that “if there had been no Iraq, no Afghanistan, and no Libya... he might be more apt to take risks in Syria,”⁶⁰ but this was simply not the case. The arc of disenchantment had taken its toll. The Arab Spring had lost its promise, and as it lost its promise Obama lost his willingness to intervene. Obama’s early idealism was firmly replaced by the realism he had preached when the Obama Doctrine had begun to form. Decisions made Egypt and Libya proved to be mistakes that he was determined to avoid making in Syria. So the conflict in Syria raged on, and Obama turned away, pivoting instead to more important areas of the world. The Middle East, after all “is no longer terribly important to American

⁵⁸ Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*.

⁵⁹ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa,” speech, *The White House*.

⁶⁰ Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*.

interests,” and even if it were, “there would still be little an American president could do to make it a better place.”⁶¹

Examining the Obama Doctrine and the Arab Spring has proved to be complicated and murky. Exploring two topics that have many different definitions is challenging, and I had to read a lot of literature from both sides of the aisle in an attempt to understand them in a way that is as unbiased as possible. The one thing that is clear to me after perusing the current scholarship on the Obama Doctrine is that the doctrine will continue to engender debate far into the future, both on what the Obama Doctrine is and the effect it had on different regions (the Middle East in particular). It is important now more than ever to understand the Obama Doctrine and the way policy is made in the region as we face a president who is wholly unpredictable in the way that he makes both domestic and international policy. Perhaps the Trump Doctrine will be a continuation of the Obama Doctrine. Many of Trump’s campaign speeches were tinged with hints of isolationism, and at the end of the Arab Spring the Obama Doctrine was isolationist when it came to intervention, although it was never isolationist in the traditional sense (i.e. when applied to trade and diplomatic relations). Or perhaps the Trump Doctrine will harken back to days of the Bush Doctrine; Trump’s personality may lead him to intervene in a Middle Eastern country in a way similar to the way Bush intervened in Iraq. It is impossible to know at this point; all we as historians can do is examine the past and set out lessons for the future, and hope that those in power listen to those lessons.

⁶¹ Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” The Atlantic.