

Leader, Follower, or Spectator? The Role of President Obama in the Arab Spring Uprisings*

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Objective. President Obama has faced a plethora of challenges both at home and abroad during his first term. While some challenges were inherited, the Arab Spring uprisings provided a new opportunity for him to strengthen America's role as a global leader. Much debate has raged over the way in which Obama dealt with the uprisings. Supporters view Obama's foreign policy as a selling point as he moves toward the 2012 elections, while opponents have condemned him as a follower "leading from behind." Absent in this debate is an objective attempt to both articulate Obama's foreign policy agenda in both a historical and cross-national context, and an effort to analyze Obama's reaction to the Arab Spring uprisings vis-a-vis other state leaders. This article attempts to rectify these problems to better understand whether Obama was a leader or a follower during the Arab Spring. *Methods.* We begin with a thorough discussion of Obama's foreign policy approach and then present empirical analysis of original data of all state signals during the Arab Spring uprisings. *Results.* Though we find some evidence pointing toward leadership, the bulk of our evidence indicates that Obama was largely either an active spectator or a follower during the uprisings. *Conclusion.* We conclude that, at best, Obama showed weak evidence of leadership during the Arab Spring uprisings.

The recent challenges to authoritarian regimes in the so-called Arab Spring caught scholars and policymakers off guard. The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010 sparked a wave of protests in Tunisia, as citizens tired of high unemployment, inflation, corruption, and a lack of social and political freedoms. Far from being an isolated event, the protests leading to the collapse of President Ben Ali's 24-year reign quickly spread. Beginning in January 2011, 18 days of protests brought an end to the 30-year

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rule of Egyptian President Mubarak. Protests beginning in February 2011 in Libya sparked a civil war that eventually led to Colonel Gaddafi's death in October 2011. Though they vary in degrees of size, violence, and outcome, protests in Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Lebanon, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Western Sahara soon followed.

Given that each movement was cloaked in terms of promoting democracy—a long-standing hallmark of democratic foreign policy interests—one might expect a consistent positive reaction from world leaders to these events. However, even a cursory reading of international responses to the Arab Spring reveals inconsistency and contradiction. For example, France signaled strong support for the continuation of Ben Ali's government in Tunisia prior to his overthrow (Crumley, 2011), and then played a leading role in the alliance to oust Colonel Gaddafi in Libya (Willsher, 2011). Meanwhile, the United Kingdom expressed strong support for the leaders in postrevolutionary Egypt and Tunisia (Porter and Spillius, 2011), while at the same time providing direct support to Saudi Arabia's efforts to squelch protesters seeking the same reforms elsewhere (Doward and Stewart, 2011). It is similarly difficult to delineate a clear policy trajectory for the United States. President Obama's speech to the United Nations in September 2011 made this inconsistency abundantly clear. He urged continued support for the protestors in Libya and Syria, somewhat retroactive support for the revolutionaries in Tunisia and Egypt, and offered a clear support for the continuation of authoritarianism in Bahrain (Fisher, 2011).

The apparent inconsistency in the reaction of the Obama administration to the Arab Spring has not gone unnoticed. Harsh criticism toward Obama's handling of the Arab Spring has come from both scholars ("Noam Chomsky: 'The U.S. and its Allies Will Do Anything to Prevent Democracy in the Arab World,'" 2011; Ferguson, 2011) and world leaders (Ravid, 2011), while political opponents have blasted the president for "leading from behind" (Lizza, 2011). In contrast, Obama's supporters view his foreign policy triumphs as a selling point for the 2012 presidential elections. His supporters note that he helped keep protests in Egypt relatively peaceful, ousted Colonel Gaddafi, and encouraged Egypt to continue its relationship with Israel and Yemen (Slaughter, 2011). After inheriting two major wars and being forced to quickly react to the Arab Spring, they argue that Obama has come across as a firm and practical leader.

The purpose of this article is to analyze Obama's role in the Arab Spring. While a plethora of ink has been spilt in both condemning and praising Obama's role in these events, few provide objective empirical analyses to support their arguments. We depart from this trend by collecting and analyzing data on the reaction to the uprisings from both the Obama administration and other world leaders. This allows us an objective and scientific answer to our guiding research question: Has President Obama been a leader or a follower in the Arab Spring?

The Importance of U.S. Leadership

The importance of understanding if Obama is a leader in world politics is rooted in the necessity of American leadership. Given the economic and military power of the United States, most global problems are best solved if America plays a central role. If Obama is not a leader, it is questionable if any other state could fill the void and bring the world together to address important issues, such as climate change, or handle major events, such as the Arab Spring.

