

U.S. Is Preparing for a Long Siege of Arab Unrest



Mohammad Hannon/Associated Press

Followers of Ansar al-Sharia burned the American flag in Benghazi, Libya, on Friday.

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WASHINGTON — After days of anti-American violence across the Muslim world, the White House is girding itself for an extended period of turmoil that will test the security of American diplomatic missions and President Obama's ability to shape the forces of change in the Middle East.

Although the tumult subsided Saturday, senior administration officials said they had concluded that the sometimes violent protests in Muslim countries may presage a period of sustained instability with unpredictable diplomatic and political consequences. While pressing Arab leaders to tamp down the unrest, Mr. Obama's advisers say they may have to consider whether to scale back diplomatic activities in the region.

The upheaval over an anti-Islam video has suddenly become Mr. Obama's most serious foreign policy crisis of the election season, and a range of analysts say it presents questions about central tenets of his Middle East policy: Did he do enough during the Arab Spring to help the transition to democracy from autocracy? Has he drawn a hard enough line against Islamic extremists? Did his administration fail to address security concerns?

These questions come at an inopportune time domestically as Mr. Obama enters the fall campaign with a small lead in polls. His policies escaped serious scrutiny in the initial days after the attack that killed four Americans in Libya last week, in part because of the furor over a statement by Mitt Romney accusing the president of sympathizing with the attackers.

White House officials said they recognized that if not for Mr. Romney's statement, they would have been the ones on the defensive.

As of Saturday night, the worst of the crisis appeared to have passed, at least for now. The Egyptian government, responding to administration pressure, cracked down on protesters in Cairo on Saturday, and in Libya the government rounded up suspects in the violence that killed four Americans on Tuesday. Leaders in Saudi Arabia and Tunisia appealed for calm.

Still, images from the past week of American flags being torn down and burned, an Islamic flag being raised and embassies being overrun by angry mobs introduce a volatile element into a re-election effort in which foreign policy has been a strength. Some critics and commentators were already evoking the images of the Iranian hostage crisis that doomed another presidency.

"After Obama's success in killing Osama bin Laden, in killing Qaddafi and in not blowing up Iraq, I think Obama and his aides figured, 'We've got this box pretty well taken care of,' " said Michael Rubin, a Middle East scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and a former Bush administration official, referring to Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi of Libya.

"Now that gets thrown up into the air," he said. "Instead of Obama being the successful guy that got Bin Laden, we're talking about Obama as the second coming of Jimmy Carter, and that's not something the campaign wants to see."

Mr. Obama came to office vowing to recalibrate America's relationship with the Muslim world after the Iraq war and gave a high-profile speech in Cairo outlining a new era of fraternity. Caught off guard by cascading revolutions in the Middle East, he eventually supported rebels who overthrew Egypt's longtime president and ordered airstrikes that helped bring down Colonel Qaddafi, who was later killed.

But his administration has struggled to find a balance between supporting democracy and guarding national interests in the region as authoritarian governments have been replaced by popular Islamist parties much less tied to Washington. To the extent that the United States supports greater democracy, it may not defuse anti-American rage in a region with no real history of popular rule, and with deep economic troubles. His citing of Libya as a model of transition now looks suspect, and the United States has been powerless to stop a bloody crackdown in Syria.

Administration officials say they are acutely aware of the risks, and they worry that the violence could rage for a while, because with every new protest more people are exposed to the inflammatory American-made anti-Islam video that has fueled so much anger. Al Qaeda's branch in Yemen on Saturday called for further attacks against American embassies.

"The reality is the Middle East is going to be turbulent for the foreseeable future and beyond that," said Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations and a former State Department official in the Bush administration. "It's going to present the United States with any number of difficult choices. It's also going to be frustrating, because in most instances our interests are likely to be greater than our influence."

