POLITICAL ISLAM: POLICY

CHALLENGES FOR THE CONGRESS

VOL. 25, NO. 3

MAY 31 – JUNE 6, 2010

DIRECTOR:
Dick Clark

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
Washington, DC
This project was made possible by grants from the Asia Foundation, Ford Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Henry Luce Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, David & Lucile Packard Foundation, and Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the authors.

Copyright © 2010 by The Aspen Institute

The Aspen Institute
One Dupont Circle, NW
Washington, DC 20036-1133
Published in the United States of America in 2010 by The Aspen Institute

All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America
ISBN: 0-89843-526-9

1787/CP/BK
# Table of Contents

Rapporteur’s Summary. ................................................................. 1

*Geoffrey Kemp*

Pakistan, Democracy and Radical Islam: Policy Options for the U.S. ................. 11

*Samina Ahmed*

The U.S. and Afghanistan: Next Steps ............................................. 17

*Stephen Biddle*

The U.S. and Iran: The Trensils and Alternatives to Engagement ...................... 23

*Shahram Chubin*

North Africa: Changing Political Dynamics in Tunisia, Libya, Algeria and
Morocco and Implications for U.S. Policy ........................................ 29

*Claire Spencer*

Conference Participants ............................................................... 35

Conference Agenda ...................................................................... 37

Samina Ahmed opened the discussion on Pakistan, Democracy and Radical Islam: Policy Options for the U.S. She posed the question whether Pakistan can retain a functioning democracy and how this development would impact on the challenge of radical Islam and the dilemmas facing U.S. policy. Assuring a future for democracy in Pakistan is even more important than the current counter-terrorism campaign being conducted by the Pakistani government with the help of the U.S. Pakistan now has a young democracy based on a coalition, and the question is whether it can survive until 2013 when general elections are to be held. The government depends on unreliable coalition partners. The key opposition supporter, Nawaz Sharif, has his own ambitions to be Prime Minister. There is continued tension between the military and the political establishment. The former believe that the government remains weak on security, on relations with India and furthering Pakistani interests in Afghanistan. Perhaps most surprising and important, there is great tension between the Executive and the Pakistani Supreme Court. The judiciary now believes it has its day in the sun and is addressing two important issues: first, the long standing legal case against President Zardari and second, the question as to whether the constitution is open to judicial review.

Unless there is a stable government that has working relations with the military and judiciary, it cannot deal with the economic and military crises it faces. Political stability is essential. There have been a number of successes including institutional reform and progress on women’s rights. However, reform of the military prerogatives to cede control of internal security and foreign policy has not made much progress. The military still supports jihadist groups who are dedicated to conflict with India, and they continue to support the Haqqani insurgents in Afghanistan. Democratic transition is essential to develop civil institutions which in turn are necessary to assure civil liberties. In terms of how the U.S. should direct its assistance, it is very important to focus resources on institution-building that strengthens the rule of law. It must help the Pakistani government provide services for the people. These priorities are as important as support for Pakistani military activity. Concerning how the United States should handle Nawaz Sharif: we should remember that he is a cautious man. The U.S. needs to engage with him. Sharif, who many believe nurtures Islamist sympathies, is sometimes referred to by Pakistanis as having “a beard in his stomach”. He is reluctant to bring down the current government, but he clearly represents an important and powerful faction in Pakistani politics.
In the discussion, it was asked why some polls suggest the popularity of the U.S. in Pakistan is lower than that of Osama Bin Laden? What are we doing wrong? Is it because we are siding with the military? Certainly the history of U.S. support for past Pakistani military dictatorships does not sit well with many Pakistanis. The media plays an important role, and the military uses the media to leak stories against the U.S. which they feel is somehow against them. On the other hand, some polling agencies in Pakistan are unreliable. Most Pakistanis don’t hate the United States; they just don’t understand the U.S. On the question of whether the U.S. should emphasize support for stability over democracy, it is essential to nurture the democratic government. Pakistan is an ally of the United States from the perspective of the civilian government, however, the military looks to the future in a different way and believes the United States is on the way out of the region and wonders what comes next. What the military does not want is a pro-India Pakistan. As yet there are no major divisions within the military; it is a very well-structured and monolithic establishment.

Concerning the performance of the Pakistani economy and the role of U.S. aid, the government has done a good job of stabilizing the economy. Should the U.S. provide more for signature projects, such as those the Chinese have developed in Pakistan—especially infrastructure projects? These have drawbacks. The Chinese are not liked in Pakistan. It is probably better to focus U.S. assistance on more tangible projects which do not have the flamboyance of a signature project. There is also a problem that, when it comes to implementing projects in Pakistan, the Pakistani army tells U.S. officials that it has to do much of the work because the civilians simply are not available. On the other hand, the military refuses to allow civilian institutions to get involved for fear that it might undermine their power base.

There were interesting questions about the problems in Balochistan. The Baloch want justice and yet they feel they are being treated as second-class citizens by Islamabad. There is no doubt the Baloch are angry. South Afghanistan is next door, and they are getting money from jihadists in the Middle East. What the Baloch want to see is the implementation of the eighteenth amendment to the Pakistani constitution which would reallocate resources more fairly throughout the country.

Another problem in governance is the inherent weakness of the Pakistani Parliament and its inability to identify its priorities and carry out its policies; it does not have facilities, for instance, equivalent to that of the U.S. Congress with many interns and the Congressional Research Service. Even if there were more clarity and efficiency in parliament, the United States needs to be very clear as to where its money is going, and to have the support of experts to allocate funds most efficiently. Support for women’s rights and health programs should be a higher priority. There has been a regression in education in Pakistan over the years. The education issue is very relevant because the problem is that the U.S. has been providing money to build more schools, but what is needed is more teachers and equipment.

The question of Pakistan’s relations with India was addressed. There were proximity talks about reconciliation in the latter days of the Musharraf government. The problem is these talks, although they made a lot of progress, did not include the key stakeholders. The Kashmiris were not involved. The talks involved secondary actors. Despite the setback in Indo-Pak relations, including the Mumbai attacks in November 2008, India has been restrained because of its sympathy towards the Pakistani civilian government. But, if there is another attack, it is another question—India will probably have to respond very strongly.

On the matter of drone strikes by the U.S. on targets in Pakistan, these are hugely contentious. The targeting is getting much more sophisticated. The civil support in Pakistan for the insurgency is low given the high number of Pakistanis who have been killed by them. Public opinion is mostly focused on jihadist attacks.
rather than the drone attacks. But, looking to the future, the United States has to be careful about getting too deeply involved about waging war against the jihadists since there can be a backlash. Another factor the U.S. must take into account is the demographic challenges in Pakistan: 50% of the population is under eighteen, and the youth bulge raises a very serious problem since it has a lack of education and very high unemployment which provides recruitment opportunities for the jihadists. Education is essential.

On U.S. and Pakistani intelligence sharing, the problem is the U.S. has a short timeline, and the real threat is not al-Qaeda but al-Qaeda-linked local groups. The military is well-equipped to engage but not well-equipped to hold territory. There was considerable discussion about the role that Wahabism (a conservative sect of Sunni Islam originating in Saudi Arabia) plays in the troubles we face in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Saudi Arabia has spent over a billion dollars in South Asia and Southeast Asia promoting Wahabism in its extreme form. Most terrorist acts that have been conducted against the United States and its allies since 2001 can be linked to Wahabism. Some of the U.S. allies are not playing a constructive role in Pakistan. Middle East money is still funding jihadist madrassas and these have done huge damage throughout the region. The irony is that it was the United States that initially backed the jihadists in the fight against the Soviets in the early 1980s.

In the policy discussion, it was pointed out that the U.S. has spent over $1 trillion in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and still has major lapses in the intelligence field including the sparse number of linguists we have on hand. There is a real danger that Pakistan could become not only a failed state, but a failed nuclear state. What we must do is not only prevent this, but also strengthen the institutions of the society including the role of women and education of the young. It was suggested that we have a mixed record in Pakistan: we must not abandon our engagement in the country and we should be positive about the current cooperation between the various groups in the coalition. We have to be careful about pushing the military too hard for fear of unforeseen consequences. One problem that the U.S. faces is that the events in the region may cause the Congress to be less enthusiastic about continued engagement once our troops come out of Afghanistan. Another concern is that under the current financial constraints we face at home, there are budgetary problems in getting more money for overseas civilian projects which all agree are vital to the stability of the region. The only part of the aid bill that is really protected in Congress is the national security projects. This relates to the other realities that if and when we disengage from Afghanistan, the domestic pressure will be to use budget savings for domestic issues. These are harsh realities we must get used to. It reflects a major challenge for us in the future, and it reflects the fact that our policy towards Pakistan remains vague and somewhat disjointed at this time.

The second day covered U.S. policy in Afghanistan. Stephen Biddle focused on two themes for discussion drawn from his paper. First, is it in America’s interest to wage war in Afghanistan; and, secondly, what is the status of the current military campaign? It is a close call to assess the costs and benefits of current military operations. We need to be specific as to why this is such a difficult conclusion to reach. First, our interests are indirect not direct; we have a long list of aspirations for what we would like to see happen in Afghanistan and for it to become a stable state. Vital security interests include that there be no new base for operations for Osama bin laden and al-Qaeda and that there be no base in Afghanistan for any operations against Pakistan. Pakistan remains a critical strategic issue because of its geography, the fact that Osama bin laden is still at large, and the reality that Pakistan is a nuclear weapons state. We have limited influence in Pakistan, but we must face the fact that if the situation in Pakistan worsens, the result would be more
dangerous than Afghanistan. The failure of our counter-insurgency policy could lead to the fall of Kabul and the fall of Afghanistan; this in turn could trigger a failure in Pakistan and a possible Taliban take over. Under these circumstances they could get their hands on Pakistan’s nuclear weapons. In view of the severity of this threat, a successful prosecution of the war in Afghanistan reduces the odds of a catastrophic failure in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Concerning the military situation on the ground, counter-insurgency operations are labor intensive and take a long time. There are four stages to our operations; clear, hold, build, and transition. Different phases are occurring at different timelines in different parts of the country. For instance, we started much later in this process in Kandahar than elsewhere. Helmand province is the test case; if our ideas work there, we ought to see progress throughout the country. We must accept that there is a “darkness before dawn” syndrome; when we start to contest violence in critical regions, violence goes up. Thus the early phases always look bad. It is therefore too early to make a clear-cut judgment on how the military operations will progress.

In the discussion period it was pointed out that there have been briefings about how successful our policies have been in Helmand, however it must be noted that Helmand is going through a phase, and the story is not over. There is great ambiguity about what victory means. There is a difference between not losing and winning. The very messiness of counter-insurgency warfare suggests that most operations end in negotiations and the question is whether we can get a good deal from any negotiations, ultimately with elements of the Taliban.

Questions were asked about the performance of Afghani President Hamid Karzai. The feeling was the U.S. should not needle him at this point in time. But something should be done to change the nature of the presidency in Afghanistan since it is strewn with corruption and inefficiency. Some noted that they voted for the war in Afghanistan in 2001, but now the war has expanded because of the Pakistani dimension. And the question is, can we separate our goal to clean out al-Qaeda, as distinct from defeating the Taliban? We must face the fact that many Americans have lost the appetite for war after all these years. The best case for continuing operations is that it reduces the odds that we will lose. Terrorism comes in different shapes and we must accept that radical groups with weapons of mass destruction pose an existential threat to us, but if they merely have other weapons, including chemical weapons, they do not. There was some disagreement on the vulnerability of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons in the event of political change in Pakistan. Some felt the Pakistani army was likely to retain strong control over their nuclear weapons, but of course nothing is certain and any change of regime in Pakistan would raise the stakes dramatically.