The importance of American leadership has been on display for over a century. At the close of the First World War, Woodrow Wilson brought the world together to forge the League of Nations; however, once the United States refused to join, the League became ineffective and dissolved with disastrous consequences. After the Second World War, the United States was central in rebuilding Europe and creating a new economic and political system. American leadership was also central to the postwar security environment, with the creation of NATO and leading the fight against communist expansion. This role has carried over to the post-Cold War era as the United States leads in the promotion of human rights, supporting democracy, and, recently, the War on Terror.

While many have predicted the decline of American influence, the role of the United States has not changed. It is clear that world leaders understand the importance of the United States in global affairs. Today American power is unrivaled and U.S. allies make only minor contributions to U.S.-led efforts (see Kagan, 2003:22–25; “Nato’s Sea of Troubles,” 2012). Large-scale missions such as the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan would be impossible without the commitment of the United States. American leadership extends beyond military affairs and into almost every global issue. Speaking of Middle East peace, Hillary Clinton said: “There is no substitute for continued, active American leadership” (Whittell and Charter, 2011). This view is not isolated to leaders in the United States. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown urged American leadership on a slate of global issues, including economic recovery and climate change, when he addressed Congress in 2009 (Porter, 2009). Brown states what the rest of the world knows: American leadership is vital in solving most major global challenges. If the United States does not step into the void and provide global leadership, there is no other state with the necessary economic and military resources to do so.

President Obama and Foreign Policy

It is not easy to define President Obama’s foreign policy. Unlike his predecessor, Obama has not developed a specific foreign policy doctrine. Some suggest that Obama is wise not to develop a coherent doctrine (Cohen, 2009), and many expect he never will, since he “is not a doctrinaire kind of leader”

(Wilson, 2007:117–18). Some praise this lack of a foreign policy vision since it provides Obama with flexibility in dealing with new issues. In contrast, others condemn Obama's approach as being "tentative, indecisive, timid, and nuanced" ("Romney: 'We're Following the French into Libya,'" 2011).

While not doctrinaire, Obama does hold several central foreign policy beliefs. First, Obama sees U.S. relative power in decline (Clinton, 2009; Lizza, 2011). Rising powers such as China have cut into American dominance and limited the ability of the United States to influence events in many regions. Second, Obama sees the United States as "reviled" by most of the world after the post-9/11 policies of President George W. Bush (Clinton, 2009; Lizza, 2011). For example, Obama's speech to the State Department on the Arab Spring opened with an account of how he had already changed past policies that were unpopular (e.g., Iraq), and later stated that the United States must "proceed with a sense of humility" (Obama, 2011). Last, Obama believes that states are drawn together by shared interests and that these interests will overcome political divisions to allow for cooperation (Nau, 2010). Hillary Clinton summarized this belief best, saying that Obama had "launched a new era of engagement based on common interests, shared values, and mutual respect" (Clinton, 2009). All three of these beliefs are central to Obama's approach to foreign affairs. While they do not define a clear "Obama doctrine," they do define how he views issues.

Guided by these beliefs, Obama approaches every issue with an eye toward the pragmatic (Lizza, 2011; Nau, 2010). With no large doctrine to fall back upon he focuses on what will work given the situation. This leads him to eschew a general solution for similar events and instead develop a new and nuanced plan for every situation. This seems to be a hallmark of Obama policy making, domestic and foreign: there are no "one-size-fits-all" solutions; every problem requires a new plan. Again, this plays into the beliefs that Obama is flexible and unpredictable.

Despite the lack of a clear doctrine, there have been few major shifts in the foreign policy objectives of the United States under Obama. In fact, it has often been suggested that Obama's foreign policy has been a continuation of the Bush Doctrine with a focus on fighting al-Qaeda—including preemptive strikes on terror targets, targeting leadership within terror organizations (such as the raid into Pakistan to kill Osama bin Laden), and working to limit nuclear proliferation ("Barack Obama's Foreign Policy: All Very Engaging," 2009; Brose, 2009; Freedland, 2009; Kagan, 2009).¹ There have been subtle differences for sure, but regarding objectives, we have seen only marginal differences between Presidents Obama and Bush.

¹ More specific evidence suggest that many moves are quite consistent with those of Obama's predecessor, including the slow withdrawal of troops from Iraq, continued Predator strikes in Pakistan, high levels of military spending, and efforts to suspend habeas corpus for military prisoners in Afghanistan ("Obama to Appeal Detainee Ruling," 2009; Paul, 2009; Scoblic, 2009).

