

Nov 04, 2016 by **Mark Dillen**

Mixed Messages ^[1]

Those who follow attitudes toward the West on the Arab street need to make room these days for nuance. As the daily televised drama of revolt in Libya and Syria makes plain, the desperate internal struggles, unleashed during the Arab Spring, still command center stage. As long as they continue, the United States, in particular, is likely to be viewed through the prism of these upheavals.

And how precisely is that?

For the antagonists seeking change, the basic answer is simple. The West should follow up its rhetoric in favor of democracy and inclusion by giving tangible help to the popular uprisings. In the case of Libya at least, the U.S. has been a forceful advocate while “leading from behind.” Thus, the denouement in Tripoli should be a net plus for the United States, both in terms of policy and perception.

In the short term, the United States (and the West in general) are most likely to be viewed according to the success of the uprisings, provided their role in supporting these movements does not discredit the protesters themselves.

Syria is a particular challenge. The United States has much less room for maneuver in Syria, but does the suffering population in Syria (and elsewhere) recognize this? In the face of months of murderous behavior by Bashar al-Assad, the West has sent no planes to protect the civilian population. With few exceptions, Assad has succeeded in keeping foreign journalists out of the country, leaving international media dependent on digital snippets from participants, which show huge demonstrations and terrifying official responses.

International publics are entitled to ask: If concern over the fate of Libya’s civilian population truly motivated the U.S. and its NATO allies to move against Qaddafi’s forces, how is it that the only distinct international response to Assad is a small UN humanitarian mission?

Before the latest events in Libya and Syria, two noteworthy polls recently tried to gauge how nations in the Middle East think about the United States and the Obama Administration. Not surprisingly, the polls found publics throughout the region disappointed.

Partly this is a story of unrealistic expectations dashed. Partly it reflects an inability on the part of the U.S. to clearly articulate the less visible actions it has taken and to underline the constraints that hinder all international action.

One must also say that this tumultuous period of the post Arab Spring has riven any sense of public consensus in many countries and has left many as worried about the future as they were just a short while ago hopeful.

America may earn gratitude for supporting street protesters demands for change, but now the

tough work of democratic reform must begin, while the U.S. is distracted by its own problems.

Mark has just concluded a year as a communications advisor and executive secretary to the USAID Mission in Kabul. These views are his own and not intended to represent any official positions of the U.S. Government.