How sustainable is the American effort in Afghanistan given our domestic challenges, in particular our deficit crisis? Here we have to distinguish between the cost of fighting the war and the cost of sustaining peace in the region. For most of the 20th century Afghanistan was at peace with its neighbors. Thus the neighbors must play an important role in the sustainability of Afghanistan. Afghanistan is currently a highly-centralized state but this is not historically how it’s been managed. The centralization grew out of the radical events of the 1980s and 1990s. Now we have a centralized government with corruption getting worse.

One of the most troubling problems from the regional perspective is the perception that the U.S. is going to eventually leave. This will determine not only Afghani but also Pakistani behavior. This raised questions about “exit strategies” which are due to begin in July 2011. This has created considerable concern in the neighborhood. Some asked whether it was in the Pakistani military interest for the U.S. to go. They want their hands on the levers, but they don’t want the Americans to abruptly “cut and run”. There were questions as to Iran’s
role in Afghanistan and was it helpful? It certainly was helpful initially in 2001 at the Bonn conference, which pulled together the interim Afghani government. Iran continues to pull its punches in Afghanistan. It is following a mixed strategy. There is a natural enmity between Iran and the Taliban due to Sunni-Shia differences.

What sort of government would the U.S. like to see emerge and what kind of power sharing between the country and the central government, including the role of parliament, is possible? There needs to be an internal balance of power between the various factions and ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Most participants felt that Karzai, as a result of his recent visit to Congress, realizes that there are limits on what the U.S. is prepared to do.

Some were very pessimistic about our long-term staying capacity and wondered if we have gone “a bridge too far.” It was pointed out that fiscal constraints ended the British Empire and helped contribute to the breakup of the Soviet Union. Now we’re feeling the pain. But if we fail in Afghanistan we have to live with the costs, which are going to be considerable. There was some discussion of the poppy trade. Certainly we need a more coherent strategy towards narcotics, but in lieu of the other crises we face in Afghanistan, it is currently a secondary problem.

The policy discussion reflected deep anxiety about our mission in Afghanistan. Few expected us to be in Afghanistan nine years after the war began in 2001. The American people have patience but not endless patience. Furthermore, it is difficult for us to sustain the war financially. The key must be to bring in regional partners, including China and Iran as well as India and Pakistan. Afghanistan is a humbling country and there is growing sentiment in the Congress for a new resolution to ask the president “When will we leave?” The fundamental problem is that, unlike major countries like China, we do not have a long-term vision for the region.

The third session was introduced by Shahram Chubin and focused on whether the U.S. should engage with Iran, and what the pros and cons of engagement are. In the broader context it must be understood that the U.S. has diminished stature and authority in the region. It has finite resources and a divided public opinion. For many in the region the price of saying “no” to the United States is going down, and there are doubts about U.S. staying power. This is giving the U.S. less influence on regional politics. Add to this the inherent difficulties in dealing with Iran. The U.S. has a lack of knowledge of the Iranian system and uncertainty about its own strategy. From the Iranian perspective the current regime in Tehran probably prefers enmity to engagement.

It’s not clear whether the Mullahs want nuclear weapons or just the capability to make them. But while it’s difficult to know exactly how to deal with them, the preferred American strategy should be to help Iran abandon its enrichment program and to permit maximum inspections of its nuclear facilities. But since this is unlikely to happen, how do you stop Iran “being nuclear capable?” On the one hand, if Iran is “caught”—that is to say crosses a red line that’s clearly laid down in the NPT (Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty)—its one thing. But what should be done if it merely continues on the same track and delays any deliberate crossing of a red line; in other words, if Iran does not behave similarly to North Korea who crossed the red line and withdrew from the NPT?

It is not clear what the U.S. can live with in terms of an Iranian nuclear capability. There are attempts to find commonality with our allies, but ultimately the major decisions will be made in Washington. Key players, such as Russia and China, are likely to continue to be obstructionist. They want the U.S. to pay a high price for their support for limited sanctions.

On the specific issue of Iranian politics, the spontaneous protests of hundreds of thousands taking to the streets last June to contest the election results were a watershed. It did not occur overnight. Public dissent with the regime
has been brewing since 1997. The elite rule a polarized society; foreign policy is a product of domestic policy. If there were a more pluralistic society in Iran there would be much less to worry about. The issue is about trust, not technology; unfortunately the regime is here to stay, at least for the near term. In terms of policy options the nuclear issue is only the tip of the iceberg. The real question concerns the nature of the regime. It is unwise for the U.S. to intervene or openly embrace the opposition, but we should support democratic principles in Iran and condemn as much as possible the regime’s repressive policies. The U.S. should focus on the human rights violations in Iran, including the multiple hangings.

In the discussion period, one participant outlined a number of reasons why the relationship is so bad. The problem began in the 1950s for the support of the return of the Shah in 1953, and continued with American support for Saddam Hussein, and failure to condemn his use of weapons of mass destruction against the Iranians. President Rafsanjani tried to ease tensions with the U.S. but was rejected. President Khatami also tried and ended up with the regime being placed on the “Axis of Evil” list. The current Supreme Leader has written to Presidents Bush and Obama but has only gotten vague responses. The question is not whether one is pro- or anti-engagement, but how to go about it. The debate today in Iran in part focuses on the legitimacy of President Ahmadinejad, and the reality is that the U.S. and Iran have many common interests. The trick is how to make this engagement work. So far the U.S. has not presented a comprehensive proposal; neither has Iran. What is needed is a comprehensive package including all concerns of the West and the Iranians, and a list of the common interests. Iran needs to know what’s going to happen at the end of the engagement. It needs a face-saving principle to solve the nuclear issue. The target should be to limit Iran’s ability to divert from its nuclear energy program to a weapons program. The Five plus One countries have never prepared any practi-

cal formula for guaranteeing that Iran could keep its nuclear energy.

During the discussion it was asked, “How do we support the Green Movement without playing into the hands of the regime?” Some suggested that we should not directly support the Green Movement, but focus on support for the principle of human rights. The U.S. has to play a comprehensive hand, and it needs to mix sanctions with engagement, but what is the sequence? Should sanctions come first and then engagement or should they be done simultaneously? The problem is we cannot afford to wait for domestic change to come about in Iran. If there is to be any progress, engagement has to occur as soon as possible, but this does not rule out sanctions. Part of the difficulty of understanding the Iranian position is that the U.S. doesn’t really know how Iranians feel about nuclear weapons as distinct from nuclear energy. There has never been an open debate in Iran about the bomb as distinct from their right to produce enriched uranium.

Some felt the U.S. needs a completely new approach since the current policy has failed. Military strikes against Iran will be negative for the U.S. and Israel; the Iranian regime will stay in power. The U.S. has vital interests beyond the nuclear issue. Unfortunately there is profound mistrust between the two parties and the U.S. has never really engaged. What Iran seems to want is acceptance, security, control of its borders, a crackdown on the drug traffic, and the right to exist. What therefore should the U.S. do? The Obama administration should offer high-level bilateral meetings and try to focus on the issue of trust. On the nuclear issue, the ultimate goal is the acceptance of an Iranian enrichment program provided there continues to be intrusive inspections.

What about other countries and their problems with Iran? The trouble here is that the Europeans have no authority to decide, they have always deferred on the big issues to the U.S. and they worry that any initiative they put forward will be vetoed by Washington. In the
absence of any breakthrough some felt that the real emphasis of American policy must be to prepare for deterrence, but would an American nuclear umbrella in the Gulf States be credible, would the Gulf States believe it?

Some stressed that from an American point of view the security of Israel is key to any negotiations we have with Iran. Unless this issue is put up front there will be no support for engagement or concessions on the part of the U.S. The Iranians know this and therefore they play the Muslim card. Their hostile rhetoric to Israel is not really an ideological issue; the two countries do not pose existential threats to each other, but the politics of the region make anti-Israeli rhetoric very effective. Some worry that the Iranians don’t understand how important the Israel factor is in American politics. And as for the effectiveness of sanctions, it was pointed out that they may not change Iranian nuclear policy, but they certainly pose a constraint on Iranian economic development. Sanctions won’t stop the centrifuges, but they make life harder for the regime. The U.S. should not look at Iran solely through bilateral lenses. Iran’s security is linked to the security in the region. To the extent that the U.S. merges closer ties and has successful policies in regional countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, this will diminish Iran’s power to be a hegemon. It is very important to draw in Turkey and ultimately Syria away from Iran because they are, at the moment, allies of Iran. It is critical to recalibrate and improve relations with Turkey.

Most participants agreed that the rigged Iranian elections of June 12, 2009 were a watershed. But this is unlikely to lead to any fundamental change in the society, since no charismatic opposition leader has emerged. However the death of the Supreme Leader would be a decisive moment and could be a watershed, and will show whether or not Iran will continue to pursue a democratic façade or whether it will become a dictatorship under the control of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Finally, it was noted that on the issue of Iran’s nuclear program there is a certain amount of hypocrisy with American policy. The U.S. supported the Shah’s efforts in developing multiple nuclear capabilities. The U.S. has done nothing to reign in India, Pakistan, or Israel and the Iranians feel discrimination. And for this reason the U.S. is probably unwise to focus on the nuclear issue because the right to enrichment is one of the issues where the regime has the support of the country, while on other issues, it does not.

In the policy discussion some felt that the administration has been on top of the issue and that it has been very successful in getting Russia, China, and the Europeans to agree to a new round of sanctions even though they do not have many teeth. The new financial sanctions are likely to be more effective than any attempt to restrict gasoline sales to Iran. It is accepted that sanctions, while not decisive, are the least dangerous policy to impose. The use of force would be much more dangerous and risky for American interests and for the region. New sanctions must include the Iranian central bank, but again the threshold question is Israel. Iran is going to have to give Israel assurances that it is not truly interested in destroying it. We shouldn’t underestimate our long-term influence as a result of the information and technology revolution. We have far better ways of communicating with them than in the past and they know all the things that are going on here. We need greater communication with the young people of Iran and should encourage them to visit. One of the reasons we have such an interest in Iran is that the industrial world is still dependent upon Middle East hydrocarbons. We must move ourselves away from this dependency; China is trying to do so. If and when this happens, Iran will lose stature if the price of oil falls. We must accept that our policy toward Iran has demonstrated a series of failures. Now we should think about new initiatives, including an initiative by members of Congress to engage with Iranian parliamentarians.
The final session dealt with North Africa and the particular challenges faced by Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Tunisia. Claire Spencer introduced the session. She pointed out that North Africa represents a “layer cake” of cultures. The tribal and trading people of the Mediterranean do not fit into rigid ideological stereotypes. Given the geography of North Africa, the people have been open to multicultural influences over the years. While there are differences between the four countries under consideration, the reality is that in each country, the state belongs to the elites. The citizens operate in a “live and let live” environment, where the entry point into government for 90% of the people is limited. Those who choose to confront officialdom are either human rights activists or terrorists. Some of the peaceful activists are getting more access, particularly in Morocco and Tunisia. In the context of political Islamists, those who support terror are a minority. The fallout from 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terrorism have given a new lease on life to the authority of the states in North Africa. The good news is that this has brought relative stability. The economics of the region are not bad, debts are under control, but private-sector growth is lacking.

This raises the question of what U.S. policy should be towards the region. Stability is a worthy objective, but the problem is that the state in these countries is the largest employer; and Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya all face succession issues. The relations with Europe are good, but in some respects, Europe is part of the problem since the business community in Europe has very close ties with the leadership and therefore is not anxious to see a dramatic change in the status quo. As far as American policy is concerned, the best priority is to facilitate new economic reform and empower people through economic growth. It should be done by stealth. The United States does not need to play a dominant role since its interests lie elsewhere, but it would benefit from a stable region.

