

# The 2011 MENA Revolutions: A Study in U.S. Energy (In)Security

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## Abstract

The recent upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have brought into stark relief the conflict between democratic values and strategic interests in U.S. foreign policy. Americans are known for commitment to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, yet the U.S. Government is frequently unwilling to step forward and openly express even rhetorical support for reform movements in foreign countries. In fact, initial American reluctance to support the recent "Arab Spring" uprisings serves as another example of what scholars argue is a general exception in the MENA to broader post-Cold War rising costs of maintaining autocracy. This article explores the American response to the recent MENA uprisings and their significance in terms of U.S. fossil fuel energy security using the theoretical lens of structural realist international relations theory.

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## Introduction

*We will lay the foundation for our future capacity to meet America's energy needs from America's own resources.*

—Richard Nixon, 1974

*A massive program must be initiated to increase energy supply ...to achieve the independence we want.*

—Gerald Ford, 1975

*This intolerable dependence on foreign oil threatens our economic independence and the very security of our Nation.*

—Jimmy Carter, 1979

*We will continue supportive research leading to the development of new technologies and more independence of foreign oil.*

—Ronald Reagan, 1981

*There is no security for the United States in further dependence on foreign oil.*

—George H.W. Bush, 1988

*For decades we have known the days of cheap and easily accessible oil were numbered.*

—Barack Obama, 2010<sup>1</sup>

The recent upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have brought to light, once again, the conflict between traditional American values and the overarching goals of American foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> Citizens of the United States are renowned for their commitment to universal liberties, freedom from oppression, and human rights for all, yet the U.S. Government has been frequently unwilling to step forward and openly express even rhetorical support for reform movements in foreign countries. Why is this so? More specifically, why, even after the initial shock of having been caught off-guard by Tunisian and Egyptian reform movements faded, did President Barack Obama appear so unwilling to express support for the revolutionaries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in early 2011? As the revolutions gained momentum, instead of expressing solidarity with the protestors, Obama's spokesman refused to be drawn on whether or not the administration continued to back Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. In an attempt to side-step the inquiry, he referred instead to the country of Egypt as a "strong ally"—from which many inferred that the United States continued to stand with the autocrat. Not until after Mubarak had already dissolved his government did Secretary of State Clinton call for an "orderly transition" of power in Egypt. Meanwhile, President Obama waited until the eighth day of protests before urging a "meaningful" and "peaceful" power transition—by which point it was already evident that Mubarak had lost the battle for control of his country.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, this ambivalence is not a recent development. It is, though, a particularly salient example of what scholars argue is a general exception in the MENA to the post-Cold War phenomenon of rising costs being associ-

ated with the maintenance of openly autocratic regimes.<sup>4</sup> Authoritarian resilience specialists have successfully produced research demonstrating that Western support plays a role in maintaining the stability of authoritarian control in the Middle East and North Africa. This support takes the form of both material resources and international legitimacy.<sup>5</sup> At times, both the European Union and the United States have been criticized for their lack of commitment to the MENA democratization process. It is this evident lack of commitment that was on display during the beginning of 2011.

It would appear that encouraging others to fight for the same freedoms Americans enjoy is not the priority that the U.S. Government sometimes makes it out to be.<sup>6</sup> But if promoting the ideal of liberal democracy does not take precedence, what does? If liberal international relations theory fails to explain the words and deeds (or lack thereof) of the American Government in this situation, what overarching theoretical explanation can we find? Following a brief overview of U.S. energy security policy literature, I will address the recent MENA upheaval. This will be followed by a concise examination of U.S.-MENA energy relations. It will become clear that the importance of the MENA to U.S. energy security poses a complicated issue to be taken into account when considering democracy movements in the area, particularly with regard to potential regime changes. I will then argue that realism provides the best theoretical explanation for U.S. reluctance to take a clear, pro-revolution policy stance concerning the recent North African uprisings. My focus is slightly more concentrated on North Africa because although reform movements were launched throughout the MENA, the most successful efforts have been limited to the North African nations of Egypt and Tunisia; Yemeni protestors succeeded in unseating President Ali Abdullah Saleh, but the country is still experiencing chaos. Meanwhile, revolutionary attempts in Bahrain and Syria, and mild unrest in Saudi Arabia, have thus far proven notably unsuccessful. In closing, I will suggest key avenues for future research.