Though the goals may be similar, the difference in Obama's foreign policy involves following a different strategy in pursuit of those goals. Perhaps the clearest example of this strategic difference is in the promotion of democracy. The Bush administration made the promotion of democracy a central part of American strategy. Bush believed that spreading democracy made the United States safer and would increase global support for American policies ("The National Security Strategy," 2002). However, Obama's belief that states will be drawn together by interests (rather than a common form of government) has led to a decreased emphasis on the promotion of democracy. Certainly, Obama still believes in the benefits of democracy and freedom that have guided U.S. policy for decades. However, he does not see U.S. interests directly served by actively working to promote democracy. In fact, a crusading foreign policy may actually harm U.S. interests by straining relations with autocratic states that are necessary partners to solve global problems. In the end, this means that Obama will work with states based on their ability to help the United States reach its goals without concern for the system of government. It also means foregoing chances of helping pro-democracy movements in the interest of maintaining working relations with autocratic leaders, which helps to explain Obama's tepid support for the Green Revolution in Iran. In his speech in Cairo in June 2009, for example, Obama took the flexible stance that he "does not presume to know what is best for everyone" ("Was George Bush Right?," 2011).

The removal of democratization as a major policy goal fits into Obama's stated desire to focus upon security over other issues. Obama has stated that the United States will play only a passive role in humanitarian disasters—such as the Darfur genocide—and has claimed the United States would not maintain forces in Iraq even if those troops could prevent a postwithdrawal genocide. The emphasis on avoiding nonessential/humanitarian conflicts may be weakening, however, as Obama did order military forces into Africa in October 2011 with the goal of destroying the Lord's Resistance Army and capturing or killing its leader Joseph Kony.

The second major change is Obama's focus on diplomacy, implying a reduced role for military force. Obama made it clear while running for office that he would seek to open a dialogue with states generally hostile to U.S. policy. In 2008, he said, "I do think that it's important for the U.S. not just to talk to its friends, but also to talk to its enemies" (Thyne, 2009:171). Obama has followed this campaign promise by trying to engage Iran and Syria, showing a willingness to work with the Taliban in Afghanistan, and easing travel restrictions to Cuba from the United States. Obama has also actively tried to work with Russia and China on issues ranging from Iran to North Korea and Syria.

The last major change is the renewed emphasis on acting multilaterally. Despite broad attention on President Bush's willingness to take action without international support, the differences between Presidents Obama and Bush are not that great regarding the desirability of international support. Both

reserved the right to act alone, but prefer to share the burden. The real difference is in the form of the cooperation. The coalitions formed by President Bush tended to be what Kreps (2011) refers to as “minilateralism.” Under minilateralism, an operation is not authorized by an international organization, and the partner states have little input regarding mission priorities and objectives. In other words, minilateralism is a multilateral effort under the direct guidance of one state. President Obama’s vision of multilateralism is more in line with full multilateralism (Kreps, 2011). Under full multilateralism, an operation is authorized by the international community and member states have a clear voice in determining objectives and strategies. This style of leadership has been described (and attacked) as “leadership from behind” (Lizza, 2011), as international consensus, and not the United States, is setting mission goals. Further, under this form of multilateralism, the United States does not necessarily take a lead role in combat as it does under minilateralism. Instead, the United States can play a supportive role or even hand off operational control, as was done in Libya.

Expectations for President Obama’s Foreign Policy Behavior

Based on our above discussion about President Obama’s foreign policy beliefs and strategies, we can make several predictions regarding how he will approach foreign policy issues. While we specifically apply these expectations to U.S. policy toward the Arab Spring, they are meant to be general predictions of how Obama will approach any issue. Building upon these predictions of how Obama will handle a crisis, we also develop several testable expectations regarding Obama’s reaction and leadership during the Arab Spring. The first set of expectations deals with his leadership style, while the second directly examines whether Obama is a global leader.

In order to understand Obama’s response to the Arab Spring, we must first construct a baseline for comparison. We considered two approaches. First, we could compare Obama’s response to past U.S. presidents in similar situations (e.g., President H.W. Bush during the Tiananmen Square uprisings). Second, we could explore Obama’s decisions during the Arab Spring to other world leaders. This is our preferred approach. First, it is difficult to match the Arab Spring uprisings with past world events, which is necessary if we are to credibly compare Obama’s response to how past U.S. presidents dealt with similar issues. Second, the availability of information to accurately capture responses from presidents is limited as we move further back in time. Third, past presidents will never serve again, so understanding Obama’s response vis-a-vis other global leaders will provide the most useful information as we move forward in time. Thus, in the remainder of this article, we develop expectations for the Obama administration in comparison to other world leaders. Our empirical investigation remains consistent with this focus by examining responses from all states, with a specific focus on major powers.