In the discussion panel, the issue of succession and economics was raised, and the hope is that there would be less focus on person-
military background. This raises a problem for the United States which throughout the region is seen by many intellectuals as an obstacle to reform because it supports dictators such as Mubarak and does not do enough to nurture reform. But if we try to use our military aid to Egypt as a lever to promote political reform, what would the backlash be? We don’t know; it is a difficult calculation to make. Some felt that the Egyptians were engaging in “the tail wagging the dog” and the military were behaving in a similar way to those in Pakistan. Others felt strongly that democracy should not be seen as a politically correct approach for the United States but as a real national security issue.

In the final policy discussion, which covered all four days of the meeting, the question was raised about putting together a U.S. congressional delegation to visit Iran and meet with Iranian parliamentarians. There was considerable support for this amongst the group, although the mechanics and the reality of such a trip remain vague.

On broader issues, some felt that the U.S. is putting too much money into military assistance throughout the region and that more should go into education, water, human rights and women’s rights. While North Africa is clearly not a priority for the United States, if one ounce of prevention will help stability in the region, then we can afford it. The problem is that “charity begins at home,” and there are priorities beyond North Africa. Certainly funded scholarships seem a good idea, but by and large we should count on the Europeans to do most of the heavy lifting. Nevertheless, North Africa offers an interesting area for the United States to engage in. We need to keep pushing for practical ways to provide democratic values. The singular focus on military operations has not worked well in any part of the world. We need to nurture freedom and information sharing. The younger generation will look at the world differently. Furthermore, ultimately there is going to be a huge transfer of wealth when we change from oil to other forms of energy. This will require massive adjustments in regions that are dependent on exports of fossil fuel. Some felt that the United States is always in too much of a hurry, that we have a tendency to be a “control freak”, that we want to go it alone rather than work in multilateral channels. We must understand that Islam, and the various challenges it poses, is not monolithic. We should not be pushing democracy but rather education. We should focus on our core values of human rights.

In some ways, the final session was a refreshing change from the other three intense discussions on Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, primarily because the United States’ vital interests and our blood and treasure are not directly involved. Discussing North Africa provided a welcome channel for participants to express their ideas for furthering American interests in an important but not vital region for American interests.
Pakistan: Democracy and Radicalism: Policy Options for the U.S.

Samina Ahmed, Ph.D.
Project Director for South Asia
International Crisis Group

Two years after taking over power from former President Musharraf’s military regime, Pakistan’s democratically elected government confronts multiple political and economic crises. With terror attacks also taking a rising toll on citizens and state institutions, the risk that this democratic transition, as others before it, could stumble and even ultimately fail cannot be ruled out.

The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)-led government remains weak, partly because it is forced to rely on some unreliable coalition partners but largely because of a powerful military, which refuses to cede control over sensitive areas of domestic and foreign policy. An increasingly assertive superior judiciary also challenges the executive’s authority.

Pakistan’s stability is even more at risk because of the military’s continued support for Islamist proxies to promote perceived national security interests in India and Afghanistan. This use of jihadist proxies has heightened India-Pakistan tensions; another attack such as the November 2008 incident in Mumbai could conceivably lead to a war between the two nuclear-armed adversaries. With the military’s tacit or overt support, Pakistani and Afghan jihadists have also ratcheted up attacks against Afghan and U.S.-led coalition forces, undermining Afghan stability and increasing the risk that Pakistan’s borderlands could once again descend into chaos.

Yet despite enormous odds, the return of democracy is moving the state in the right direction. There are signs of real progress, particularly with regard to domestic governance. Within the short space of two years, the PPP-led government and its parliamentary opposition have enacted tangible and long-overdue reforms, reached through democratic bargaining and consensus. The 18th constitutional amendment, in particular, has the potential of restoring parliamentary sovereignty and strengthening federal democracy. If sustained and implemented, this reform process could reduce political, ethnic and regional tensions, exacerbated by almost a decade of military rule, that threaten the stability of a fragile state.

The U.S is understandably concerned about Pakistan’s political stability, given the threats posed by Islamist radical violence to the country, and from Pakistan to its neighborhood and beyond. With the right policy choices, however, the U.S. could play a major role in helping to stabilize Pakistan’s democratic transition, which would in turn stabilize the volatile region in which it is situated.

Democratic Reform: Challenges and Prospects

Soon after the PPP government was formed under President Asif Ali Zardari’s leadership, following the 18 February 2008 elections, domestic and international observers expressed doubts that it would complete its five-year term.
Two years later, although the government has stumbled from crisis to crisis, it has not only survived against all odds but has also managed to set Pakistan back on the democratic path.

For the ruling party, one of the greatest challenges lies in keeping an unwieldy coalition together. With a slim majority in parliament, it has been forced to include some unreliable partners in the federal and state governments. These include the Muhajir Quami Movement (MQM), whose Muhajir constituency (Urdu-speaking migrants and their descendents) is often at odds with the PPP’s Sindhi base. The PPP cannot rely on either the MQM’s support or that of another coalition partner, the Islamist Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, since both parties have a long history of close ties with the military, evident in their partnership with Musharraf’s regime.1

The PPP government’s survival thus depends to a considerable extent on Nawaz Sharif, who heads the main opposition party, the center right Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N). If the PML-N were to support a no-confidence vote in parliament, the government would fall, and midterm elections would have to be held. PML-N hardliners are tempted to support such a move since their party, currently seen as more popular than the PPP, would likely win at the polls. However, party chief Sharif is hesitant to destabilize the government, well aware that this would only empower an ambitious military that had ousted his government in the October 1999 coup, forcing him into exile for several years.

The ruling party is clinging to power through the support of its main opposition at a time when relations with the powerful military leadership are far from cordial. President Zardari’s reported personal differences with Army Chief General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani aside, the military’s opposition to the PPP is also rooted in a long history of discord and distrust, with a former PPP Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto executed by a military ruler, General Zia-ul-Haq and both PPP governments, headed by Benazir Bhutto, ousted through military-devised interventions during the 1990s before they completed their full terms of office. The military’s opposition to the PPP also lies in its mistrust of a party that has historically supported rapprochement with India and Afghanistan.

The military leadership is more than likely aware that the longer an elected government lasts, and the more stable a democratic transition, the more difficult it is to retain or consolidate its hold over political power and the resultant economic benefits. Conscious, however, that a direct military intervention would face international, including U.S. opposition, also aware that Pakistani public opinion would strongly oppose such an intervention, the military could resort, as it did during the failed democratic transition of the 1990s, to indirect manipulation.

This could conceivably include using its previous allies and the PPP’s current coalition partners, particularly the MQM, to undermine the government. The military’s allies in the media have certainly, since the government’s formation, launched a concerted campaign to discredit the PPP leadership, particularly President Zardari. Yet the superior judiciary’s over-zealous pursuit of power is far more of a threat, and could provide the high command the lever it needs to remove the government. The military could then, as in the past, put a puppet regime in place, followed by rigged elections, which would allow it to rule from behind the scenes.

While the judiciary’s role in such a ‘soft coup’ cannot be dismissed out of hand given the history of successive military interventions legitimized by the superior judiciary, the current Supreme Court owes its very existence to the popular movement that led to the restoration of democracy. It would be well aware that it would lose its credibility and popular standing. However, even without the military’s urging, this superior judiciary is resorting to judicial activism that appears to infringe on executive authority, taking suo moto action (on its own violation), for instance, on issues ranging from the price of sugar and petroleum products to bureaucratic appointments and promotions.
The strained relations between the ruling party and the judicial leadership, particularly Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, and the potential for judicial support, no matter how inadvertent, for an indirect military intervention, could be triggered by two particular cases. First, the Chief Justice, having declared the National Reconciliation Ordinance unconstitutional, insists that the government reopen all corruption cases against Zardari, including those in Swiss courts, despite presidential immunity. Should the court rule that the president does not enjoy immunity from prosecution while in office, Zardari would be forced to step down. Since he is also PPP co-chairman, the government might opt to resign, with the resultant instability working only in the interest of anti-democratic forces.

The Supreme Court’s decision to hear petitions against the 18th constitutional amendment is even more significant, with an unwise judgment potentially undermining the progress made thus far to stabilize the Pakistani polity. Indeed, the 18th amendment can be considered one of the major accomplishments of the PPP government and a welcome sign of maturity of Pakistan’s civilian leadership. Signed by the president into law on 19 April 2010, passed unanimously by the National Assembly and the Senate, the 18th amendment is a landmark bill that restores parliamentary sovereignty and strengthens federal democracy. The amendment expands fundamental rights and removes the constitutional distortions of military rule, repealing, for instance, Musharraf’s 17th amendment, including Article 58-2 (b) that gave the president, the head of state, the power to dismiss elected governments. Transferring the powers of appointing army chiefs and provincial governors from the president to the prime minister, the amendment strengthens the federation by devolving considerable power and authority from the center to the federal units.

Prohibiting any institution, including the Supreme and High Courts from validating the subversion of the constitution, the amendment also makes the appointment of judges of the higher courts far more transparent by establishing a seven-member judicial commission, composed of judges, the law minister and attorney general and a representative of the lawyers’ community, which would send nominations to a parliamentary committee, composed equally of government and opposition members. This provision has been challenged by a number of anti-government elements and is being considered by the Supreme Court, disregarding Article 39 (5) of the constitution which clearly states: “No amendment of the constitution shall be called in question in any court on any ground whatsoever.”

Should the Supreme Court decide to strike down even a single article of the 18th amendment, devised by the collective will of the country’s elected representatives, this could result in a serious clash between the legislature and the judiciary. Such a clash would undermine progress made thus far by the PPP government to stabilize the democratic transition.

The government has initiated a number of major democratic reforms in the past two years including the passage of the National Finance Commission Award on redistributing financial resources by the federation to the provinces, the first since 1997. On 14 August 2009, Zardari announced a FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) reform package, which includes lifting restrictions on political party activity, curtailing arbitrary arrests and detentions, and envisages audit of funds for FATA. The Balochistan package, introduced in parliament in November 2009, pledges economic, political and social rights and justice for the Baloch, including initiating judicial enquiries into the killing of Baloch leader Akbar Bugti and other Baloch politicians, tracing the disappeared, and ending military operations.

The military has stymied the FATA reform package. It is also undermining the reconciliation process in Balochistan, where grievances against the center’s exploitation of provincial resources and the indiscriminate use of force have resulted in a province-wide insurgency. Although continued military operations and
targeted killings and disappearances of political dissidents have hardened Baloch attitudes, the very fact that Baloch parties in parliament supported the 18th amendment shows that there is real potential, should the democratic transition stabilize, to bring the Baloch back into the political fold.

A stable and sustained democratic transition is also needed to allow the country’s leadership to focus on the issues that concern the average Pakistani, badly hit by high living costs and the state’s inability to provide basic services. Forced by the economic legacy of military misgovernment to obtain an economic bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the government has had to reduce subsidies on energy consumption, with the resultant inflation fuelling public discontent. The dysfunctional energy sector, which is hampering economic growth even as prolonged power outages provoke public discontent, is a matter of particular concern. The government has, once again after consultations with the opposition, devised a package to conserve and increase energy supplies but much more needs to be done with donor, particularly U.S., support.

The government has also created programs to give some protection to the country’s poor, such as the Benazir-income support program that specifically targets women. Yet no civilian government will be in a position to provide the capital needed for human development unless it can reduce the ever-increasing defense burden, justified by the military on the grounds of anti-terrorism and anti-insurgency operations. Religious radicalism could increase even further since rising unemployment and a youth bulge, with almost half the population under the age of 18, give violent extremists opportunities to exploit domestic alienation.

The Struggle Against Violent Extremism

The military, under General Kayani’s leadership, claims that it is committed to eliminating violent extremists, and has indeed suffered heavy losses in operations, particularly in the FATA and Malakand division, including Swat. The civilian government realizes that its legitimacy depends on effective action to eradicate the terror networks responsible for killing more than 8,600 civilians in 2009 in more than 1,900 terror attacks, including suicide bombings. Public opinion has understandably turned against the violent extremists, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa but also countrywide.