## Energy Policy in the Literature: U.S. Insecurity

The United States is the world's third largest producer of crude oil (5.7 million barrels per day, with an additional 4.6 million barrels per day in petroleum gains) but is the world's largest consumer (18.8 million barrels per day).<sup>7</sup> More problematically for the long term, "the United States consumes 25% of the world's oil, while possessing only 3% of the world's oil reserves."<sup>8</sup> A topic of Presidential rhetoric spanning eight administrations, fossil fuel energy security has never failed to capture attention in

one way or another (starting with Nixon in 1974 and continuing through the Ford, Carter, Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Clinton, and George W. Bush Administrations to the present day.<sup>9</sup> Beginning with Nixon's desire to decrease dependency on foreign resources and most recently making headlines with Obama's warning that "cheap and easily accessible oil" is on the way out, the issue of energy security has served as both a political rallying call and a liability throughout the years. Notwithstanding charges of being "abstract, elusive, vague, inherently difficult and blurred" in nature, this subject has also grown increasingly salient in academic literature over the past decade.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Haass attributes the decline of unipolarity in large part to United States energy policy. He argues that high levels of U.S. oil consumption and imports funnel financial resources to producer regions. Such financial capital would be better devoted to seeking to reduce the influence wielded by fossil-fuel net exporters by increasing our own energy independence and investing in sustainability.<sup>11</sup>

One of many explanations for the lack of real policy movement on the issue of foreign oil is that since economic assessments of the effects of energy security are generally vague and nebulous, policymakers frequently lack guidance for effective policy creation and implementation. In an effort to mitigate this problem, Lefèvre uses an alternative approach which delineates between the price and physical availability factors on energy security. Lefèvre's findings, based on European case studies, reveal that oil market resource concentration is an important factor in the rise of the price component of energy security.<sup>12</sup> This underlines the importance of the emphasis Lubeck, Watts, and Lipschutz place on securing stability in regions of oil resource concentration.<sup>13</sup>

Brown and Huntington note that increasing U.S. oil imports instead of trying to increase U.S. oil production expands the share of our energy supply derived from unstable regions, thus exacerbating oil price shocks.<sup>14</sup> However, as a fungible resource in the integrated global oil market, any upsurge in U.S. oil consumption (whether from domestic production or imports) can aggravate economic losses related to oil supply disruptions. In an investigation of externalities quantifiable as "oil security premiums" (economic losses connected to disturbances in oil supplies), the authors found that estimated oil security premiums are actually relatively modest compared to projected increases in oil price itself. The study by Brown and Huntington, as well as individual work by Brown, stresses that oil consumption makes the United States vulnerable to security externalities such as those described above, but that such economic concerns remain secondary to matters more directly related to the secu-

rity of energy supply.<sup>15</sup> These concerns include resource concentration outside the United States and the causes for current fluctuations in oil prices (such as government instability in producer regions).