Expectation 1: Response Time

Since Obama does not have a global doctrine, he has to devise a policy as events happen. Further, he does not link events regardless of how similar they appear. In the case of the Arab Spring, Obama never developed a single one-size-fits-all policy; instead, he tailored policies for each state. While this approach allows for a high degree of policy nuance, it takes time to develop a response to each individual event. In contrast, a more doctrinaire foreign policy approach trades specificity for an ability to react quickly. Without a set doctrine, Obama's administration must study each event in isolation and construct a policy for that case.

Assuming that at least some world leaders are more doctrinaire in their approach to foreign policy (e.g., Israel's support for Egypt), we would expect Obama to take longer to develop his policies than leaders of other states because he must first study an issue to develop a response. This could contribute to a view that Obama is not leading, as it would appear that Obama is being led by what other leaders find important. We can examine this expectation by analyzing the timing of the first public comments on the Arab Spring uprisings. When compared to other leaders, we expect to see a delay between when an event starts and Obama's response.

Expectation 2: Signal Consistency

Lacking a clear doctrine also means Obama's policies will experience a high degree of variance, particularly early in a crisis. Once an event occurs, Obama will start the process of forming a policy; however, this cannot be done quickly and changes will likely occur in reaction to events on the ground and as other world leaders state their policies. This yields two testable implications. First, we should expect to see a high level of inconsistency overall in Obama's reaction to the Arab Spring uprisings. Second, while we should witness a relatively high degree of discrepancy in U.S. signals in the early days of a crisis, these signals should become increasingly consistent as time passes. Initially the goal will be to avoid closing off any options, so comments will shift between supporting one side or another. Over time, we expect the signals to become more consistent as Obama's policy forms and objectives become clear.

Expectation 3: Follow the Leader?

Our third expectation deals with the effect of Obama's actions on world leaders. As discussed earlier, the United States is in a position of world leadership by virtue of its central role in the global economic and security environments. Other states look for and expect American leadership on major world issues. While the United States does not dominate the decision-making process in

other states, world leaders must take American preferences into account when formulating policy. The question here is to what extent leaders appear to follow Obama's lead.

If Obama is a global leader, we expect to see two things. First, other states should wait for Obama to act before taking action. Here, other states, especially allies, will want to know what Obama's policy is before committing themselves. If a state jumps out ahead, it could find itself without American support, or worse yet, in direct conflict with U.S. policy. Most leaders should seek to avoid one of these outcomes, when possible, by first determining what Obama will do before taking action. Specifically regarding the Arab Spring, we expect other states to avoid commenting on a situation and to avoid taking a side prior to Obama signaling his policy.

Second, beyond just waiting for the United States to take action, once the United States does move we expect other states to follow Obama's lead. Other leaders should adopt policies similar to Obama's from the outset, or quickly adjust their policies to match U.S. signals. Depending on the level of communication between the United States and a specific country, we could see a state either directly mirror U.S. policy pronouncements, or slightly lag U.S. signals as leaders learn about Obama's policies. Either way, if Obama is shaping global opinion and policy, we should see other states adopt policies in line with U.S. policies relatively quickly.

Empirical Analyses

An empirical assessment of our expectations requires data that identify the reaction of all states to the Arab Spring, which will allow us to investigate Obama's policies toward the protests vis-a-vis other leaders. Lacking the necessary data, we developed an original data set that captures all signals sent to Tunisia and Egypt during their uprisings. These states were chosen for theoretical and practical reasons. The Tunisian protests were the first step in the Arab Spring, and therefore are critical to understanding how leaders react to crises more generally because they happened independent of what came afterwards. Egypt was the second state to experience massive protests. We include it due to its strategic importance and because it played a key role in sparking further events. Though capturing signals in all uprisings would be ideal, limitations both in time and resources forced us to limit our data collection efforts to these two states.

For Tunisia, we begin our data collection on December 17, 2010. This is the date of Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation, which sparked the protests. We end our data at the end of January 2011, which coincides with the government's decision to abide by protester demands in removing all members of Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party from the government. For Egypt, we begin our data collection on January 25, 2011, which is the

day protest groups first organized, and end on the day following Mubarak's ouster on February 11.

