

How might Tea Partiers play the Mideast?

By Eric Davis

As President Barack Obama's approval ratings continue to decline, prospects for a Republican in the White House in 2012 loom ever larger. It is not unlikely that, if a Republican is elected, he or she will have strong ties to the Tea Party. Little attention has been paid to the Tea Party's views of one of the world's most volatile areas, the Middle East. What would be the consequences of a Tea Party administration for U.S. policy and interests in that region?

There are two trends in the Tea Party movement when it comes to Washington's foreign policy. One trend reflects the isolationism that has pervaded much of U.S. history. Ron Paul and many Rick Perry supporters reflect this view. The other trend, which supports the decisive use of force against America's enemies in the Middle East, calls for using Israel to fight terrorism and to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Two Tea Party candidates, Michelle Bachmann and Rick Santorum, fall into this camp.

The Tea Party's dilemma is that it offers no policy for reconciling declining American economic power with a strategy for sustaining the global influence of the United States. The U.S. has faced severe constraints in fighting two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. If it were forced to militarily engage Iran, let's say following an Iranian attack on Israel, and to simultaneously confront an outbreak of hostilities in the Korean Peninsula – an unlikely but possible scenario – it would be hard pressed to carry through on such a challenge.

The Tea Party fails to appreciate the constraints that the economic crisis places on its deployment of hard power. It likewise has not realized the opportunities that soft power – public diplomacy, technical and educational support, and direct engagement of adversaries – offer for enhancing U.S. influence in the Middle East.

But does the U.S. only have two options, either isolationism or relying on military force? Is there not a third way that could achieve U.S. objectives in the Middle East without "breaking the bank" and risking more American and Middle Eastern lives? The so-called Arab Spring demonstrates considerable convergence between Arab and U.S. political interests in the region. The Libyan people's warmth toward the United States, especially now that the Libyan dictator, Moammar Gadhafi is gone, is just one indicator of that convergence.

Rather than trying to understand the current dynamics that are engulfing the Middle East, Tea Party candidates have opted instead for a simplistic approach to U.S. foreign policy. They have not grasped that the Middle East is ripe for positive change. Its "youth bulge" means that roughly 70 percent of the population of the region is under the age of 30. As my current research with Iraqi and other Middle East youth indicates, many admire American values of

freedom of expression and freedom of creativity. Middle East youths realize that, in those countries where individual freedoms reign, citizens enjoy the prosperity and political stability that they seek as well.

Tea Partiers also are not sensitive to the need to reach out to the peoples of the Middle East, who they often assume are hostile to American values. They have wrapped themselves in a mythical American "Golden Age," when the United States was supposedly close to being a perfect society. In advocating this return to an idealized past rooted in the 19th century, Tea Partiers tend to ignore foreign cultures. However, American political leaders must engage the peoples and cultures of the Middle East if they are to make effective foreign policy decisions.

By extension, those in the Tea Party who think that the U.S. can rely on Israel alone to pursue American interests in the Middle East are naive. Their efforts to link U.S. support for Israel to Christian Biblical injunctions is no substitute for a rational foreign policy; nor is it in Israel's interests, much less that of the peoples of the Middle East.

The U.S. relationship with many countries in the Middle East, among them allies such as Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey, and Yemen, has greatly changed in recent years. Likewise, Israel finds itself more isolated than ever, and no longer has a close ally in Turkey, which recently expelled the Israeli ambassador in Ankara. Following President Hosni Mubarak's ouster, ties with Egypt have deteriorated as well, as the two states squabble over policy towards Hamas, who currently control the Gaza Strip.

If the Tea Partiers sincerely want to reduce the deficit, enhance American influence in the Middle East, and strengthen Israel, they must eschew basing foreign policy on Biblical injunctions, prescribing withdrawal, or, conversely, advocating the use of force as the principle tools in Washington's foreign policy arsenal. Instead, expanding American technical assistance would better serve the region's economic development, along with aid to improve education, health care, housing and agriculture. If it is based on local needs, such assistance could strengthen ties with the regions' countries.

Offering U.S. technical assistance (which can also put unemployed Americans to work overseas), offering scholarships at American universities, and engaging Middle Eastern youth, whether thorough social media or exchange programs, or both, would cost much less than military engagement and building weapons systems that are now much less effective for fighting terrorism and asymmetrical warfare.

Engaging the youth behind the Arab Spring will demonstrate that Washington's rhetoric in support of democracy has teeth. If the U.S. can find a way to begin serious negotiations to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – the region's most truculent problem – then engaging the peoples of the Middle East, especially its youth, would most likely bring positive benefits. For instance, it might dissipate much anti-American rhetoric and undermine the appeal of radicalism. This is a scenario that the Tea Party has yet to consider.

Those who aspire to the American presidency owe the American people well-thought-out foreign policy alternatives. They need to view the peoples of the Middle East as potential allies, not as inherently hostile to the interests of the United States. With the stakes so high in the Middle East, and the economic challenges facing the U.S. exceptionally complicated, empty

rhetoric is no longer an option.

Eric Davis, a professor of political science at Rutgers University and a former director of its Center for Middle Eastern Studies, is author of the forthcoming "Taking Democracy Seriously in Iraq." He wrote this commentary for **THE DAILY STAR**.

Copyrights 2011, The Daily Star - All Rights Reserved

19/09/2011