Perceived threats to energy supplies are becoming increasingly salient in the energy security debate. Although in recent years leading industrial countries have integrated climate change concerns into their policy agendas, security of fossil fuel energy supply remains paramount; the United States consumes approximately two-three times the amount of its annual crude oil production. An ever-relevant concern in the United States, the attention devoted to energy security issues continues to grow at an unprecedented rate.<sup>16</sup> Perceived or actual vulnerabilities, due to excessive reliance on particular sources or suppliers of energy, have led to the rise of policies designed to diversify energy supplies. Such policies include the expansion of U.S. oil company investment in Algeria, the creation of giant wind farms in Texas, and exploration of U.S. natural gas reserves in shale formations.<sup>17</sup> However, although seen as more stable than some of its neighbors, Algeria remains vulnerable to the spread of regional unrest (see following "Jasmine in Bloom" section); domestic alternative energy production remains a nascent industry; and U.S. natural gas reserves have yet to be fully investigated. Despite favorable estimates of shale gas resources, uncertainty remains because the industry possesses the ability to fully predict neither "how resources in the ground translate into future yields" nor the true ecological repercussions of various extraction methods, including controversial hydraulic fracturing.<sup>18</sup> For the short term at least, U.S. energy needs continue to rely heavily on oil and on the MENA. Even oil-producing states in the region from which the United States does not directly import oil can affect international prices by limiting the supply of oil (in 2010, national oil companies controlled approximately 55% of current production and 85% of proven reserves).<sup>19</sup>

Lacher and Kumetat recently dispelled illusions of excessive risk on the part of European nations investing in North Africa.<sup>20</sup> However, their review neglected to consider the potential effects of mass reform movements. "Insurgency" was considered as a subcategory of "terrorism," but this is hardly comparable to largely peaceful mass protest and overthrowing of government. Lacher and Kumetat's article is also more geographically narrow in focus than this study, as they limit their investigation to North Africa. This paper then builds on their work by considering the effects of the current unrest in the MENA and gauging the potential consequences for U.S. energy security.

## Jasmine in Bloom: The 2011 MENA Revolutions

The 2011 uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa have garnered the appellations "Jasmine Revolution(s)" and "Arab Spring." The "Jasmine Revolution" label originally referred to the rise to power of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia in 1987. Media organizations, particularly those of Western origin, resurrected it recently to refer to the 2010–2011 unrest. The Tunisian protest movement then spread throughout the Middle East and North Africa, taking the phrase "Jasmine Revolution" with it. However, many demonstrators prefer to refer to the movements by country name, or cities where early protests broke out. The term "Arab Spring" has also been spread by the media, particularly Western media organizations. This, and phrases like "Arab Awakening," indicate a newly pro-revolution, pro-Arab attitude, which challenges formerly shallow Western media portrayals of the region. These appellations for the MENA demonstrations and protest movements may be used interchangeably without real differentiation in meaning.<sup>21</sup>

Demonstrations originated in Tunisia, following the December 17, 2010 self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, a jobless graduate protesting the confiscation of his fruit and vegetables by the police. The continuation of protests following this initial expression of anger in Tunisia, considered a stable nation in the region, surprised many observers. By January 9, between eleven and twenty deaths had been reported, following clashes between protestors and police. Riots broke out as demonstrators attacked public offices and burned cars. Two days earlier, rioting had taken place in neighboring Algeria over sharp increases in food prices. Although police dealt harshly with demonstrators, using teargas and batons, Algerian Trade Minister Mustapha Benbada promised imminent price reductions in edible staples, hoping this would mitigate the situation.<sup>22</sup>

Demonstrators refused to be suppressed in Tunisia. The uprising gained such strength that on January 14 Tunisian president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia. By this time the death toll had reached an estimated 200 people. U.S. President Barack Obama, apparently caught off-guard by the success of the Tunisian revolution, delivered a post-hoc statement lauding the "courage and dignity of the Tunisian people."<sup>23</sup> Algerian rioting also continued, although without marked success. Two Algerian men apparently set themselves on fire during this time span in what appeared to be copy-cat suicide attempts of the Tunisian December self-immolation that first sparked regional protests. Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi condemned the Tunisian revolution, while concern mounted among regional and Western leaders about the possibility of a domino effect in the MENA. On January 17, a man in Cairo set himself on fire,

apparently in protest against economic conditions. Near the end of the month, Yemen also made headlines as demonstrations, initially inspired by Tunisia then by the arrest of a well-known female Islamic activist, became more impassioned. Riot police used water cannons to disperse protestors; President Ali Abdullah Saleh attempted to defuse tensions by raising salaries of state employees, halving income taxes, and ordering his ministers to control prices.<sup>24</sup>