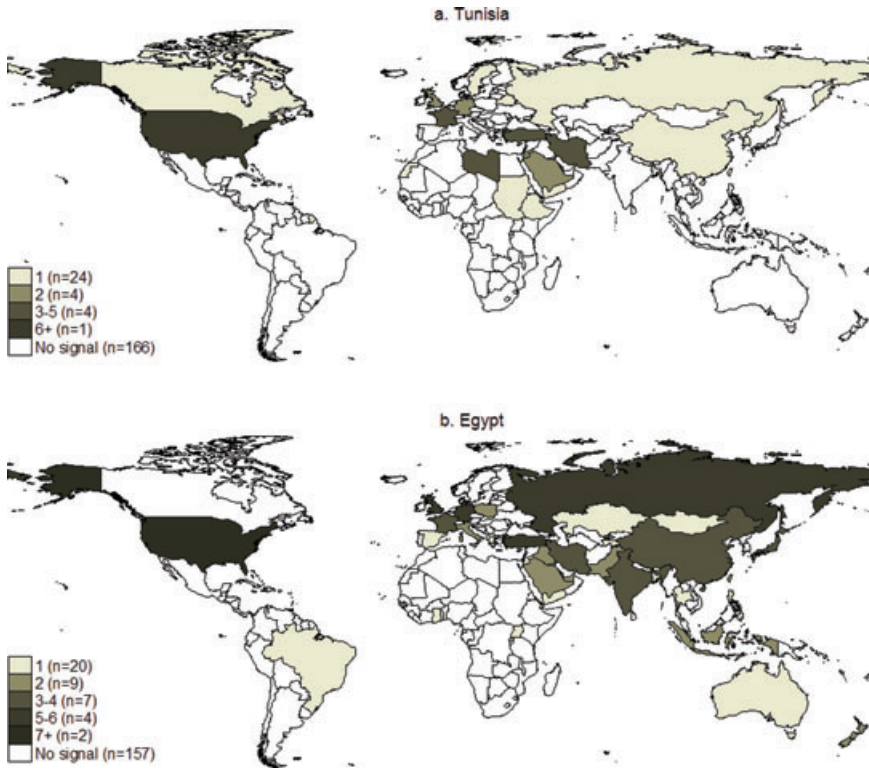
Our data collection protocol followed past efforts to capture events between states, drawing particularly on McClelland's (1979) World Event Interaction Survey (WEIS) framework. First, we gathered all newspaper articles that mentioned either "Tunisia" or "Egypt" during the periods of their uprisings using the Lexis-Nexis search engine. To assure a reasonably wide source coverage, we drew upon three major outlets: *New York Times*, *London Times*, and *BBC*.² This resulted in over 1,000 articles for potential coding. Second, we coded each article that included a specific statement from an official of the executive branch about the uprisings. Our coding captured the signaler (states and international organizations), target (Tunisia or Egypt), signal date, and source. The signals themselves were coded following the WEIS framework, which categorizes all interstate signals into one of 63 nominal categories. We then converted the nominal codes following Goldstein (1992), who places the WEIS categories on a continuous scale ranging from -10 (most hostile; e.g., military attack) to +8.3 (most supportive; e.g., extend military assistance). After eliminating duplicate reports, our final data set includes 47 and 109 signals sent to Tunisia and Egypt, respectively.

We can get a basic understanding of our data by examining the frequency of signals sent to each state during the uprisings, which we present in Figures 1a and 2b. Two features stand out. First, the variety of states responding to each uprising is surprising as we see both weak and distant states responding to the crises. Second, we see that the United States was the most frequent signaler in each instance. If one considers speaking out frequently as a component of leadership, then these analyses clearly point toward strong leadership from Obama during the Arab Spring uprisings. We now move to more direct analyses of our theoretical expectations.

Beyond sending frequent signals, people expect a clear and consistent message coming from their leader. Our earlier discussion of Obama's foreign policy approach provided three expectations. First, because Obama does not rely on a specific doctrine, he will take time to evaluate each issue as it arises. This means the United States should arrive relatively late to events such as the Arab Spring. Second, because he has little interest in protecting a clearly defined doctrine, we expect Obama to be willing to alter his reaction to the uprisings as new information comes in. Thus, we should see ample variation in signals from the Obama administration. Third, though early signals are likely to be inconsistent, we expect the signals to become increasingly consistent over time as he narrows in on a firm policy.