Despite the military’s claims of having routed the terrorists, the continuing attacks show that militant organizations, especially command and control, have yet to be eliminated. Nor is there any evidence that the tribal borderlands are firmly under the state’s control. Indeed, these regions, particularly FATA’s North Waziristan but also Khyber and Orakzai Agencies, remain sanctuaries and a base of operations for homegrown and foreign extremists. North Waziristan, in particular, is the base of the al-Qaeda linked Haqqani network and its Pakistani Taliban allies, responsible for attacking NATO/ISAF (International Security Assistance Force), U.S. and Afghan forces across the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

The military’s ineffectiveness is partly the result of selective and inconsistent operations, which continue to oscillate between the use of indiscriminate force and appeasement deals. The ongoing operation against some Pakistani Taliban groups in South Waziristan, for instance, has been accompanied by new peace deals with other equally violent homegrown extremists such as the Gul Bahadur group in North and the Maulvi Nazir group on South Waziristan Agencies, which, in turn, are linked to Mullah Omar’s shura and the Haqqani network, and actively involved in cross-border attacks in Afghanistan. The military leadership, however, believes that the Quetta shura and the Haqqani network are serving and will in the future promote perceived national security interests in Afghanistan.

The alliance between the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban with al-Qaeda linked Sunni jihadi groups in Pakistan’s heartland is particularly ominous. The British government rightly
believes that most terror plots can be traced back to Pakistan-based jihadi groups, so too, as the most recent attack on CIA personnel in Khost province demonstrates, can many high profile attacks in Afghanistan. Terror plots hatched by Americans of Pakistani origin within the U.S. homeland have also been traced back to Pakistani jihadi contacts. Ignoring the threats to its U.S and other Western allies, the Pakistani military high command, however, still sees al-Qaeda linked groups such as the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT), renamed Jamaat-ud-Daawa (JD), and the Jaish-e-Mohammad as an asset in its proxy war against India.7

The U.S. is particularly concerned about the safety and security of Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal, given the spread of jihadi violence in the country. There’s little doubt that the more Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal expands, particularly stockpiles of fissile material, the more the risk of pilferage. But the real danger lies in a conflict between Pakistan and India escalating to the nuclear level. Although India exercised enormous restraint after the 2008 Mumbai attacks, it could opt for a far more robust military response should another such attack occur. And the risks of such an attack remain high so long as the military refuses to allow civilian law enforcement agencies to take effective action against these dangerous al-Qaeda linked jihadis.

Despite attacks as far south as Karachi and in the farthest reaches of the tribal borderlands in the northwest, the military still refuses to accept the link between homegrown, regional and transnational terror organizations. Having publicly pledged to eliminate this terrorist syndicate, the civilian government could, if given the authority and autonomy, effectively tackle it though civilian law enforcement agencies, particularly in the Pakistani heartland. The PPP-led government has also repeatedly expressed its desire for peace with Afghanistan and India as has the PML-N opposition. However, the civilian leadership must first be able to control national security and foreign policy which, given the military’s unwillingness, would ultimately depend on the survival of the democratic transition.

Policy Options for the U.S.

U.S. policymakers are understandably concerned about Pakistan’s stability but Washington D.C. must resist the temptation of resorting, as in the past, to quick fixes. It must resist in particular the temptation to fall back on the policy of engaging with Pakistan’s military at the cost of civilian institutions. The belief that the military is the sole organized and effective institution capable of delivering counter-terrorism dividends has undermined U.S. credibility and indeed U.S. vital national security interests in Pakistan since 2001. Although the deteriorating Afghan conflict might once again tempt U.S. policy makers to go down the same path, U.S. patience with and support for the democratic transition would pay major dividends—in terms of countering the threats of violent extremism emanating from Pakistan and in stabilizing a fragile nuclear-capable state, located in a volatile neighborhood.

A sustained democratic transition would go a long way in stabilizing Pakistan by bringing estranged ethnic communities such as the Baloch back into the political fold. The assertion of civilian authority over security policy would empower civilian governments to counter radicalism, helping also to bring an end to the military’s long-standing policy of using jihadis for proxy wars in neighboring India and Afghanistan.

U.S. policy should therefore focus on strengthening the new civilian order through political support, helping also to build civilian capacity through the most appropriate use of civilian assistance. The U.S. administration must also warn the Pakistan high command of the redlines that it must not cross if it is to remain the recipient of generous U.S. military aid.

The U.S. should:

- Strengthen USAID’s capacity to oversee and implement civilian assistance to Pakistan, including hiring and deploying personnel with regional expertise and/or experience in post-conflict development.
- Resist the temptation of judging the suc-
cess of civilian assistance in terms of the money spent; instead, the effectiveness of U.S. assistance should be gauged through periodic internal and independent assessments of the impact of assistance on target communities and civilian institutions.

- Relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction of FATA and Malakand division’s conflict-hit zones must be civilian-led, empowering displaced communities to determine their own needs and priorities.

- Assessments of the political, social and environmental impacts of development, particularly large-scale signature projects, must be made prior to the allocation of funds and after extensive consultation with Pakistani official counterparts and civil society organizations.

- Financial oversight mechanisms over donor-funded programs should include local representatives and independent bodies, including nongovernmental and civil society organizations.

- Building the capacity of the civilian police and supporting judicial and penal reform should take priority over supporting the military’s capacity to conduct counter-insurgency operations.

- Political and constitutional reforms in FATA should be encouraged through support for comprehensive governance, stabilization and appropriate rural development efforts.

- Military assistance should be conditioned on demonstrable steps by the military to support civilian efforts to eliminate all terror networks, particularly those that target India and Afghanistan.

1. The Muhajir Qaumi Movement is a coalition partner in the federal and Sindh provincial governments and the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam is a coalition partner in the federal government.

2. The National Reconciliation Ordinance, signed by Musharraf in December 2007 overturned all cases against political leaders between January 1986-October 1999, allowing Bhutto to return home and participate in politics.

3. Article 248 of the constitution provides immunity to the president from prosecution while in office.


6. The Northwest Frontier Province was renamed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (or the home of the Pashtuns), by the 18th constitutional amendment, meeting a longstanding demand of the province’s Pashtun-majority population.

The U.S. and Afghanistan: Next Steps

Stephen Biddle, Ph.D.
Senior Fellow for Defense Policy
Council on Foreign Relations

This review of the situation in Afghanistan will focus on four central issues: defining success, the role of governance reform and anti-corruption initiatives in achieving that success, exit strategies and negotiation, and the net prognosis looking forward.

Defining Success in Afghanistan

Success in war means achieving the political ends for which the war is fought. For the United States in Afghanistan, these ends are essentially twofold: that Afghanistan’s territory not be used as a base for terrorists to strike the West, and that its territory not be used to destabilize its neighbors—and especially Pakistan.

Of course there is a much wider set of ambitions Americans would seek for Afghanistan, as they would for any state in the international system. Americans would like Afghanistan to be ruled in accordance with the will of the governed, for its people to be prosperous, for its women to be educated, and for minorities’ rights to be respected. But while Americans surely wish these things for any state, they do not normally wage war and spill blood in their pursuit. The two vital national security interests for which bloodshed would normally be thought justified in Afghanistan are narrower, and focus on denying its territory as a base for terrorist and subversive activity beyond its borders. If these core interests are secured, then the war can be considered a success. It will be a greater success if core U.S. security aims are accompanied by achievements in human rights and economic development, too, but the acid test for success and failure is an Afghan end state that achieves these two minimum requirements.

What would an Afghanistan that could meet these conditions look like? And is this achievable?

An achievable, acceptable Afghan end state will probably not look like the centralized state pursued by the international community since 2001. The Bonn Agreement and subsequent Afghan constitution of 2004 placed virtually all executive, legislative, and judicial authority in Kabul, creating one of the most centralized states in the world (on paper). Every executive branch official of consequence, from provincial governors down to mid-level functionaries at the sub-provincial level, is appointed by the President. All security forces are national. All policy-making, budgeting, and revenue-generating authority has been held by Kabul. In principle, this strong-center approach would have a number of advantages—it would defend against warlordism, it could enforce human rights norms nationwide, and it would meet core U.S. security requirements. But it is also a radical departure from the country’s historical political culture and underlying distribution of power and legitimacy, all of which have always been local and regional, not national. More than eight years of hard experience now sug-
gest that whatever its benefits, the centralized model is just not achievable at reasonable cost in Afghanistan.

But it is also unnecessary. The Secretary of Defense has famously noted that the United States does not require a “central Asian Valhalla” to meet its core security interests. U.S. policy has thus been backing away from its previous strong-center ideal toward a more decentralized model that would delegate various authorities now held in Kabul to the periphery. These would surely include the power to make and execute budgets, to utilize traditional alternatives to centralized justice systems for some offenses, to elect or approve locally key officials now appointed by Kabul, and could extend to local revenue collection or regulatory authority.

Of course, there are limits on tolerable decentralization: while Valhalla may be unnecessary, a central Asian Somalia would be insufficient. An acceptable decentralization would have to ensure, at a minimum, that Kabul retain control of Afghanistan’s foreign policy and the capacity to prevent misuse of its territory to launch terrorist or subversive activity across the country’s borders. For now, the chief threat to Kabul’s control of its territory is the insurgency; an end to the war would certainly simplify the problem, but this would not eliminate all challenges to government territorial control. It will thus still be necessary for the central government to retain at least enough military power to penalize any local authority that tried to undermine national foreign policy by granting sanctuary to terrorists or subversives in their localities. Beyond this minimum, however, governing powers could be delegated as necessary.

A variety of specific models could meet these requirements (for a more detailed discussion, see Stephen Biddle, Fotini Christia and J. Alex Thier, “What Would Success Look Like? Acceptable End States in Afghanistan,” forthcoming in Foreign Affairs). But a workable solution is thus very likely to require significant delegation of today’s national powers to the periphery.

Decentralization is not a panacea. It could, for example, weaken human rights protections by enabling conservative southern Pashtuns to restrict educational opportunities for women or to strengthen the role of Sharia law in dispute resolution. If so, this could backtrack on nearly nine years of U.S. promises for rule of law and basic rights for women and minorities, with costs for U.S. prestige in addition to its effects on innocent Afghans.

But decentralization could also allow more progressive localities (as in Afghanistan’s major cities) to pursue stronger protections than national opinion might otherwise permit. And most importantly, it would much better align the underlying distribution of power and legitimacy in the country with the official political system—promoting public acceptance of that system and greater public willingness to participate in and defend it.

In the process, decentralization could greatly facilitate success in the counterinsurgency campaign. Counterinsurgency (COIN) is often viewed as a form of violent competition in governance. It is much easier to win this competition when the governance offered is closer to the natural preference of the governed, and a decentralized system is aligned much more naturally with Afghanistan’s traditional political culture and preferences than is today’s design.

On balance, a less centralized Afghan political system could thus meet America’s core security requirements, and would be much more competitive with the Taliban in the war’s violent contest in governance. If achieved, such an end state would constitute a reasonable minimum definition of success.

Governance Reform and the Problem of Corruption

This is a much less demanding agenda than enabling a radically centralized regime to manage the nation from distant Kabul, and should be much easier to realize. But it is hardly trivial even so. The Taliban will find a decentralized government harder to topple, but will continue to try; even a less-ambitious end state will
require hard fighting to secure. Also crucial, however, will be to overcome the problems of corruption and abuse of power that have been so destructive in fueling insurgency in Afghanistan to date. The Taliban are not popular—they have never polled above single digits in Afghanistan—but they are seen as honest and incorruptible. When the government alternative is as dishonest, self-serving, and corrupt as today’s Afghan system, this makes even an unpopular Taliban option competitive. For years, trends in popular support for the Afghan government have been discouraging—success requires that this decline be reversed, or at least arrested at levels of support that remain above the Taliban’s.