Also, during the end of January, unrest spread to Amman, Jordan. Demonstrators demanded political and economic reform. However, during the last six days of January, Western media attention was fixated on mass demonstrations in Egypt. Nationwide protests erupted with dissatisfied citizens calling for the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. By February 1, Mubarak attempted to placate protestors by promising to step down at the next election. This attempt failed, as did an effort to intimidate demonstrators using regime-orchestrated mob violence. Demonstrations also continued in Yemen, despite Saleh's offer to step down in 2013. The first week of February saw continued mass demonstrations in Egypt, in spite of renewed government efforts to wheel and deal its way out of the trouble. Mubarak finally stepped down on February 11 after eighteen days of mass protest. The following day, Algerian police beat back protestors in Algiers. Protests also resumed in Yemen, and appeared in Bahrain and Iran. Bahraini riot police fired teargas and rubber bullets at demonstrators during the first mass protests in a wealthy Gulf state. By the end of February, protests and accompanying riots had spread to many cities in Morocco, continued in Yemen and Egypt, reappeared in Tunisia, Bahrain, and Jordan, and also appeared in Iraq.<sup>25</sup>

Region-wide protests, and Western attention to them, eased at the beginning of the month of March as Libya took over the headlines. Mid-March saw Yemeni protests pick up pace once more; the banning of protests in Saudi Arabia (following street demonstrations by minority Shia groups); and Saudi support for the Bahraini regime in putting down protests that had almost overwhelmed riot police. Algeria moved to stave off additional unrest by providing pay raises to more government employees. Syrian security forces killed protestors in Daraa, while Saleh began to lose his grip on the Yemeni population. By March 21, eleven top Yemeni military commanders had resigned. Confrontations in Jordan and Bahrain also continued through the end of March. April saw continued unrest throughout MENA, with regime crackdowns and plainclothes security forces firing on civilians in Yemen; troops firing on and killing protestors in Syria; a Jordanian man setting himself on fire; pressure from Egyptian protestors to prosecute Mubarak; and systematic attacks by Bahraini forces against medical personnel assisting injured protestors. By the end of

April, the Syrian Government had sent tanks and troops into towns and villages in a massive crackdown; Yemeni ruler Saleh had promised to step down, but protestors continued to demonstrate over what was seen as a repugnant immunity deal negotiated with the Saudi-dominated Gulf Cooperation Council.<sup>26</sup>

Over a year later, the protests have only resulted in the resignation of three heads of state: Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and after a much longer process, Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen. Various other leaders have announced their intentions not to seek reelection after their current terms, including the Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Jordanian protests did result in the resignation of the government, but the breadth and depth of reforms is debated; in May of 2012, many observers feared the reform process had been stalled indefinitely.<sup>27</sup> The Obama Administration's overall response to the MENA revolutions has been remarkable for its underwhelming nature. Apparently caught flatfooted by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions (and supporting the semi-liberal regimes of "our guys"); seeming to try not to step on the Saudi royals' toes with regard to the Saudi Arabian and Bahraini demonstrations; reluctant to criticize the King of Jordan; and failing to express support or concern for the Syrian and Yemeni protestors until government crackdowns became extreme, the American Government has appeared to be making more of an effort not to support the revolutions than to express solidarity with the revolutionaries.<sup>28</sup> The perennial U.S. need for oil explains this reserve.