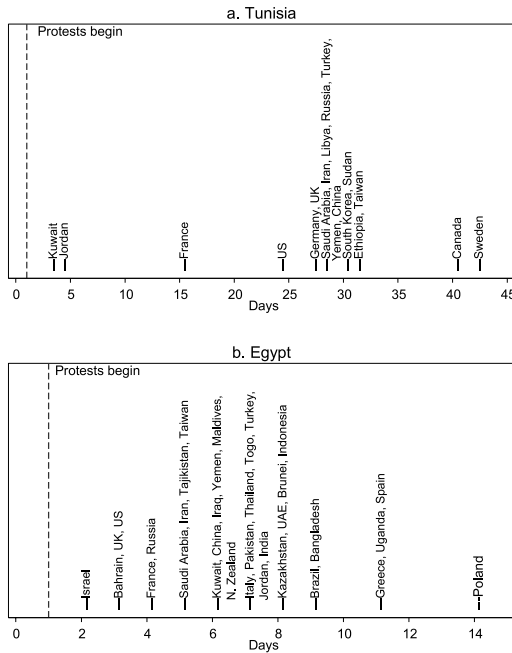
²Though these outlets are apt to capture signals from Western states at a higher rate than non-Western states, we expect this to not be a major problem for two reasons. First, our descriptive statistics indicate fairly wide coverage with signals coming from a plethora of non-Western states (see below). Second, our theoretical expectations are meant to compare U.S. signals versus other potential leaders in the international system, the bulk of whom are expected to come from Western states (e.g., France, Germany, and the United Kingdom).

FIGURE 1
Signal Frequency During the Arab Spring Uprisings



We see mixed support for our first expectation. Regarding Tunisia (Figure 2a), Kuwait and Jordan were the only states to quickly react to the uprisings. France signaled almost two weeks later, followed by other Western leaders over three weeks after the uprisings began. Though the response from Western leaders coincided with major escalation of violent protests on January 11, they ignored several major events that came earlier. Tunisian police responded to protests with live fire, tear gas, and beatings as early as December 24. Reactions to the protests in Egypt (Figure 2b) came much quicker, likely reflecting both the greater security implications for Egypt and the understanding that the Arab protests would not be single-shot events. Israel was the first to act in sending supportive signals to the Mubarak regime, followed a day later by Bahrain, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Other major powers soon followed, including France and Russia (day 3), and China (day 5). Taken together, these analyses provide support for our expectation. Obama was clearly late in realizing the importance of the Tunisian protests.

FIGURE 2
Time to First Signal During the Arab Spring Uprisings



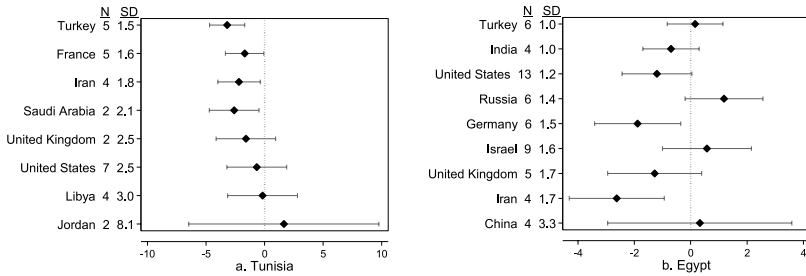
Though he was one of the first to react to protests in Egypt, Israel came first and the United Kingdom moved at the same time, leaving little evidence that Obama forged the path for others to follow in either uprising.

We next consider the variation in signals throughout the course of each uprising, expecting to see ample variation in U.S. signals. Figure 3 shows the standard deviation of signals for the most frequent signalers. Focusing on Tunisia (Figure 3a), our expectation is supported. The mean signal from the United States to the Tunisian government is slightly negative and quite varied. In contrast, states such as Turkey, France, Iran, and Saudi Arabia sent much clearer signals in terms of orientation and consistency. The variation is more tempered in reaction to Egypt (Figure 3b). The United States ranks third in terms of consistency, and the bulk of signals were clearly hostile to the Mubarak regime. Though the consistency of U.S. signals across both uprisings falls in line with other frequent signalers, this un-exceptionalism suggests little evidence of leadership.

Our third expectation is that while variations in signals from the Obama administration are apt to be inconsistent early, they will become increasingly consistent with time. We examine this in Figure 4 by plotting the signals sent from the United States to Egypt and Tunisia over time. Focusing on Egypt

FIGURE 3

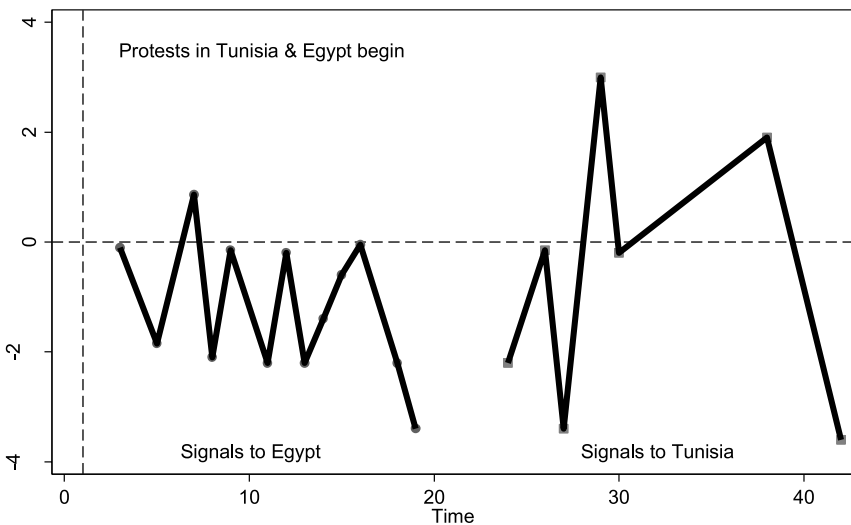
Signal Consistency During the Arab Spring Uprisings



