

## **The Arab Spring needs statesmen**

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A little over three years ago, President Obama gave a much-anticipated speech in the hall of Cairo University that was titled "A New Beginning". It was designed to signal a break from the confrontational approach to the region adopted by the Bush Administration, and followed on from a Persian New Year's greeting delivered to Iran some months earlier.

Three years later, the US President finds relations with Iran increasingly dominated by talk of military action rather than negotiation, the seat of power in Cairo occupied by a democratically elected Islamist president who would be unlikely to invite the American president to repeat his speech, his ambassador to Libya and three other staff members killed in a mob attack and United States embassies in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen attacked.

Despite having presided over the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, establishing a timetable for their withdrawal from Afghanistan, guaranteed the security of most of the Gulf Arab states, provided billions of dollars in aid to others and offered the opportunity for a recalibrated approach to the region, President Obama must be wondering what more can be done to stop the Arab world from featuring purely as a security issue in American political dialogue.

Of course, the United States suffers from a not totally undeserved reputation for interfering in the Middle East to achieve political outcomes favourable to itself.

While this has been the lot of the region for centuries, one aspect of Washington's motivation that seems to rankle is the concept of American exceptionalism that consciously or unconsciously informs much of US policy in the region.

This belief in the role accorded to the United States reached its zenith during the Bush Administration, as some in Washington took to the notion of democratising the region with almost missionary zeal. And amongst Republicans at least that belief still exists. Senator John McCain even used the term recently in deriding President Obama, claiming that "He (Obama) does not believe in American exceptionalism and therefore, he doesn't believe that America should lead."

This notion of American leadership rankles with many in the Arab world, and produces the type of senseless violence that we have seen these past few days. Although ostensibly defending their religion these protestors, or those behind them are really railing against the United States. And therein lies the hypocrisy of their actions, as many of these same protestors are eager consumers of America.

Two of the oldest and most prestigious universities in the Arab world for instance, are the American University in Cairo and American University of Beirut (coincidentally founded by Presbyterians and Protestants respectively).

Many Arab students still see tertiary education in the US as the ultimate guarantee of quality.

Arabs are voracious consumers of American fast food, singers, movies and technology. From pop culture to education, the Arab world subconsciously acknowledges American exceptionalism - America leads and the Arab world largely follows.

But such senseless and misguided violence cannot be solved by the President of the United States seeking a new beginning in its relationship with the Arab world.

One of the reasons that the Arab world has done little other than to rail against US policies in the region is because the region lacks statesmen; leaders who can bring their populations along with them in pursuing unpopular policies that create something of international significance.

Some Arab politicians have reached high office in international organisations; Boutros Boutros Ghali from Egypt and Lakdar Brahimi from Algeria spring to mind. However with the exception of Anwar Sadat, it has been hard to name any Arab leader who has exhibited statesmanlike qualities.

Leadership in the Arab world has been largely characterised by hereditary rulers, autocratic opportunists or parochial leaders whose political horizons stretch little further than ensuring the maintenance of their rule through coercion or co-option. Little wonder that the Arab League is one of, if not the most ineffective multinational organisation in the world.

This current wave of popular protests against symbols of America, and the killing of American officials brought on by a provocative, amateurish, internet film with which the US government had nothing to do presents an opportunity for these nascent Arab democracies' leaders to exhibit some real leadership.

The reaction of elements of the population in response to a deliberately provocative film made by fringe elements of society must be roundly condemned, and the difference between the fringe elements that made the film and the US government should be made clear.

The first test for the new era of Arab leaders will be whether they can be statesmen or whether they will become a democratically-elected version of the limited rulers they have replaced.

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