## U.S. Energy Security: The MENA Connection

A number of causes can result in energy price fluctuation, including current energy supply and demand conditions, financial market conditions, and expectations concerning future supply and demand. Due to the fungibility of oil, and the integration of global hydrocarbon markets, what takes place in the MENA is of paramount concern to the United States.<sup>29</sup> The North African region alone holds approximately 4.5% of the world's oil and 4.4% of the world's proven gas reserves.<sup>30</sup> Although the U.S. procures a greater amount of its oil from Canada than from anywhere else, disruptions in the MENA both directly and indirectly affect U.S. oil import capabilities. Direct effects include increased competition with Europe (the largest hydrocarbon importer from the MENA area) for MENA resources, while indirect effects include the destabilization of global hydrocarbon markets (e.g., through speculation).



Once the protests began in Tunisia, Brent crude oil prices increased by nearly \$20 per barrel to \$113 per barrel on March 8, 2011, at which point unrest had spread through a number of MENA countries.<sup>31</sup> (The price for West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude, the benchmark most often cited in the United States, did not increase as dramatically due to a variety of factors, including greater integration between the market for Brent.) With the launch of NATO Operation Odyssey Dawn in Libya (on March 19), prices rose even more dramatically to \$125. While oil futures had already been rising during the fourth quarter of 2010, largely as a result of the global economic recovery and accompanying increase in oil demand, unrest in the MENA contributed to higher prices. This is because of threats to the oil supply from and oil transportation through the region, as well as lower production having resulted from the protests. Furthermore, there remained concern (indeed, there remains concern, albeit now diminished) that more pronounced unrest may spread to the region's larger producers.<sup>32</sup>

"The MENA region includes some of the world's largest oil exporting countries and most important shipping chokepoints."<sup>33</sup> In total, the region's oil exports equal approximately 40% of global oil trade. Approximately 45% of the petroleum used in the United States is imported. 52% of that comes from the Western hemisphere, but 42% of the remainder comes from the Persian Gulf and Africa (although 10% is from Nigeria, largely unaffected by the MENA protests).<sup>34</sup> The EIA lists three shipping chokepoints in the MENA alone (the Suez Canal, Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz), which also impact international oil transport and availability.<sup>35</sup> Egyptian protests in January and February highlighted the possibility of disruptions to oil and natural gas transport between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. Turmoil in Libya, a larger oil exporter than Egypt, and Bahrain also increased concern in the oil markets, as a number of U.S. companies are invested in Libya's oil production. Although Saudi Arabia and Kuwait announced they would increase production to compensate for any loss from the Libyan disruption, some of the extra Saudi oil is of lower quality than Libyan crude, which makes Saudi oil an imperfect substitute for lost Libyan production. Some European refineries are not equipped to process lower quality crudes, which may result in damaging market competition for petroleum from Nigeria (which ranks seventh among U.S. oil suppliers) and Azerbaijan.

The United States' biggest concern, however, remains the possibility of the revolutionary movement spreading to other, larger petroleum producers in the region—specifically Saudi Arabia, which is the world's second-largest producer (behind Russia). According to the Congressional Research Service, "[i]n addition to its current output, as of the end of

2010, Saudi Arabia also held about 80% of the world's spare oil production capacity—capacity that is now being used to offset supply disruptions elsewhere."<sup>36</sup> If the Arab Spring decided to truly bloom in Saudi Arabia, market fears could potentially drive prices far higher. Finally, the security situation in the Strait of Hormuz is also of concern. The Strait, located between Iran and Oman, is used as a route for a third of global oil transport—any interruption could result in higher oil prices.<sup>37</sup>

## Realism: Strategic Concerns over Democratic Ideals

Realism, which emphasizes the propensity for conflict between states and their desire to maximize self-interest in the world system, provides us with a clear and parsimonious theoretical explanation for the behavior of the United States Government with regard to the recent MENA uprisings.<sup>38</sup> Structural realism evaluates the world politics at the system level. The unit of analysis is the state. The theory views international relations as a competition for power between self-interested states, leading to a generally pessimistic outlook on "the prospects for eliminating conflict and war."<sup>39</sup> It may be notable, then, that the United States has not been more vocal in its disapproval of the democratic movements in the Middle East. This can be attributed either to the conflict between realism and democratic ideals (like people, states do not always act out of purely rational self-interest) or to the fact that the MENA revolutions did not spread to larger oil producers in the area.<sup>40</sup>