Note: Y-axis = orientation of signals, ranging from -10 (most hostile) to +10 (most supportive); diamonds = mean signal; whiskers = \pm one standard deviation.

FIGURE 4

Signals from the United States to Tunisia and Egypt



Note: Y-axis = orientation of signals, ranging from -4 (most hostile) to +4 (most supportive).

provides some evidence of our expectation. The initial three signals to the government were neutral, then hostile, and then supportive. Following this period of uncertainty, all remaining signals were hostile. However, we see a large degree of variation in terms of the strength of signals throughout the crisis. Likewise, little pattern can be discerned in regards to Tunisia regardless of the time period involved as the signals seemingly bounce randomly. Overall, we see only weak support for the expectation that signals should become clear

and consistent as more information allows Obama to settle on a specific policy toward the uprisings.

Our next step is to look for clear patterns of leadership by looking at both the timing of the first signals sent from potential followers vis-a-vis Obama, and how well the orientation of the signals mirrors (or quickly lags) U.S. signals. We return to Figure 2 as a first step. Regarding Tunisia, we see that the United States was very late to act. Obama sent his first signal in day 24 of the crisis, which lagged France by nine days and Kuwait and Jordan by over two weeks. However, once the United States signaled hostilities toward Ben Ali's government, 13 other states acted within a few days. Unlike Tunisia, the United States (along with the United Kingdom and Bahrain) was quick to respond to the crises in Egypt, following only Israel by a day. Similar to the pattern in Tunisia, other states quickly followed within days. Taken together, the timing of signals might simply capture the variation in time it takes leaders to respond to events. However, it could also indicate leaders might have waited for the United States to first signal its reaction before responding.

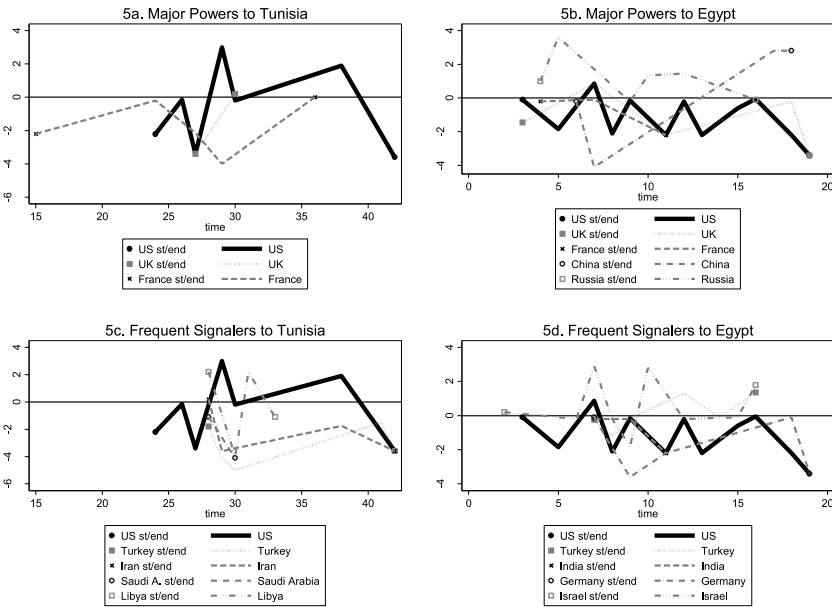
A more concrete way to analyze leadership is to look beyond the timing of signals by considering how well the orientation of signals either mirrors or slightly lags U.S. signals. We present evidence for discussion in Figure 5. In this figure, the *Y*-axis captures the orientation of the signals with negative values capturing hostile signals sent to the government and positive signals indicating support. Figures 5a and b focus on major powers alone, while Figures 5c and d analyze the most frequent nonmajor power signalers in each crisis.³

