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Our Next Step in the Middle East

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The Arab Spring put severe limits on American influence in the Middle East—but Washington still has a unique opportunity to help convert failed states into peaceful nations, says Jeremi Suri.

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The Middle East is experiencing a revolution as citizens in country-after-country seize control of their societies. In Tunisia and Egypt, this has meant the forced resignation of a longstanding dictatorship. In Libya, [Yemen](#), Bahrain, and Syria, it has meant armed conflict, even civil war. As with all revolutions, the final outcome is hard to predict, but we can be sure that the region will not return to circumstances of the recent past. Moderate secular rulers will not be able to cow their citizens and live off the fat of oil exports and American aid. The new leaders of the Middle East will have to show that they can serve their citizens in ways their predecessors never did.

The United States has a vital role to play in this process. For the last half century, Americans have influenced the politics of the Middle East, often with damaging consequences. That is a history, above all, the United States must not replay. It is time we learned from our past errors. We should refrain from supporting strong-man dictators who promise to protect our interests. They rarely fulfill their commitments, and they always inspire resentment and resistance. We also should avoid quick fixes, from regime change to large investments in economic development. The complex mixture of cultures and peoples in the region is not susceptible to change on

a rapid (American) timetable.

These historical warnings, however, should not become a justification for passivity. As bad as some of the previous American efforts in the region have turned out, things have only been worse when the United States stayed away. One of the biggest problems in places like Yemen, Lebanon, and [Somalia](#) is that Washington has allowed local thugs and extremists to hijack political authority. Without American support, it is very hard for well-intentioned reformers to challenge ruthless figures who control the guns, the roads, and the oil.

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Savvy and select American intervention should accompany the restraint and humility that history teaches all visitors to the Middle East. We can group the appropriate United States policies into three areas: interpersonal, intergovernmental, and intergenerational. Each includes issues that directly benefit both Americans and Middle Eastern residents. Each offers low risk and high reward. American policies require courage, vision, and some creativity—qualities that have been absent from deliberations in Washington since the beginning of the [Arab Spring](#) a year ago.



Hani Mohammed / AP Photo

First, Washington should move quickly to increase the density of personal contacts between prominent citizens in the Middle East and their counterparts in the United States. This involves a vast increase in America's understaffed civilian diplomatic presence in the region. The Middle East should become the No. 1 priority region for new ambassadors, attachés, and other representatives of the United States. We should do everything we can to learn much more about the citizens who are taking control of these societies, and we should forge deep personal relationships with them, often through informal contacts outside "official" embassy settings. Historical research shows that the trust and familiarity that come from close diplomatic relationships are much more valuable, especially during a time of transition, than policy pronouncements. The United States must invest immediately in becoming more deeply connected to the Arab street.

Second, Washington must prioritize investments in transparent and accountable political institutions. Again, the historical track record shows that spending on good governance produces more dividends than efforts at foreign-sponsored economic growth. Governance is also less expensive. The United States should work with the European Union, the United Nations, the World Bank, and other international bodies to create a modest "Fund for Openness" that can provide assistance and aid for the key anchors of democratic politics: a free press, a fair judiciary, and basic safety for dissidents. International peacekeepers, including a small contingent of American soldiers, should support basic security for nurturing these processes.

Third, and perhaps most important, American investments in the Middle East must look to the long-term interests of the region and the United States. The president should reject all claims about immediate "success" and argue that the United States has a generational commitment to stability, prosperity, and democracy in the Arab world. It is hard to imagine America enjoying these

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benefits if they are denied, as they have been for decades, in the Middle East.

The promise of more participatory politics in the Middle East demands serious and sustained American actions—far beyond what we have seen so far.

The United States should push for a moratorium on most military weapons sales to the region and divert investments into secular public education. Observers have long argued that Islamic extremism has grown because madrassas and other forms of hateful indoctrination have filled the vacuum in available resources for impoverished families. The people of the region need inclusive and non-hateful alternatives. The United States and its Western allies have the educators, the experience, and the resources to help. The costs will be modest and the rewards will be transformative.

The Arab Spring places severe limits on American influence. History also cautions against many traditional American forms of intervention. The promise of more participatory politics in the Middle East, however, demands serious and sustained American actions—far beyond what we have seen so far. The United States has a unique opportunity to invest in the modest interpersonal, intergovernmental, and intergenerational changes that will help convert failed states into peaceful nations. More than anything else, that is the American dream.

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