This does not require perfection, or the elimination of all corruption in Afghanistan. But it requires doing much better than today in certain key respects. And to accomplish this will demand more than just benign, apolitical technical assistance and mentoring—it will require coercive leverage to change the interest calculus of Afghan officials who benefit from the current system and will resist change.

In fact this is the norm in counterinsurgency. Almost by definition, any time an outside power is engaged in COIN it is doing so with a host government with serious legitimacy problems—this is why there is an insurgency in the first place. And these legitimacy problems typically stem from an unrepresentative distribution of resources in the society that benefits those in power at the expense of others. This creates a systematic divergence in interests between the host, which typically wants to retain its privileges, and the outside power, which typically prefers reforms designed to undermine the insurgency’s claims to superior governance. The host thus does not necessarily want what its allies want—if the outside counterinsurgency is to prevail, it must normally bring leverage to bear sufficient to compel a resistant indigenous host to reform.

In principle, the United States enjoys considerable potential leverage in Afghanistan. The international community spends billions of dollars in Afghanistan, deploys tens of thousands of soldiers, and is today essential to almost all functions of Afghan governance. The Karzai regime is wholly dependent on this outside support for survival. Since 2001, however, outside support has normally been provided unconditionally, with no meaningful quid pro quos for reform. This has forfeited the potential leverage inherent in the scale of outside assistance to Kabul. If reform is to occur, this must change.

This does not mean, however, that blunt threats of military withdrawal are the most effective form of leverage, or that heavy-handed, public pressure from the United States is the best way to use the leverage at Americans’ disposal. The American debate sometimes implies that the only way to pressure Karzai to reform is to threaten to leave, whether in July 2011 or at some other time. Yet withdrawal threats have complex effects, some of which hurt more than they help. They might indeed galvanize reform from the host, but they can also persuade local actors that the Americans lack the will to stay long enough to succeed. The latter encourages them to hedge their bets by accommodating the enemy in anticipation of abandonment by irresolute Americans. The U.S. can try to combat this by proclaiming its commitment to Afghanistan, but if this rhetoric is taken seriously it undercuts the credibility of the threat to leave and thus undermines U.S. leverage. This dilemma bedevils all attempts to use withdrawal threats as coercive leverage.

By contrast, there are many other sources of leverage that offer subtler, more flexible incentives for reform with fewer damaging side effects. In fact, any of the thousands of things the West does in Afghanistan every day can be a source of leverage if doing them is made conditional on key reforms. Particular aid programs can be accelerated or slowed; training and mentoring can be expanded or contracted; logistical support can be provided or withheld for particular units at particular places and times; official visits can be offered, withheld, or delayed; visas can be granted or denied; the possibilities are nearly endless. All of these lat-
ter opportunities have the great advantages that they are readily divisible, can be focused on issues of greater value to the host than to the outside power, and can be dialed up or down progressively as needed with much less effect on locals' assessment of U.S. determination to prevail.

Nor is public announcement normally the best way for threats to be conveyed. Few world leaders are likely to be made more receptive to American overtures by public humiliation. And few publics are likely to reward leaders who appear to be lackeys of foreign interests. The more the United States couples explicit threats with public demands of any host, the greater the resistance it can expect to encounter from that host. In fact, Hamid Karzai may be more prone to such resistance than most, given Afghanistan’s particularly xenophobic political culture and its tradition of nationalist resistance to outside pressure.

Instead, a sustained, graduated, balanced program of privately delivered sticks, coupled with publicly provided carrots, offers the best prospect. Yet actual U.S. policy to date has oscillated between opposite—and largely unproductive—extremes. The Bush Administration saw Hamid Karzai as a hero and a friend who should not be coerced; their policy approximated an all-carrot/no-stick approach. The Obama Administration came into office with the opposite instinct: they applied extensive, public pressure in a close approximation of an all-stick/no-carrot alternative. Neither extreme is likely to succeed. Real progress will require a patient combination of carrots and sticks, with a balance of private and public communication, guided by a politico-military strategy that considers a wide range of international security and economic assistance as grist for the graduated application of pressure for reform.

**War Termination, Negotiation, and Exit Strategy**

In combination, this definition of success and prescription for governance reform have important implications for the process of ending the war and bringing American troops home. Textbook counterinsurgency theory tends to assume that such wars are won by slowly strangling the insurgency through severing it from its support base in the population and gradually constructing a superior alternative in a reformed host government. This process can take many years, however, and is very demanding of troops and resources in the meantime. In practical terms, many insurgencies end long before the textbook conclusion plays itself out—usually via negotiated settlements that give both sides something but neither side everything. Often this involves recognizing the insurgents’ political wing, and bringing them into the government as a legal political party. Relative to a full-length COIN campaign, such settlements can occur much more quickly; indeed they are virtually the only way to accelerate such wars dramatically given the inherently slow, gradual nature of counterinsurgency methods on the battlefield.

If the United States is in fact unwilling to stay long enough to impose terms on the Taliban via strangulation, then negotiation is the only real alternative. And there has been much interest recently in just this possibility (often called “reconciliation”), motivated largely by the widespread interpretation of the President’s West Point speech as calling for a rapid American withdrawal after July 2011, and the inference many have drawn from this that the United States is not willing to pursue COIN to its ultimate conclusion. In fact the Administration’s position is far from clear on this: a strict reading of official statements since the speech suggests that a decision will not be reached before December on the pace or scale of withdrawal, which could be so slow and gradual as to be militarily inconsequential depending on the results of the December review. The actual future of the U.S. commitment is thus unknown for now.

But can negotiation offer an acceptable option for speeding U.S. exit? Maybe, but this depends on what the various parties are will-
ing to accept, and how each evaluates its own military prognosis. On the Taliban’s side, much is unclear. Their public statements have mostly indicated confidence that they will win, coupled with blue-sky demands that leave little room for meaningful accommodation. But it is impossible to know how well this reflects the actual views of any given element of a complex, divided, and very secretive leadership group. Their current attitudes are also subject to change as the U.S. surge and General McChrystal’s COIN campaign play themselves out—and as an aggressive counter-leadership targeting effort by Western special forces and drone strikes increases the personal risk in continued fighting for Taliban commanders. The only way to find out the Taliban’s actual flexibility is by negotiating.

For any negotiations to succeed, however, it is essential that the United States know its own limits and orchestrate very carefully the military, political, and diplomatic elements of its strategy. In principle, American willingness to walk back from the extremely ambitious 2001 model for an Afghan end state could open bargaining space by creating opportunities for the Taliban to play a meaningful local role in a less-centralized government in those places where their support is strongest. But without clear limits on their role and an ability to enforce these limits against later encroachment, a near-term deal could merely plant the seeds for later civil warfare or subversion after the U.S. withdraws, destroying in the process America’s ability to sustain the core security interests for which it now wages war, and yielding a delayed version of defeat. Moreover, American self-constraint to an early withdrawal timetable (if that is ultimately the Administration’s choice) weakens its bargaining position; other things being equal, this would move any achievable deal in the Taliban’s direction. And the dynamics of a necessarily coercive anti-corruption campaign vis-à-vis the Karzai regime adds further challenges: coercion always works both ways, and among Karzai’s potential options for resisting U.S. reform pressure is to threaten a separate peace with the Taliban under conditions the U.S. would not accept if the Americans do not lighten up on their demands for reform. Negotiation per se is thus no panacea.

Given the opacity of the Taliban’s true intentions, negotiation itself may be the only way to find out whether a settlement can really speed U.S. withdrawal—early exploratory talks thus make sense. But these will be very complex negotiations, and could easily undermine fundamental U.S. interests unless very carefully designed and delimited: this is a process with at least as much downside risk as upside potential. Expectations for any such talks thus need to be kept low: it would be dangerous to assume that negotiations necessarily offer a viable means for rapid U.S. exit. They might—but they could also sacrifice critical U.S. security interests if mishandled.

The Prognosis

What, then, can we expect in Afghanistan? Can a successful outcome be achieved, whether on the battlefield or at the bargaining table?

No one can guarantee success. Counter-insurgency is notoriously difficult, and the political scientists Jason Lyall of Princeton and Isaiah Wilson of West Point estimate that since 1975, the success rate of all government counterinsurgents has been just 25 percent.

Yet the West enjoys some important advantages in Afghanistan. Perhaps the most important is a deeply flawed enemy in the Taliban. In a struggle for the political allegiance of the population, they start with the enormous disadvantage of their own track record in ruling the country from 1996-2001. Afghans know the Taliban, and very few hanker for a return to their brand of suffocating theocracy. In repeated surveys over nearly nine years, the Taliban have never attracted more than trivial popular support overall, and their polls have remained almost stationary over time. Many Afghans feel threatened by the Taliban; some now see the Karzai government as even worse, but few prefer Taliban rule to a reasonably honest alternative.
And this creates a real opportunity for success—if the United States steps back from the unrealistically ambitious end state designs of 2001, if a combination of astute Western pressure and Afghan receptivity yields enough anti-corruption progress to arrest the Karzai regime’s slide before it reaches Taliban-scale unpopularity, and if America proves patient enough to bring this about. Negotiation might ultimately offer a quicker exit than counterinsurgency would yield if left to its own devices, but the more the U.S. advertises its impatience the less likely it is to leave with its interests intact. There are many ifs, U.S. persistence alone cannot guarantee success, and persistence comes at a steep price in lives and treasure—but if Americans are willing to pay that price, there is a meaningful chance that their real, core interests can still be secured.
The U.S. and Iran: The Travails and Alternatives to Engagement

Shahram Chubin, Ph.D.
Senior Associate, Nuclear Policy Program
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

The concept of “engagement” is a relatively new one. It appears to incorporate the rather traditional idea of what has usually been called diplomacy with a newer one of entanglement and interdependence. So it encompasses dialogue and the notion of common or overlapping interests, as befits a globalized community of diverse states. There is nothing especially controversial about this in relation, say, to China. Where it has proven controversial is in relation to “rogue” or outlaw states, avowed enemies of the U.S., its allies or their interests, who do not play by the “rules”, and even reject such rules as imperialist constructs.

Broadly speaking, during the Cold War the U.S. followed a policy of “engagement” with the USSR, despite a dangerous and acute rivalry. No one suggested that summit conferences or hot lines, or attempts at finding common ground, whether in relation to arms control or particular regions, should be avoided. No one suggested that the “evil empire” could be safely ignored or dictated to. Though not articulated (except perhaps by George Kennan) the assumption was that what we now call engagement could serve as a policy, pending changes within the USSR, changes that might in fact be accelerated by that engagement.

It is not possible to understand the current version of engagement with Iran without reminding ourselves of the extraordinary period preceding it. The shock and anger that gave way to hubris and arrogance after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 did not lead to a thoughtful appraisal of U.S. interests and policies. The traditional penchant of the U.S. for simplification surfaced. Old-style diplomacy (discussion, consensus, multilateralism) was discredited and ejected, while U.S. self-reliance and dependence on power, technology and force came to the fore. If the U.S. was the world’s leading military power, why should it wait on committees and foreigners to define how its interests should be defended or upheld? Why was the world’s only superpower to be constrained by weak-kneed allies and supercilious client regimes, all dependent on U.S. power for security? The U.S. not only discarded multilateralism but also (unilaterally redefined?) international law, whether in respect to “enemy combatants” or the definition/practice of preventive war. “Talking with evil” was equated with moral contamination and defeatism. Whatever it took, the U.S. would and should, rid the world of evil regimes.