Administration officials say the people in the streets are not the ones who won the elections, but those who lost, and that the new governments largely have condemned the violence. Mr. Obama's outreach, they said, has improved the position of the United States in the Muslim world. "We have made significant inroads in demonstrating that the U.S. is not at war with Islam, and isolating Al Qaeda as an element within Islam," said Benjamin J. Rhodes, a deputy national security adviser. "But it clearly remains the case that there are persistent challenges in parts of the Arab world. It's been building up for a very long time."

The twin challenges of dealing with the crisis overseas and the politics of it at home overlap in complicated and uncomfortable ways. Just hours after mourning in the Rose Garden last Wednesday for American victims of a Libyan attack, Mr. Obama flew off to a Las Vegas campaign event. After meeting their flag-draped coffins at Joint Base Andrews on Friday, he headed to Democratic headquarters for campaign meetings and then to an evening fundraiser.

In his weekly address on Saturday, Mr. Obama referred to American anxieties about the unrest. "I know the images on our televisions are disturbing," he said. "But let us never forget that for every angry mob, there are millions who yearn for the freedom and dignity and hope that our flag represents."

During marathon meetings at the White House since the killings of American diplomatic officials in Benghazi, officials have tried to anticipate the next developments and contemplate a response. But they were surprised when an American-run school was ransacked in Tunisia, which they considered a successful transition.

Even as more Marines are sent to diplomatic missions, and two Navy destroyers patrol nearby, Mr. Obama has reached out to leaders like Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, and aides asked YouTube to review its posting of the video.

More broadly, the Obama team is confronting the very nature of America's presence in the Middle East. With embassies already fortified after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, officials are asking whether they can be further secured or whether some activities need to be curtailed, like assistance and public diplomacy programs that leave Americans more exposed, though there are no plans at the moment to do so. The State Department said Saturday that it was evacuating all family members and nonessential personnel from embassies in Tunis and Khartoum.

The trade-offs of such choices are stark. Pulling back on American involvement in these countries would undercut the ability to build cultural bridges that in theory diminish the sort of hostility now vividly on display. Yet officials said continuing with business as usual seemed untenable as well, and they recognize that foreign aid, already a tough sell in a rigid fiscal environment, may become even tougher to extract from Congress.

At home, the challenge is political but no less daunting. Republicans have had a hard time putting up a fight on foreign policy but believe the uprisings provide a new opening. Mr. Romney characterizes Mr. Obama's approach to the Arab Spring as naïve and apologetic, and his campaign has criticized the president as not being supportive enough of Israel.

In recent days, Republican critics like former Vice President Dick Cheney have opened up a new line of attack by accusing Mr. Obama of not paying enough attention to intelligence

briefings. Mr. Obama receives the briefing in writing every day, but does not always sit down for an oral presentation, as President George W. Bush did. “The hubris of a president who believes he does not need to meet regularly with them is astounding,” Marc Thiessen, a former speechwriter for Mr. Bush, wrote in *The Washington Post*.

The White House says the president receives plenty of briefings and meets repeatedly with security advisers. “The president’s record, when it comes to acting on — interpreting correctly and acting on — intelligence in the interest of the security of the United States is one that we are happy to have examined,” said Jay Carney, the White House press secretary.

As for the broader debate, Mr. Obama’s defenders argue that the legacy of American support for Arab autocrats complicated the situation. “Obama did his best, in a very difficult situation, to get the United States on the right side of history,” said Martin S. Indyk, a former ambassador to Israel in the Clinton administration. “But we had a good 40 years of U.S. policy backing regimes that the people in the street overthrew.”

Some analysts pointed to his failure to make progress between the Israelis and the Palestinians. “You didn’t have a track record to use with these Arab elites to say, ‘We’re doing the right things,’ ” said Daniel C. Kurtzer, a former ambassador to Egypt and Israel who teaches at Princeton.

Over the last week, Mr. Rubin said, Mr. Obama suffered from an intelligence breakdown, much as Mr. Bush did before the Iraq war. “That’s not Obama’s fault,” he said, “but it’s going to make him look weak because he’s the one sitting in the Oval Office.”