We see little evidence of leadership in focusing on Figure 5a. The initial signal from the United States was hostile to the government, coming in day 24 of the crisis. The United Kingdom soon followed with a negative signal on day 27. However, this bit of evidence pointing toward U.S. leadership is soon washed away when we see that both U.S. and U.K. signals came well after France's negative signal on day 15, and that neither Russia nor China sent any signals during the Tunisian uprisings. Beyond the initial signals to Tunisia, no clear pattern emerges to indicate that any global power followed the same erratic trend of the United States. Examining major power signals to Egypt in Figure 5b yields a similar conclusion. The first U.S. signal was a weak negative signal on day 3. The United Kingdom also sent a negative signal on day 3, though it was appreciably stronger. On day 4, France followed with a weak negative signal, while Russia sent a weak positive signal. China followed on day 6 with a weak negative signal. Thus, there is some initial evidence that France and China followed the United States, the United Kingdom was consistent with the United States, and Russia charted a different path. Beyond these initial signals, we see that the United States stayed consistently negative toward the Egyptian government beginning on the seventh day of the crisis,

³We define "major powers" here as the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council.

FIGURE 5

Signals to Tunisia and Egypt from Major Power and Frequent Signalers



Note: For all figures, Y-axis = orientation of signals, ranging from -4 and -6 (most hostile) to +4 (most supportive); X-axis = time since protests began (truncated for Tunisia).

as did France and the United Kingdom. However, both China and Russia sent positive signals during this time period, indicating little evidence of leadership.

While it is unsurprising that not all major powers followed the lead of the United States, we should expect to see weaker states more willing to follow the lead of the United States. These states are considered in Figures 5c (Tunisia) and 5d (Egypt). Regarding Tunisia, we see evidence that Saudi Arabia and Turkey followed the three negative U.S. signals sent on days 24–26, sending negative signals themselves on day 28. Iran and Libya also acted on day 28, unsurprisingly sending positive signals in contrast to the United States. Beyond the initial signals, we see a strong positive response from the United States to the ouster of Ben Ali on day 27 of the crisis, which was not followed by any state beyond the United Kingdom. After this, the United States bounces from slightly negative (day 30), to positive (day 38), and back to negative (day 42). No other state follows a similar path in their reactions to the events in Tunisia.

Evidence that states followed U.S. leadership in Egypt is similarly lacking. As discussed earlier, Israel was the first signaler in this crisis, and its signals are inconsistent with U.S. signals, appearing to oppose U.S. signals. Meanwhile, India, Turkey, and Germany first signaled weak hostilities toward Egypt on

day 7, which followed two previous negative signals from the United States. However, on day 7, U.S. signals suddenly switched positive, making them counter to those sent by potential followers. Beyond day 7, the United States was consistently hostile toward Egypt, as were Germany and India. Turkey took the opposite approach, however. Again, our analyses provide some support for Obama's supporters and detractors. If we seek clear evidence of leadership in terms of states mirroring U.S. signals, we see little evidence for such a conclusion.

Conclusions and Implications

The Arab Spring uprisings were dramatic events that caught the attention of scholars and policymakers. The events also provided the opportunity for traditional leaders to solidify their role in global politics. Prior to these events, President Obama's primary foreign policy venues were geared toward inherited conflicts, including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the hunt for Osama bin Laden. Unlike his predecessor, Obama has not delineated a clear doctrine to guide his policies toward new events. Instead of placing new crises into a predefined construct, he considers the nuances of each event prior to developing a response. This approach largely departs from a long history of U.S. presidents being guided by clearly defined doctrines. As such, Obama's approach is deserving of both the critical inquiry provided by journalists and voters, and the discussion and empirical analyses we have provided here.

Our goal in this article was to better understand Obama's role as a leader in the Arab Spring. We focused our efforts on factors that are commonly understood to capture leadership, including quick, clear, and consistent signals, and evidence that other states were following his signals. Regardless of the measure, our analyses of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt provided little evidence that Obama played a leading role in the international response to these uprisings.

We remain agnostic as to whether the lack of U.S. leadership during these uprisings is good or bad for two main reasons. First, it is possible that our focus on only two states missed evidence of strong U.S. leadership as the protests spread beyond Tunisia and Egypt. A more thorough analysis of all events during the Arab Spring would allow to examine this possibility, and more data would allow for more sophisticated empirical investigation. Second, our conceptualization of leadership is perhaps quite inconsistent with what many may expect from their current president. After almost a decade of involvement in two major conflicts, U.S. citizens might welcome a president who is willing to spectate as world events unfold. Based on the data analyzed here and our criteria for strong leadership, however, we are forced to conclude that, at best, Obama showed weak leadership during the Arab Spring uprisings.

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