Unfortunately, as was already evident, the world’s leading power was vulnerable and even it could not manage alone: moral authority, legitimacy, the common opinion of mankind, also counted for something, especially in morally ambiguous areas of “fighting” terrorism and selectively promoting nonproliferation. Even the ‘greatest superpower the world has ever known’ could not fight and finance multiple wars simultaneously, especially if it chose to cut taxes at the same time. Allies would be necessary and diplomacy might need to substitute, at
least initially, for yet another war.

All of this had become evident in relation to Iran by 2005. After the initial revelations about Iran’s undeclared enrichment plant in mid-2002, the U.S. had expected to address that problem after Iraq was dealt with. The principal European states jumped into the void to prevent ‘another Iraq’ and also to demonstrate their willingness as allies to deal with an international security issue. The U.S. in the next three years watched their efforts without committing itself. By 2005, with the U.S. mired in Iraq and Afghanistan and Iran’s nuclear programme moving steadily forward, the Bush administration offered to join the negotiations. It had, however, one condition that was supported by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC resolutions): that Iran cease enrichment before any negotiations. This precondition was not accepted by Tehran. Iran shrugged off the sanctions and resolutions of the U.S. and/or the UNSC and continued its nuclear activities, often combining it with belligerent rhetoric. It was clear that Tehran no longer believed (as it had in 2002/3) that the U.S. had a “military option.” In a way this was confirmed by the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) issued in December 2007, which in pointing to the end of Iran’s weaponization activities (in 2003) perhaps inadvertently, drew attention away from its enrichment activities and suggested that Iran was by no means an imminent threat. This took the air out of attempts to patch together support for stronger sanctions and the basis for domestic support for the “military option”.

Already in 2006 the Iraq Study Group had suggested that the U.S. would do well to “engage” both Iran and Syria, to see if there was common ground to build on stabilizing Iraq. By the end of the Bush administration, U.S. policy had come full circle. From criticisms of the Clinton presidency for depending on diplomacy and for weakness (‘nation-building’ and firing cruise missiles into empty tents, etc.) and substituting regime change and ‘shock and awe’, the U.S. was where it had been—facing multiple and ambiguous threats, numerous commitments with finite resources, and skeptical (and parsimonious/stingy) allies. It was the pose not the sheriff that was reluctant. Worse still, the constant threats of the use of force may have increased Iran’s incentives to go for nuclear weapons, when, in their absence, Iran’s aim might have been a nuclear weapons option (or latent capability).

The Bush approach had the virtue of a moral clarity of sorts:

- The U.S. should not wait for threats (the intersection of dangerous technology and bad regimes) to materialize but deal with them, preemptively, if necessary.
- Bad regimes’ intentions cannot be trusted and one must assume the worst.
- Bad regimes’ proliferation should not be ‘rewarded’.
- The U.S. should not talk to, or legitimize, reprehensible regimes.

Clarity perhaps, but not consistency, for selectivity was inevitable: Why Iran and not Pakistan (and some would say Israel)? Where U.S. values were concerned, was Saudi Arabia really a worthy ally?

The problem, however, was not consistency but effectiveness. All options were not on the table, however insistently this was repeated by Condoleeza Rice. Threats that certain actions were “unacceptable” miraculously became acceptable, as red lines were shifted and success redefined downwards. Sanctions were not strong enough and inducements were not attractive enough (perhaps none could be). The result was that in the six and a half years between August 2002 and January 2009, Iran went from running 164 centrifuges to some 4,000.

It was in light of this daunting and frustrating experience that Obama promised “engagement” would be discussed. If regime change by force no longer looked attractive/feasible, and preconditions that blocked negotiations were a dead-end, and sanctions required diplomacy,
clearly a new approach was needed. This would give more emphasis to diplomacy not because it was a panacea, but rather because it *might create* a climate for an agreement or at least demonstrate the U.S.’ willingness to compromise. While unpopular with some domestically, it would then create the basis for stronger actions that would stand a better chance of international support and/or acceptance. It would thus replace a policy in which the U.S. looked unwilling to compromise or even talk, with one that demonstrated that the problem lay not with Washington’s but with Tehran’s unwillingness to discuss issues of international concern. The Obama speech in Cairo referring to mutual respect and reaching out an open hand rather than a clenched fist, hit all the right notes. It put paid to the image Iran had cultivated of being the victim of a crazed superpower that sought to impose its views on the world and especially the Middle East.

Obama’s policy was new in that it sought to move away from the failed approach of its predecessor, not in the sense that it sought different goals. Or rather *not very* different goals. Whereas the U.S. had previously tried to prevent Iran from acquiring the technology that could lead to a weapons *capability*, such as mastery of the fuel cycle or the reprocessing of plutonium, the goal now may have subtly shifted to the prevention of the development by Iran of nuclear *weapons*. If this is the case, it would be an admission that Iran has more or less mastered enrichment, a recognition of a fact rather than a concession. Be that as it may, as the new administration geared up to consider whether and how to drop its (and the UNSC’s) precondition of the suspension of enrichment prior to discussions, “events” on the ground—destiny—took over.

First, Obama’s reiteration of a softer diplomatic approach found a ready audience in the Iranian street, which again looked to the U.S. with sympathy and respect. The regime in turn was baffled as to how to respond, since Iran’s embattlement had stifled dissent and justified its monopolization of power. Despite Supreme Leader Khamenei’s clear approval of—and identification with—Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad’s nuclear policy (notably in March 2008), all three presidential candidates running against him, criticized it forthrightly (and hence, by extension, Khamenei as well).

The story thereafter is generally well-known. This time election rigging was not accepted. Over time, street demonstrations in favour of the Green movement went from asking “Where is my vote?” to demanding “Death to the dictator.” Despite savage repression this dissent is not likely to be stifled even if it is also unlikely to unseat the regime. The effects of this on the U.S.’ focus on the nuclear question had already been demonstrated at the end of 2009. The offer by the UNSC and Germany (the P5+1) to swap 20% enriched uranium for Iran’s stockpile of lower enriched uranium, to feed Iran’s reach reactor, was a ploy designed to buy time. By removing a significant part of Iran’s fissile material, the U.S. would be giving itself a little more time and perhaps building confidence, for a more substantive agreement without the same urgency as would otherwise be the case. Domestic politics in Iran torpedoed this as Ahmadinejad’s foes prevented him from being able to claim success. Since then the regime has huffed and puffed and resorted to its usual tactics of upping the ante (enriching to 20%); announcing the intention to build ten new enrichment plants; threatening to retaliate against those imposing sanctions; and offering vague alternative initiatives. All of these are intended to divide the international community and deflect sanctions while posing as nationalist at home. What is not clear is what impact the de-legitimization and general vulnerability of the regime will have on its foreign policy behaviour. Will it become more receptive to a deal? Or more assertive and less interested? Or a mixture of the two, evident since November?

What is clear is that “events” have complicated U.S. diplomacy. “Engagement” has both strengths and weaknesses. It has to be compared to the alterna-
tives: unilateralism, coercion, or war, none of which are especially promising against a medium-sized power. Coercion, for example, appears to upset U.S. citizens (or at least some of the elite) more than it impresses its intended target. But engagement should not be oversold. It has inherent limits. It takes two to engage and one reason why Iran resists it, is awareness of its subversive effect. For engagement can be a means of opening up closed systems and encouraging peaceful 'regime change.' Alternatively, engagement can be exploited by the 'target' which, like North Korea, can ask to be paid-off again and again for the same thing. There is no guarantee of success. There is the risk of contamination or tarnishing of values: Engaging Syria means forgetting the Hariri killing. Engaging Iran may look like endorsing a vicious regime and ditching those seeking freedom in Iran—or downplaying values in exchange for a dialogue which risks going nowhere.

Engagement runs the risk of becoming an end in itself; of being, or becoming, open-ended with no yardstick for assessing success or potential success, and a reluctance to admit failure. Some reciprocity is needed if it is not to become an exercise in delay and being 'strung along' on problems that might be time-urgent.

Engagement is not a policy but a means. It is not an alternative to other measures but part of a spectrum of measures that have to be considered together. Nothing precludes sanctions being imposed while discussions proceed.

In Afghanistan (as elsewhere) engagement can be used to split the opposition, to feel out those ready to negotiate/compromise and distinguish them from the diehards.

Engagement is a way of trying to open the door to build confidence between states that differ on major issues. The issue of trust is the heart of the problem in the nuclear dispute with Iran. No amount of inspections, however intrusive; no technical fix, however ingenious, is going to reassure the U.S. about Iran’s nuclear intentions. Indeed the nuclear issue itself is only one of the issues separating the two states, though the most fateful one. Given the large pending agenda of differences, from the U.S.’ regional presence to Iran’s spoiler role in the Middle East; from U.S. threats to Iran’s use of terrorist proxies; and from energy security to investment, there can be no substitute for sustained dialogue. One-shot meetings, ultimata, or simple refusal to engage, do not hold much promise. Understanding may be achieved through interaction, and, with luck, trust eventually may be built. What is certain is that a refusal to discuss issues and search for common ground (without illusions that it will be successful) can never be a productive policy, however virtuous it may feel.

While the opponent might play for time, it is not always clear whom time favours. U.S. policy that delays Iran’s nuclear progress, even temporary freezes, could be to the U.S. advantage, given domestic dynamics in Iran.

In the final analysis, engagement is the recognition that diplomacy and dialogue must at least be tried and exhausted before more radical measures are resorted to, whether these are coercive or merely involve acquiescence in “new realities”.

**Engagement and Unfolding Policy**

U.S. policy has to reflect U.S. values as well as pressing U.S. interests, i.e., domestic as well as strategic considerations. It has to accept trade-offs that may appear contentious (the regime or the opposition?) and to pursue policy in the absence of complete information (what are Iran’s intentions?). It has to balance the risks of action and inaction, of preferring to trust to future containment/deterrence versus investing in, and taking greater risks, in a policy of prevention. Risks avoided today may create greater risks tomorrow. Containment/deterrence will not be painless, not least because it will take place in a new context where the target is then nuclear capable, while today it is not. Engagement in the abstract may be defensible but it makes a difference on whose terms engagement is entered into. Is it a policy of defeatism and retreat, as its critics allege, implying the absence of alternatives or a
robust policy that accepts the other side’s surrender graciously?

Bluntly put, the U.S. wants to stop Iran’s nuclear programme short of a nuclear capability (or actual weapons), by putting a freeze on it. This might build a little confidence into the relationship, but also buy time for change, either in the regime’s thinking (and cost/calculus) or in the opposition’s strength. How long a freeze, what is covered by the freeze, what sort of inspections, and whether Iran would accept are all uncertain.

Dealing with the regime on the nuclear issue need not mean embracing them or treating them with kid gloves on other issues, notably in respect to human rights, but also its spoiler tactics in the Middle East. That said, it makes no sense to openly interfere in Iranian politics and give the regime the argument it seeks to delegitimize its domestic opponents.

The paradox is that most of the problems between the U.S. and Iran are attributable to the Iranian regime’s behaviour, which has fostered distrust and which is unlikely to change. At the same time the opposition is more likely to follow reasonable policies and to be a more trustworthy interlocutor, (as well as reflect U.S. values, accountability and human rights). The problem is that the U.S. cannot be sure whether the opposition will prevail and in what time frame: Is it comparable to Hungary in 1956? Or Germany in 1989?

The U.S. must also prepare for the eventuality that its policy of prevention fails by creating the basis for a strategy of deterrence and containment. Defence of allies near Iran against the missile threat (and nuclear intimidation) will mean Anti-Tactical Ballistic Missiles (ATBMs) stationed on land or sea, and an extension by the U.S. of security guarantees to allies. Whether these will include guarantees specifically against the nuclear threat in which the U.S. formally ‘extends deterrence’ to its Gulf allies (Israel not needing it and Turkey already covered by NATO) is not clear. This cannot be done lightly and will need broad domestic support. All of this will be affected by how Iraq and Afghanistan evolve; U.S. policy towards Pakistan and Saudi Arabia; what regional role Turkey decides to play; the prospect for oil prices and how politics in Iran develop or regress.