Even more germane to our particular inquiry, structural realism emphasizes the need for each state to focus on its own survival in an anarchic world system. Waltz points out that states' actions can be explained by examining the constraints under which they operate in international competition. Structural realism emphasizes that not merely military might, but also energy security, is cause for concern, particularly for the United States.<sup>41</sup> States seek, at a minimum, their own survival, but at a maximum, universal domination. U.S. desire for, at the very least, our own energy security, is a clear and rational cause of recent reluctance to support grass-roots democracy. The preference for keeping "our guys" in power is self-evident.<sup>42</sup>

Wohlforth explains this with parsimony rivaling that of realist theory itself. Realism is based on three key assumptions: *groupism*, *egoism*, and *power-centrism*. *Groupism* dictates that people need group solidarity to survive above subsistence level. In the modern world, the group level is the state. *Egoism* holds that self-interest will inevitably win out over altruism; *power-centrism* holds that power is the "fundamental feature of

politics."<sup>43</sup> An important element of power is control of resources—such as energy. Key logical implications of these assumptions for our case study are as follows: the state, and nationalism, will be a key feature of politics; and state strategic interests will "trump any putatively universal morality and ethics."<sup>44</sup> Indeed, "realism suggests skepticism about the ability of even the wisest states to promote democracy beyond their own borders."<sup>45</sup>

Likewise, in keeping with the defensive realist theory of proponents such as Waltz, the United States has not come to the rescue of the autocrats removed from office as a result of the Arab Spring movement. While the United States will undoubtedly face a complicated policy situation in the Middle East as new regimes come to power, attempting to maximize its own power in the region by blatantly manipulating the situation and aiding in the suppression of mass protests would be unwise—the international system would react unfavorably.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion: Suggestions for Future Research

This paper has examined the recent Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa and the American energy concerns pertinent to it. The key puzzle was how to explain the lack of meaningful United States rhetoric in support of the MENA reform movement. It was a particularly curious conundrum given the freedoms on which our own country was founded. The evaluation of the U.S. energy security situation and the U.S. MENA relations demonstrated a connection between American energy security concerns and American foreign relations in the MENA. At one point in the beginning of 2011, oil prices jumped approximately eight percent in just a few days due to fears that the chaos in Egypt would affect the two million barrels per day that pass through the Suez Canal and the adjacent oil pipeline. This was clearly of grave concern to American policymakers and energy analysts.

This paper employed the theoretical approach of structural realism to further clarify and explain how energy security interests translated into American policy toward the MENA during these historic revolutionary efforts. As one of the most well-known theories of international relations, structural realism offers a framework for evaluating the competing goals of U.S. foreign policy and American democratic values. It provides a hierarchy of priorities. This hierarchy clearly shows that energy security is of great importance in the larger structure of national security.

This paper closes with some suggestions for future research. Scholars and policymakers should investigate the special case of Libya. A study of U.S. participation in the NATO intervention in Libya has the potential to provide additional clarification to this work on the U.S. response to the regional revolutions overall. Analysts have suggested contradicting explanations as to whether aiding the Libyan rebels is for altruistic, humanitarian reasons, or whether it is a bid to more quickly restore stability to an important producer—*action* for strategic purposes this time, instead of *inaction*.<sup>47</sup> Scholars have now begun to address U.S. and NATO participation in the Libyan revolution, but more work needs to be done. Research clarifying America's foreign policy on Libya would contribute greatly to the field. Additionally, the Syrian situation becomes more desperate by the day. Academic analysis of the United States' reluctance to intervene militarily in this matter would provide a valuable contribution to understanding the role that energy (in)security and democratic values play in American foreign policy (in)action.

## About the Author

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