The next chapter in U.S. policy on this issue is likely to be as contentious as in the recent past, but it is important that partisan considerations not lead to simplistic sloganeering in the face of difficult choices ahead.

Engagement: Future Policy Choices

I have argued that for success engagement requires receptivity on both sides. What does the U.S. do when overtures are rebuffed? How long should it persist or wait?

This depends on the estimate of how long remains before the line is irrevocably crossed by the state you are seeking to engage, in this case of Iran becoming nuclear capable. This is not clear or unambiguous as the line depends on technical as well as political considerations.

Second, it depends on what the options are at that point. Do you move from engagement to serious sanctions? Then again the question will arise: At what point will sanctions have proven a failure and what is the next policy option?

Since Iran is fearful and mistrustful, it has not—and will not—take up the U.S. offer of engagement.

Whether sanctions that are broad enough (in terms of participating states) and deep enough (in terms of consequences) can be mustered to affect Iran’s cost-calculus in a timely manner, appears doubtful. (Neither Russia nor China views nonproliferation as more important than using Iran as leverage to weaken the U.S.).

If correct, the question will arise again: What next? Logically and perhaps inexorably the next step would be a resort to force which is recognized as dangerous and possibly counterproductive. More dangerous than a nuclear Iran? We cannot tell. We cannot be sure that Iran will cross the threshold to an operational weapons capability, and if it does, how it will behave with such a capability.
Such considerations return us to the present.

If the alternatives to engagement and sanctions are not attractive, if Iran is experiencing technical and political difficulties, if the U.S. is gaining the moral high ground through its own policies, what is the rush to “close the door” and ditch the engagement strategy?

Given an inability to freeze or reverse the Iranian nuclear program, policy is and has been, about “gaining time.” Time for what? Time for improving confidence and trust by small steps (like the fuel swap). Time for a change of mind in Tehran, for political change there, for a diplomatic breakthrough, for a better regional environment in which to tackle Iran.

This is where it stands now. The U.S. should recognize that the nuclear issue is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of differences with Tehran. Nevertheless any agreement or technical fix might begin to melt the iceberg.

The use of force should be kept on the table. It serves three functions: it keeps Iran off-balance, reassures Israel, and provides leverage for sanctions with the Security Council members as well as reluctant allies.

Engagement has been criticized for having gone too far. A better question is whether it has gone far enough? Here are some suggestions for policy:

- The U.S. should go the extra mile: Benign unilateral measures—even un reciprocated—are worthy of a great power. Why not release spare parts for civilian aircraft? Stop making Iran’s entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) subject to unrelated political conditions? Similarly why not offer nuclear materials for medical purposes, deal or no deal?
- Focus on areas of overlapping interests even in the face of Iranian zero-sum thinking: avoiding incidents at sea; marginalizing the Taliban; student visas.
- Continue promotion of the multilateralization of the fuel cycle.
- Seek Iran’s acceptance (ratification) of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) parallel to the U.S. acceptance of it.
- Do not make empty threats.
- Establish ‘red lines’ which are guaranteed consequences (e.g., weaponization).
- Do not exaggerate the implications of a nuclear capable Iran. Do not indulge Israeli worst-case thinking while remaining sensitive to its concerns.
- Bolster deterrence and defense while continuing the diplomacy of prevention.
- Continue the approach to the Iranian people.

Finally a philosophic reflection which may confirm some of you in your belief in my ‘defeatism:’ Some issues are not susceptible to solution and need to be ‘managed.’ Not welcomed, encouraged or acquiesced in, but simply managed. This was the case in the Cold War and there may be such cases in the future. Losing perspective and self-control in these cases can make them more intractable and costly, than restraint. Before this conclusion is accepted everything sensible must be done to seek prevention, consistent with U.S. values and national interests.
North Africa: Changing Political Dynamics in Tunisia, Libya, Algeria and Morocco and Implications for the U.S.

Claire Spencer, Ph.D.
Head of the Middle East and North Africa Programme
Chatham House

Regional Overview: Shared Opportunities and Challenges

North Africa is a region on the move, but for reasons more complex than those often identified as being core priorities to the U.S. Seen for years as a southern Mediterranean transit zone towards more critical geostrategic and economic interests in the wider Middle East, the states of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya have recently become significant geopolitical partners of the U.S. in their own right. The key areas of U.S. interest in this region are focused on its energy sources, with nearly a quarter (23.9%) of Algeria’s oil and gas exports in 2008 destined for the U.S. market, combined with the intensification of bilateral and multilateral security cooperation to stem the spread of al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist organizations across North Africa and its hinterland in the sub-Saharan Sahel states.

The opportunity for reviewing and extending this relationship has never been greater. Since the lifting of bilateral sanctions against Libya in 2004-06, the U.S. has enjoyed good relations with the leaderships of all four states for the first time since before the Cold War. The renewing and re-forging of links with Algeria and Libya, in particular, has opened the way for increased U.S. inward-investment into the region, higher market penetration for U.S. exports, and greater interest in promoting a solution to the conflict in the Western Sahara and making progress towards Maghreb-wide regional integration.1

The challenges facing this region, however, are now directly related to internal reform processes in each state and how these are managed over the next five to ten years. In three of the four states (Libya, Algeria and Tunisia) potential succession crises loom large over this period. Their resolution is rendered more problematic by the personalized nature of power and the lack of institutionally-embedded mechanisms to manage smooth political transitions.

With regional variations, the centralization of state power in North Africa has been the bedrock on which the relative stability of this region has been assured over the past 40-50 years. This stability, which effectively excludes large sections of the local population, has not come without a price. Alongside the resurgence of terror, of potentially wider import have been the growing instances of socioeconomic unrest across the region. Workers’ strikes and protests are now commonplace in Algeria and have also affected sectors of the Tunisian and Moroccan economies. Paradoxically, it is precisely because this region has not suffered a significant decline in either state revenues or economic growth rates (still averaging 4-5% per annum) that popular demands for a share in the benefits of economic growth have been on the rise. Sporadic unrest over wage and salary levels, and
riots over unemployment and limited access to social services have not yet reached critical levels, nor have they coalesced into organized forms of political protest. What these trends do indicate, however, is the emergence of deeper sources of socioeconomic and political malaise in North Africa, which may well constrain the ability of leaderships to make bold moves at the regional and international level.

This augurs badly for a swift resolution of the Western Sahara conflict which still divides Algeria and Morocco, and for the prospects of creating the kind of regional trade union which would boost overall regional incomes by $10 billion for every 1% increase in intra-regional trade. North African states have relied on European partners (representing up to 75% of their trade) and single sector exports (97% of Algeria’s and Libya’s foreign earnings) to avoid overcoming their internal regional differences. This situation is unlikely to change until the social and cultural affinities enjoyed by the Maghreb’s populations are transformed into more horizontal links by their inclusion and participation in the affairs of their own states.

**Systemic Priorities?**

With successions looming, American and European policy makers will need to pay more attention to the internal dynamics of economic and political change within each state and less on the positions adopted by individual leaders. With the exception of Qadafi’s Libya, where, besides public service inertia, virtually no institutional checks exist to limit policies adopted by the Leader, regional leaderships are captives of what might be termed ‘symbiotic authoritarianism’. As most acutely seen in Morocco, this means that even top-down attempts to encourage greater political participation run up against the structural and behavioral limitations of hierarchical regimes reliant on patronage, personal relationships and corruption. In Algeria, by far the most striking recent development has been the arrest of 15 senior managers, including the Chief Executive of the state-owned oil company, Sonatrach, on charges relating to the subversion of public funds in the award of contracts. This may augur change, but with no government ministers or senior political figures under the spotlight, it is more likely to shift the public mood within Algeria and beyond against political systems that consistently favor the few over the many. How to break out of this bind constitutes the real challenge for the future stability of the region.

The risk of state breakdown is far more salient than the threats posed by the ‘epiphenomena’ of transnational terrorism, illegal migration and trafficking. These are more properly seen as the symptoms of root causes that the securitization of public policy across the region has so far failed to address. Rather than increasing the progress towards democracy, the security imperative has effectively halted it, by allowing North Africa’s leaders to resource and re-energize long-standing strategies of co-option and coercion to substitute for gaps in their popular legitimacy. The reinforcement and re-equipping of state security forces has also served to extend the surveillance and monitoring of a much wider range of political and economic actors. The regression in respect for human rights recently observed in all four states by Human Rights Watch is directly related to an expansion of these counter-terrorist controls.

The reassertion of terrorism as a threat to the stability of the region has nevertheless largely been contained over the past three years. As a rallying point for transnational terrorism, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has failed to gain any significant footholds in the states and societies neighboring its heartland in Algeria. Since 2007, it has largely shifted its operations southwards to the Sahel states, where it has become enmeshed in criminal activities, trafficking and kidnapping foreigners for ransom. Better intelligence and policing of nationally-based terrorist networks and cells in Morocco, Tunisia and Libya have preempted further actions on the part of indigenous cells of terrorists, and have notably allowed the Libyan authorities to release 202 members of
the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) in late March 2010.

Local and international vigilance over future attacks and kidnappings will need to be maintained, but North Africa’s leaderships have demonstrated their ability to deflect the resurgence of widespread terrorism on the scale seen in Algeria in the 1990s. As then, the insurgent movements have failed to capture the imagination of younger generations of North Africans, whose grievances are now rooted more directly in the socioeconomic and political issues described above.

The role of political Islam in this equation is likewise more complex than the more newsworthy AQIM. North Africa’s historical attachment to Sufism and zawiyas (or brotherhoods centered on Sufi Islamic leaders) is undergoing a region-wide revival, partly with official encouragement to nonviolent tariqas (or Islamic ‘paths’) to counter the infiltration of non-indigenous ‘Salafist-jihadist’ schools of thought in local mosques. Much of the region’s turn to piety (witnessed by more women adopting the veil, for example) is a reaction to socioeconomic and political exclusion, rather than a staging post towards violent action. The low turnout for national elections in Morocco in 2007, which the main Islamist opposition party, the Party for Justice and Democracy (PJD) was widely forecast to win, is a sign that the voting population does not see participating in polls for parties generally perceived to have been officially co-opted as the route towards the kind of political changes they seek.

The political challenges: different regimes, different equations

The political cultures and traditions of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya differ in style and substance from each other, but their political systems will face similar pressures in coming years. From a scale ranging from tentative openings to greater pluralism in Morocco, to the self-reinforcing elite circles of Algeria and Tunisia and the one-man state of Colonel Qadafi in Libya, they all face real political dilemmas in embarking on political reforms that would almost certainly jeopardize the survival of current regimes.

Algeria and Tunisia have opted for the route of retrenchment, with increasingly formalized electoral processes substituting for genuinely democratic alternatives. Algeria has a multiparty system, but as in Morocco, the low voter turnout for national elections in 2007 reflects the lack of popular credibility in the national assembly. Both President Zine El Abidine of Tunisia and President Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria have adopted constitutional changes effectively allowing each to stand as president for life. In presidential elections held in 2009 neither faced credible opponents, winning 90.24% of the vote (Bouteflika) and 89.62% (Ben Ali).

They differ in terms of their capacity to maneuver independently. President Bouteflika’s position depends on the acquiescence of a military establishment which has held sway over Algerian affairs since independence in 1962. The recent public airing of corruption scandals, including arrests across a number of public ministries and agencies, has effectively stymied initiative on the part of officials fearful that they could be next in line. The real struggle, however, has been taking place within a narrower set of elites, staking the future of Algeria on the continued exploitation of Algeria’s oil wealth (representing $149 billion in foreign reserves at year-end 2009) or on reining in the current scale of public corruption. Perennial concerns over Bouteflika’s health, and his ill-disguised attempts to promote his brother, Saad, as his natural successor at the presidency, mean that the jury is still out on whether this contest will only superficially change Algeria’s power structures, or ultimately escape the control of the ageing power-holders behind the scenes. It is certainly not AQIM that will decide the outcome, although its low-scale attacks remain a peripheral concern.
In Tunisia, President Ben Ali, and his immediate family and entourage have more direct and consensual control over a wider circle of political and economic elites, through allowing for more leeway in economic sectors not directly impinging on state control over key assets. While trade liberalization has clearly benefitted larger sectors of the population than their counterparts in Algeria, unlike Morocco, Tunisia has yet to privatize the banking sector, raising doubts about how much further genuinely independent economic reform can be undertaken. Ben Ali’s Achilles’ heel is Tunisia’s extreme restrictions on freedom of speech, press reporting and the legal recognition of nongovernmental organizations, unions and opposition parties. This situation, which many deem unnecessary in a relatively homogenous population of only 10.4 million people, sits uncomfortably alongside a tradition of constitutionalism and women’s rights. The labor-related protests in the southern town of Gafsa which were followed by widespread arrests in 2008 suggest that the consensual trade-off between sacrificing political rights for economic growth may now be coming under increasing strain.

For Morocco, the challenge might best be summarized as a good strategy that comes unstuck at the level of tactical and practical implementation. A good example of this arose in July 2009, when to celebrate King Mohammed VI’s tenth anniversary as monarch and head of state, two local magazines undertook a public opinion poll in conjunction with the French daily *Le Monde*. Although the results were broadly positive in terms of the King’s public popularity and the public’s appreciation for his programs to alleviate poverty, all copies of the publications in question were seized by the Ministry of Interior (on the grounds that any poll about the King was an abuse of the monarchy). This left *Le Monde* to fulminate that arbitrary government and attempts to silence public debate are hardly the hallmarks of an open and pluralist system.

The Moroccan government nevertheless faces a critical problem: the Moroccan economy is essentially split along two lines, of a modern sector based on Casablanca and the capital Rabat, and a rural sector of subsistence farmers that absorbs 50% of Morocco’s workforce, but contributes only 15% to GDP. Educational levels and regional affiliations are similarly split, and few political parties, beyond the tolerated but not officially recognized Islamist movement, Al-Adl wal Ihsane (Justice and Spirituality), are able to mobilize the population. The launch of a new technocratic party, the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM) succeeded in displacing others in the local elections in 2009, but being led by a close associate of the King, it is still seen as a creature of the royal palace, from whence the majority of new initiatives derive.

One alternative has been to stimulate regional development, and devolve administration to autonomous regions. Regional autonomy is also a vehicle for incorporating the Western Sahara as a province within Morocco, although this strategy is likely to fall afoul of Algerian resistance (backed up by the UN General Assembly and African Union) to any *de facto* avoidance of holding a popular referendum on the future status of the region. King Mohammed VI commands universal Moroccan support for the Sahara policy, but growing gaps between rich and poor, and development strategies that only partially soak up unemployment and improve educational standards, may yet bring the hierarchical Moroccan model under pressure as middle-ranking officials fail to follow through on the King’s visions.

Libya is torn between its reformers and conservatives, but it is still Qadafi who holds the ring in terms of how and where the balance is struck. This can change rapidly, largely because very little of what is envisioned, such as the abolition of most government ministries announced in 2009, or free and fair elections, is ever implemented. Of Qadafi’s 7 sons and
potential heirs, Saif-al Islam is depicted as the most reformist. Having left politics in 2008, Saif al-Islam has re-emerged without an official role or portfolio, to become more deeply involved in a ‘de-radicalization’ program of Islamist activists that culminated in his oversight of the release of 202 LIFG prisoners in March 2010. Despite a veneer of popular representation through a series of ‘peoples’ committees’, consensus around the Qadafi regime is still based on tribal and regional links, while opposition groups are dealt with swiftly and arbitrarily. The economic system has offered the most opportunities for new openings, above all to foreign investors, but with the haphazard and personalized methods associated with securing permits and visas and progressing contracts, Libya’s reformers are unlikely to prosper until functioning institutions are in place.

Conclusion: U.S. Policy Implications

Two recent reports, one by the World Bank on the limits to private-led growth and the other on the state of political reform in the Arab world, both point to similar conclusions in relation to North Africa: that the region’s problem lies not so much with the lack of legislated reforms, as the failure to implement them. The U.S., along with Europe, will need to pay more detailed attention to the systemic roadblocks towards progress on the ground in both these areas, in order to unlock the potential which undoubtedly exists across North Africa. Without reform at the microeconomic level and the political engagement of greater numbers of local participants, there will be no advance towards the regional or global integration that external partners of the region seek, nor will there be enduring stability in North Africa.

The reliance on relationships with personal leaderships, in turn, will also need to give way to assisting a new generation of leaders to create their own Maghreb. There is clearly a region-wide desire to break with existing models of governance, but these have become so entrenched that even the region’s reformers are aware that top-down, state-driven strategies are likely to continue to fail. The state alone cannot deliver jobs at the rate that new entrants will be entering the market over the next ten years, nor can it stem the tides of socioeconomic unrest indefinitely. With the succession of at least three ageing leaderships on the near horizon, the U.S. should be identifying and listening to a wider set of actors, above all those interested in changing organizational and management cultures to foster local entrepreneurialism, in both the political and economic spheres. This new engagement should include actors affiliated to Islamic groups, whose concerns, if not their proposed solutions, are shared by many.

References:

1. The terms ‘North Africa’ and ‘Maghreb’ are interchangeable here, except insofar as ‘Maghreb’ conjures up the aspirations of the four states under examination, along with Mauritania, to form a regional union, the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), only partially developed since its launch in 1989.


6. Amel Boubekeur ‘Tunisia: beyond illusions of change’ *Open Democracy* 23 October 2009 http://www.opendemocracy.net/amel-boubekeur/tunisia-beyond-illusions-of-change points out that the Tunisian constitution stipulates the upper age limit for the president to be 75 years of age, meaning that President Ben Ali (aged 73) will have to retire at the end of his current term (2009-14).

Political Islam: 
Policy Challenges for the Congress 

PARTICIPANTS 

Tunis, Tunisia 
May 31–June 6, 2010 

Members of Congress 

Representative Howard Berman 
and Janis Berman 
Representative Earl Blumenauer 
and Anne Blumenauer 
Representative Jason Chaffetz 
and Julie Chaffetz 
Representative Susan Davis 
and Steven Davis 
Senator Dick Durbin 
and Loretta Durbin 
Representative Jeff Flake 
and Alexis Flake 
Senator Tom Harkin 
and Ruth Harkin 
Representative Zoe Lofgren 
and John Collins 
Senator Dick Lugar 
and Charlene Lugar 
Representative George Miller 
and Cynthia Miller 
Representative Donald Payne 
and William Payne 
Representative David Price 
and Lisa Price 
Representative Jan Schakowsky 
and Robert Creamer 
Representative John Tierney 
and Patrice Tierney 
Senator Tom Udall 
and Jill Cooper Udall 
Representative Henry Waxman 
and Janet Waxman 
Senator Roger Wicker 
and Gayle Wicker 

Scholars/Experts 

Samina Ahmed 
International Crisis Group 

Stephen Biddle 
Council on Foreign Relations 

Shahram Chubin 
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 

Claire Spencer 
Chatham House 

Mai Yamani 
Independent scholar on Muslim and 
Arab politics 

Consultant and Rapporteur 

Geoffrey Kemp 
The Nixon Center 

Foundation Representatives 

Barry Lowenkron 
The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur 
Foundation 

Stephen Heintz 
Rockefeller Brothers Fund 

Taleb Salhab 
Rockefeller Brothers Fund
Moderator

Dick Clark
Director, Congressional Program
The Aspen Institute

Aspen Institute Staff

Diane Anello
Bill Nell
Pat Walton
Pakistan, Democracy and Radical Islam: Policy Options for the U.S.

Samina Ahmed, International Crisis Group

The survival of Pakistan as a united cooperative entity has become a vital interest for the United States. The prospect of Pakistan devolving into separate tribal and ethnic groups or the emergence of a radical state equipped with nuclear weapons under the control or influence of the Taliban would pose an existential threat to key U.S. friends, especially India. One of the strongest arguments in favor of a continued U.S. military presence in Afghanistan is to weaken Taliban influence in Pakistan. However, some Pakistanis believe this increased western military activity will drive more extremists over the border into their territory. Compounding the challenge is the reality that the democratic government of Pakistan is weak and divided. How the United States manages relations with Pakistan, including military and civilian assistance programs, must be a high priority for the administration and the Congress.

Discussion Questions

• Are Pakistan’s nuclear weapons secure?
• Has public opinion in Pakistan turned against the Taliban?
• How weak is the government of Pakistan and is there any danger the Pakistan military will intervene once more to impose a non-democratic leader?
• How dangerous are the separatist movements throughout the country especially in the Baluch province?
• What is the status of negotiations with India over terrorism and Kashmir?
The U.S. and Afghanistan: Next Steps
Stephen Biddle, Council on Foreign Relations

President Obama’s decision to increase U.S. troop strength in Afghanistan means that this war will be center stage for the remainder of his first term. How the war evolves could well determine his chances of winning a second election. Setting a proximate time limit on the U.S. military mission and assuring the American public that the U.S. commitment is not open-ended have to be balanced by a vigorous prosecution of the war and a determined effort to accelerate the training schedule for the Afghan security forces and clamp down on corruption. The success of the war against al Qaeda and the Taliban is closely linked to what happens in Pakistan. On the broader horizon the fate of NATO, fighting its first war, could be determined in the mountains and valleys of Afghanistan.

Discussion Questions
- How does one define “success” in the war in Afghanistan? Do exit strategies make sense at this point in time?
- Should other regional powers, such as China and India, be pressured to do more to help Afghanistan?
- How should the U.S. approach the problem of corruption within the Afghan regime?

Engagement With Iran: A Balance Sheet
Shahram Chubin, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

How the Obama administration handles Iran will be one of its most difficult foreign policy challenges. The original intent to engage with the Islamic Republic suffered a serious setback following the rigged Iranian presidential election in June 2009. Although this crisis did not prevent a meeting in Geneva in October, hopes of reaching an agreement with Iran on its nuclear program have so far come to naught. How should the U.S. handle the Iranian nuclear program if diplomacy fails? Given that the Iranian political system has been severely weakened in the aftermath of the elections and its very legitimacy is under scrutiny, the preferred choices for the U.S. and the western coalition may be increased sanctions and enhanced military support for regional allies.

Discussion Questions
- How stable is the Islamic Republic of Iran? How weak is the economy?
- What is the likelihood Iran will deploy a verifiable nuclear weapon?
- Are there any realistic military options to destroy or delay the Iranian nuclear program?
- How should the U.S. government help the opposition without making it more vulnerable to repression?
North Africa: Changing Political Dynamics in Tunisia, Libya, Algeria and Morocco and Implications for the U.S.
Claire Spencer, Chatham House

With the exception of Egypt, North Africa’s other major Arab states, (Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco) often take a back seat in U.S. foreign policy discussions. Yet all four countries have important roles to play in the emerging geopolitics of the Mediterranean. Algeria and Libya are key energy suppliers, particularly for the European market. Morocco and Tunisia have taken strong stands against Islamic terrorism. Morocco, in particular, has made considerable progress in political reform and encouraging a more open, pluralistic society.

Discussion Questions
• Is Tunisia progressing toward a more open society?
• Can Libya reform while Qadafi remains in power?
• How dangerous is the insurgency in Algeria?
• How stable is Morocco’s leadership?
• What should be the focus of U.S. policy toward these countries?
• Is Al Qaeda in the Maghreb a significant concern for the U.S.?